



CHARIS of MINNESOTA INCORPORATED

The Olive Branch

We believe God is calling us to do more



**Charis President:
Maret Ryan**

I recently attended a Bureau of Prisons training and learned some heartbreaking facts about recidivism. If you've been in prison twice, the recidivism rate jumps up to 90%. That is just unacceptable. I have listened as women released from prison to a halfway-house or re-entry program speak of roommates in the bed next to them who are using drugs in these houses. That is just unacceptable. I have heard first-hand stories of not being able to find a place to live because landlords don't want to rent to ex-offenders. And if they can't find a place to live, then they're back to living with the same drug-using family and/or friends. That too is unacceptable.

For the past year I have watched as doors were opened for the Charis ministry that have been tightly closed in the past. I have been introduced to people I had no business meeting, with the result that boundaries were moved and freedom given. Such is the awesome power of God in our lives and in the Charis ministry. Through that Godly power the Charis ministry can help to turn what is unacceptable into something that is pleasing in God's sight.

One of my most gratifying moments of this past year was to see a long-time sister in Christ reconnect to our community. She walked into our Charis Connects meeting with her head held high and a big smile on her face. She was greeted with kindness, compassion and a hug. I heard her

speaking of the impact of a Charis weekend on her life. (Read more on Page 3.) So it is with many of the women who find their way to this part of our ministry. Their steps are a little hesitant at the beginning, but still they keep walking through the door.—and they hear once again that they are worthy.

The Charis board of directors believes God is calling us to do more; to keep our work strong on the inside but to also help on the outside. It's on the inside that we first make the connections with our brothers and sisters in Christ and begin to build the trust relationships. Maintaining a strong and effective presence in the prison is vital to our ministry. With the caliber of our volunteers, the people who have committed their lives and hearts to making an impact, we know we can make a huge difference. That is why the work must not stop there.

This is why we're taking steps to ensure a healthy volunteer base, and to do that a speaker's bureau has been preparing to go into the community—into your churches and organizations—to speak about the Charis ministry and to give a powerful witness to the saving grace of God to our brothers and sisters on the inside. There are people with good hearts in our community and we aim to find as many of them as possible to work with us. We're also planning to host a Charis weekend on the outside to provide volunteers with an idea of what

truly happens on a Charis retreat. This weekend will be for potential volunteers, friends and families of former inmates and for anyone who would like to join us on our journey.

Most of all we'd like to start a Charis Connects for the men who are leaving prison and have the same struggles and need the same support as do the women. We've tested ourselves and think we have built a good model that will work.

The JOG that our team members give covers the cost of a putting on a weekend retreat, but it does not cover any additional costs for this ministry. Costs for Bibles and devotionals, our ministry support of New Life in Christ (David Hibbison's ministry), promotional materials, and Charis Connects are all dependent on support from you.

It says on our Charis cross that "Christ is counting on us." As a Board we take that to heart and also feel God is giving us a new sense of urgency—that our mission must include being the Godly resource that walks alongside our sisters and brothers in Christ after release. Lives can be redeemed, walks can be strengthened, and with strong financial help from you, we can continue to make a difference in the lives of so many.

We can turn something that is unacceptable into something that is pleasing in God's sight.

God bless!



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

Praying Through Challenges ... by Kathy Fagerness, Lay Director

Although Isaiah 41:13 was selected as our weekend verse, and proved to be quite meaningful to so many team members and weekenders alike on our Charis #47 weekend, there was another verse that also sustained me as lay director through the challenges of our months of preparation. 1Thessalonians 5:16-18 says *Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus*. To be honest, I was most certainly **not rejoicing over** the restriction that was placed on us at MCF-Shakopee that allowed no new team members, neither was I (nor anyone else on our team) rejoicing when we heard the shocking news that God had brought our beloved John Troyer, our opening speaker, home to be with Him the day before our second team meeting.

As we prayed our way through these challenges and allowed Christ to take the lead, we were able to come out on the other side stronger in our faith and willing to rely more fully on Him to work out the details. We were able to **rejoice and give thanks in** our circumstances, although not so grateful **for** them. Seven former team members who had not served at MCF Shakopee in several years were specially trained by Chaplain Amy and welcomed back with open arms; special friendships were reignited and it was a real blessing to have them back and serving so faithfully once again! John Troyer might have been physically absent from our team, but he was most definitely with us in spirit, and only God knows the impact his story has had and will continue to have on our weekenders making a decision not only to follow Christ, but also to lead others to Him.

