

**Charis Mission:
Presenting God's
reconciling love
in Jesus Christ to
inmates in
correctional
institutions in
Minnesota**

CHARIS of MINNESOTA INCORPORATED

The Olive Branch

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT: Putting prayer into action



**Charis President:
Maret Ryan**

In the September 2015 edition of the Olive Branch newsletter I outlined five major areas of discernment that came from the Charis Board of Directors prayer journey. These five areas were: 1.) Make prayer a priority 2.) Strengthen Charis inside the prison 3.) Expand Charis outside the prison 4.) Recruitment and marketing and 5.) Collaboration and outreach.

In December the board met to **prayerfully** begin the first steps to adding a framework to those five areas. Their next task is to meet in small groups and return to the Board in April with a solid plan of action for each of the five areas. Please keep our Board members **circled in prayer** as they meet to discern God's will in each of these areas.

I am pleased to report that our outside ministry, Charis Connects, has now had three gatherings. With a solid core of committed leadership and active and motivated volunteers, this group is looking forward with great anticipation to what lies ahead. It's an adventure, and the outcome is in God's hands!

In November there were nine Overcomers in attendance, sharing in food and fellowship. We began using

the term Overcomers when describing the women who participate in Charis Connects. We intentionally did this because we want this new ministry to reinforce new beginnings. The women who attend each month are determined to leave the label of "offender" behind them as they take on their new identity. We are proud to walk beside our new Overcomers. **Please pray** for the women who leave Shakopee—that they find support and encouragement as they rebuild their lives. We are so grateful God has called us to walk beside them.

We are also **praying** for a green light from the Department of Corrections to begin this same type of group for the men who are released from MCF Faribault. **Please pray** that this happens soon, God willing, and that many will be called to this new ministry.

In each of our prisons we are facing significant changes and challenges, and more and more we feel the need for our ministry to be covered in prayer. We ask for your **prayers for** God's protection of the Charis ministry and that we will use Godly wisdom in all our decision making. God Bless.

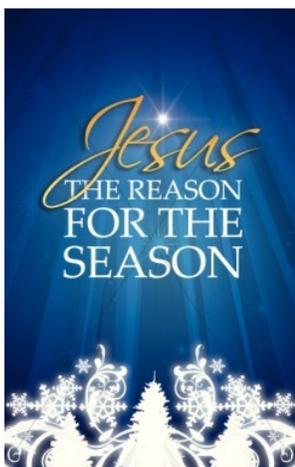
Can You Bless Charis This Christmas?

One way to be a blessing to the Charis ministry is by providing financial help to defray the costs of holding a weekend. Everything used on the weekend needs to be purchased—we do not rely on any government funding to run our ministry.

So that means every pencil, every sheet of note paper, every prayer request form, every decoration used for the Agape Dinner, every meal served during the weekend, every Freedom Guide printed, every grouping card used, every Charis cross and every Bible given to a participant — it ALL needs to be covered by donations. And that's just some of our expenses.

Our team members are very generous, donating at least \$75 each time they serve (in addition to their cost of a hotel) but more is needed to cover our basic costs.

Would you **prayerfully** consider writing a check to help Charis continue to be a viable and active presence in the prisons? Mail to Charis, P.O. Box 102, Hopkins, MN 55343. Thank you for your generosity!



What I Saw

by Heidi Anderson



Editors Note: Heidi Anderson attended her very first Charis experience in October 2015 as a guest at the closing. She was visibly moved by what she heard and saw there. She was asked to write an article for the Olive Branch describing

her experience. Here are her words:

My heart began racing the moment I pulled into the parking lot of the Faribault prison on Sunday, October 4. This was my first experience attending a Charis event at a prison. Apprehension filled me as I parked my car. I began feverishly praying to God for strength and courage. It felt like the huge, silver coiled barb wire was glaring back at me, like metal knives mocking my presence outside the perimeter.

A colleague of mine had invited me to the closing ceremony. I timidly entered the daunting facility. I opened the doors, and waited in front of a dark tinted window box. I jumped when a faceless man's voice boomed from above. A loud metal drawer was pushed into my space and the nameless voice asked for my driver's license. I complied, and watched my identity disappear into the black. I thought of turning around and running fast. Soon others began arriving. I wondered why these average looking people didn't seem as nervous as me. My inner voice answered, "Unlike you, Heidi, these people have probably never done anything worthy of prison." My nerves ramped back up when a heavy, locked door slowly opened from the inside, allowed six of us in, and then closed tightly, trapping us in the small windowed box.

Prison leaders led us across the now dark and cold prison yard. During that brisk walk that felt farther than it was, I felt timid, and smaller

than I have ever felt in my life. We entered the next building as a group, the new entrance much warmer than the check-in area. We were brought into a small room and invited to have a seat on folding chairs that formed a circle. After we were all seated the Warden, and his chief assistant, thanked us graciously for coming to the Charis closing. As I listened to them speak it was obvious they took pride in "their prison." They referred to "their" two thousand male inmates as insiders. They passionately talked about work programs and requiring educational standards (no one works without first getting a GED). They spoke on reformation, accountability, counseling, and their passion for giving inmates hope, structure, and God. I was blown away by their prison pride and love of Christ.

