

## MICAH MISSION AIDS TRANSITION TO SOCIETY

**By Kate O’Gorman**

The Micah Mission is an ecumenical, non-profit, faith-based organization in Saskatoon that provides support to current and formerly incarcerated people.

The work is done predominantly on a volunteer basis, with some 50 volunteers offering their time and compassion to the three integrated programs that make up the Micah Mission ministry.

Person-to-Person and the Community Chaplaincy program connects volunteers with individuals both within and outside correctional institutions through visitation opportunities and support for transition back into the community.

A third program called Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) works with people who have been incarcerated as sexual offenders and are transitioning back into the community. The intention is to address the risk of re-offence while keeping both the community and the formerly incarcerated individual safe.

Through a model of friendship, these programs seek to make the reintegration process as smooth as possible, inviting the individual and the community to enter into a process of reconciliation and wholeness.

According to chaplain Peter Oliver, “Many people who find themselves in our correctional facilities are struggling with mental illness, some don’t have good social support systems and they may be in danger of re-offending. These people need assistance and this is what (Micah Mission) does.

“We help current and former inmates understand what is happening to them emotionally; we assist people process how they are being treated by their families; we assist them in finding employment and put them in touch with any social services they may need, and so on,” describes Oliver. “Our main goal is walking with people as they make their journey back into the community.”

As a volunteer with Person-to-Person, Harry Harder sees his job as one of extending friendship. “In the five years that I have been volunteering I have journeyed with three people; two have been released and I still maintain a regular telephone connection with them,” explains Harder. “My connection serves as a window to the world for these men.”

Board member Sharon Wright says that “one of the things I’m most impressed with when listening to the stories of our volunteers is that they really develop friendships with those who are incarcerated, which is difficult for many people to understand.

“You can’t journey with someone over a period of time and not develop a sense of community with them,” continues Wright. “That’s what we’re all about. We want those who feel that they are alone to have a sense of community and feel like they belong — because when you feel like you belong, you are accountable and you don’t want to do harm.”

The volunteers and those who serve on the board represent many different Christian churches. Board member Cam Harder explains, “we are an ecumenical group; we have people who are United, Catholic, Quaker, Lutheran, Mennonite and Anglican who are actively participating on our board and in volunteer support.

“Something I think that this Christian heritage brings to the work is that we come with a Gospel perspective that our value as human beings is not something we ourselves create, nor destroy, but it is a gift from God,” adds Cam Harder. “So we encounter people with a deep amount of respect. We also recognize that because these folks who have found themselves in prison or being released from prison are loved by God and are valued people, we want the best for them. We want them to live lives that are healthy and whole where they can use their gifts in a useful way to contribute to the larger community.”

While it is the Gospel vision that inspires the work of the Micah Project and its volunteers, “the intention is not to evangelize,” notes Oliver. “The intention is to walk with individuals on a journey of mutual care and concern. If that should emerge in some kind of faith encounter, then great; if it doesn’t, that is okay, too. The point is that we are two people walking with each other and respecting where the other is at.”

To this end, “we want to create a culture of faith-filled volunteers,” continues Oliver. Walking with people as they reintegrate into the community is a critical relationship. Faith community involvement and partnering with various congregations is key to the success of the reintegration program.

To highlight this point, Harry Harder recounts the story of Ryan and how his successful reintegration relies heavily on faith community support.

“Ryan has recently celebrated the one year anniversary of his release. Prior to this past year, the longest period of time that Ryan has managed to stay out of prison was four months. But he made connection with a faith

community and the faith community gathered around him and throughout the course of a year, primarily through social engagement with him and regular meetings, he has been able to stay out of jail and feels a sense of centredness. It has been transformative not only for Ryan but for the faith community that has been walking with him. Friendships occurred as a result of this faith-community partnership that otherwise would have been highly unlikely.”

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