Although there were many highlights, the weekenders expressed many times over how impacted they were not only by the Stations of the Cross on Friday, but also by the Agape Dinner, Forgiveness Service, and the outdoor Burning Ceremony (of their *Forgiveness Lists*) on Saturday evening. On this beautiful and balmy autumn evening, and with the smoke of our burning *forgiveness lists* rising into the broad and expansive starlit sky, it brought to mind Psalm 103:12...*as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us*.

Some quotable takeaways... a weekender expressing to her table leader on Saturday that she has never owned a Bible and then on Sunday how moving it was to see her sobbing as she clutched her Bible so closely and expressed, "I am going to read it over and over and over again"... other weekenders stating that Saturday "was the best day of my entire life." Ephesians 3:20-21 seems to sum it up best. God is so good and He supplied all of our needs beyond *what we could have asked or imagined*. *To Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen*.



Now We're Talking!

Karen Troyer, Board member, recently represented the Charis ministry at two separate events: Prison Fellowship training and the Midwest Mentoring Collaborative Conference. At each of these events she was given the opportunity to share goals and ideas with others groups attempting to create fellowship with Overcomers. Our willingness to walk alongside them after release is a gift that allows relationships to grow and offers hope to those who will follow. There is an especially large role for communities of faith to play in seeking a solution — encouraging a new way to live that allows and accepts who God made us all to be. So how can we work together? Let's keep the discussion going.

Do We Make a Difference?

My name is Christina Valtierra, OID #407801.

I remember the officials telling me I would always be incarcerated and as a result, they would use my number as just another statistic. You see, I had a lengthy criminal record. By the time I was 17 I had more than seven felonies. I was certified as an adult at age 17. By age 19 — the time when young women in the real world were graduating from high school and going to college — I was being sentenced to Shakopee Women's Prison for the second time, looking at a five-year or longer sentence.

Anytime I need a reminder of what it's like to lose everything, including my dignity, I think of my two beautiful daughters who are 15 and 16 years old. They're living the life "their Momma" never had the chance to live. How innocent they are, and how grateful I am knowing that they will never be exposed to a life of gangs, crime, drug and alcohol abuse and misuse.



I was an active member of the well-known Chicago street gang, the Vice Lords. And everywhere I went I let that be known. Sadly, not one of my so-called partners ever had my back. I had my own back, and it is a lesson I learned the hard way. The famous saying "prison will make you or break you" is not a laughing matter. The fact is, prison broke me and it made me. And because prison both broke me and made me, I am a Conqueror. There was a time I boasted in the things of the world: power, crime, hate, seduction, my own will and my own way. But that time has passed and is gone!

While I was incarcerated I began participating in the Charis group activities and it reminded me of what the Lord says about those who are broken and down trodden. Witnessing the Charis men and women coming into a prison to selflessly give of their time and energy brought me to a place of reflection. I attended the three-day Charis retreat in 1995 and I began to believe in myself again. I was foolish and wise enough to believe God does, can and is more than capable of changing a life. I fully dedicated my life to Him and I will never be the same. I have been out of prison since 1997. I run a successful food business and I am a health and wellness coordinator in the Native American community. God has restored my brokenness, mended my family back together and given me a rightful place in society and life.

All praise, honor and glory goes to Him because it is God in whom I now boast. God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And He chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. (I Cor. 1:27)

***Do we make a difference?
Yes we do!***

**Put the Bible where it belongs
into the hands of an inmate**



Bibles (and devotionals) are our largest ministry expense at nearly \$5,000 per year. Recently we were asked, "If a prison chaplain asked for Bibles, would Charis pay for them?" We'd love to be able to say yes. With your help that can happen. Would you consider pledging \$100, or as much as you can, to help us purchase these life-giving items? Your tax deductible gift would benefit so many.



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Website:
<http://charismn.com>



Like us on Facebook at
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Prison Ministry

The Charis website, www.charismn.com, has a re-entry link that can help you learn more about the re-entry process and how to help Overcomers in your church and community. Check out this valuable resource.

Giving to Charis Just Got Easier: Mail or on-line

We understand that giving is a personal decision, and we are honored that you would consider donating to the Charis Prison Ministry. Your gift makes a difference.

Donate by mail: Please mail your donation to:
Charis Prison Ministry, PO Box 102,
Hopkins, MN 55343

Donate online: from the Charis website: www.charismn.com
Simply select the donate link and you will be taken to a secure site to complete your transaction. There are options available to Give weekly, monthly or one-time only.

Please consider pledging a monthly donation to support the Charis Prison Ministry.
God bless you for your generous heart.