I felt excitement return, and was ready to meet all 57 insiders. I now had a better understanding of what was going on. Once a year the prison allows Charis to put on a three day Christian retreat. On the last day, in the last hour of the retreat, fellow volunteer Christians walk into the closing ceremony to allow the men to see a human visual of their "new family in Christ." My purpose for being at the prison felt more important than ever. I had a new, beautiful obligation laid out. I had to make sure my 57 new family members could see God with me, and in me.

I followed the group into an extremely loud room and was met with the most aggressive, passionate clapping and cheering ever heard. The applause was not of this earth! I forced tears to burn back into my eyes. I took an open chair in the fifth row, still overwhelmed by the cheers of appreciation I did nothing to deserve. I was seated behind the retreat volunteers. Our five rows faced the insiders five rows, with a 7 foot walkway in between separating the insiders from the outsiders. The space was fairly wide between us, but facing each other it felt intimate. The

What I heard Continuing the story

retreat lay director explained that the men in attendance were broken up into groups, i.e. "tables" when they arrived Friday morning. Each table elected a person to speak for the respective table, answering three questions. 1. How they came to the retreat 2. What they found in the retreat 3. What they were taking away from the retreat.

The "patience" table was first. To be truthful, I wondered/judged/doubted how any of these tough looking men could be capable of speaking effectively without formal training. If I continue to stay honest I will say, as a member of a speaking club, I was not expecting much in the way of speech, intellect, organization, connection and presentation. I was instantly proven wrong. The first speaker seemed nervous until he confidently asked the group, "How did I come here?" He answered his own question with a realness that no Ted Talk can teach. "I came here empty, scared, lacking purpose, anxious, needed healing, forgiveness, alone, and lonely." If this heavily tattooed man made any grammar errors, wasn't prepared, or rehearsed I didn't catch it. It's hard to find a mistake in naked raw truth. This man looked beyond intimidating before speaking, but God's grace started shining light in him and all around him. The young man continued, speaking passionately about the acceptance they all felt, the community that was built, and family that had been formed in just three short days. I almost let out a sob when he looked the entire room in the eye, and said "My group felt like they weren't in prison over the weekend, even as we were led back to our cells each night."

The six other groups that spoke were self-control, joy, love, kindness, faithfulness, and

gentleness. Each group finding new ways of using the English language to paint and capture truth. I could go on and on about this evening. I will go on and on about this evening, hopefully for the rest of my life. Why you ask? Because I drove to Faribault as a little arrogant Christian, who knew it all. And I was humbled to my knees by true faith, the kind of faith a free woman whose eyes work could never see. The kind of raw faithfulness only a blind, imprisoned old man with long grey hair could speak. A man with such arrogant conviction he swears God has blessed him with the ability to see better than most, even though he is blind. A man who praised and thanked the Lord for the honor and blessing of being incarcerated for the last 22 years, a path God "granted him," that God picked him and allowed him opportunity and the gift to share God's word with young convicts who were hurt and hopeless men.



I had the nerve to drive to Faribault prison with my heated seats, bottled water, and Sirius XM radio playing the Message, thinking I was going to teach some criminals something about God. That is an embarrassing truth and beyond wrong. That, my friends—insiders, outsiders, believers, and non-believers—is how my God (OUR God) works! Whenever I think I've got it all figured out, He reminds me, always on His terms, that I don't. I'm human. I'm His. Whatever is happening to the least of His children, if it isn't happening, or hasn't happened to me yet, I know nothing. Well, that's not entirely true... I know His unconditional love. The grace He gives to me, His 24/7 support, and His much needed daily forgiveness. Thank you Faribault, and thank you Father.

Heidi 's interactive website is coming soon. It's all about people helping people. www.humanadvocates.org

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**May you all find the peace and joy of Jesus Christ this Christmas season.
Thank you for all you do for the Charis ministry.**

Be a Blessing

If you are interested in serving on a team for the fall weekends, NOW is the time to let us know of your availability. You can do this by downloading a team application from the Charis website (www.charismn.com) and emailing it to the Charis liaisons (find the link at charismn.com) or to me (maretryan@gmail.com). Each completed application will be forwarded to the appropriate lay director.

Your presence would be a blessing to all the men and women who attend a Charis weekend.

How to Help our Overcomers

Many of the women who come to Charis Connects have recently been released from prison. We're calling them Overcomers. Many have no family in the area and their friends may not be the kind of people who will help them on their journey to recovery and transformation. They are starting over, full of good intentions and with strong resolve to change their lives. To make these changes they need a little extra help from the Charis community. Here's how you can help:

- Connections for housing: do you know someone who would rent to an Overcomer? Would you be willing to help defray the one-time request for the rental deposit or first month's rent?
- A job. Do you know someone who would take a chance and hire an Overcomer?
- Health & home care products like toothpaste, toothbrushes, deodorant, shampoo, conditioner, pillows, towels, laundry soap, socks, gloves etc.
- Gift cards for gas or food for those searching for work.
- Contributions to a fund that will be used to assist the Overcomers.

Would you consider asking your friends, family or church community to join you in assisting with these needs? Call Karen Troyer to donate or with questions. She can be reached at 612-910-1124 or karentroyer@msn.com. Please be assured that requests for assistance from Overcomers are carefully screened.