

HISTORY OF JAIL CHAPLAINS MINISTRY

“I was in prison, and you came to visit me.” (Matthew 25:36 NIV)

In 1979, Cass County Sheriff Don Rudnick invited Pastor Curt Frankhauser, then an assistant pastor at Fargo's First Assembly of God Church, to become a volunteer chaplain for the Sheriff's Office. Chaplain Frankhauser began by helping deputies make death notifications to families. Later the chaplain responsibilities expanded to providing ministry to inmates. The ministry had great favor with the Sheriff's Office under Pr. Curt's leadership as he carried out his dual responsibilities as a pastor at First Assembly and as a chaplain at the Cass County Jail. The new Cass County Jail, a 348-bed facility, opened in the fall 2002. Designed with a room specifically for programs, this greatly expanded opportunities for the ministry.

In May of 2006, the Peace Officer Jail Chaplains Association received its nonprofit status from the IRS, allowing tax deductible donations to be given to the ministry. A volunteer board was formed of six individuals of various professional backgrounds. Members of the original board were: Gary Manske, Russ Tweiten, Gregg Robbins, Mark Brakel, Leonard Sliwoski and Pr. Curt Frankhauser.

The Articles of Incorporation stated that the purpose of the newly formed corporation was to provide a ministry of presence, support and counsel to the law enforcement personnel of the Cass County Sheriff's Office and to provide quality, caring, professional and effective ministry to the inmates in the Cass County Jail.

God used Jeff Frankhauser's tenure as a jailer in the Cass County Jail to introduce his brother, Pr. Curt to Sheriff Rudnick. This led to Pr. Curt starting as a volunteer chaplain with the patrol deputies. As his relationship with the Sheriff's Office team grew, God was also doing a work in Pr. Curt's heart, when on occasion he was asked to provide Christian care for inmates who requested a visit. Pr. Frankhauser realized the impact his visits had on some inmates and asked himself, "If Jesus were here, where would he be?" Pr. Curt took the calling seriously, to the point of asking Sheriff Don Rudnick to throw him in jail for a couple of days. That experience changed his motivation and Pr. Curt began telling Jail Chaplain volunteers, "It's an honor and privilege to minister in the jail. The jail is a place where people are thrown away. We search in the junk pile and try to make treasure out of it."

In April of 2007, Mike Sonju was hired as a full-time chaplain, providing a daily spiritual presence for the inmates and staff at the jail. Chaplain Mike, along with a team of volunteers, began providing a wide range of Christian faith-based programs for both male and female inmates. Bible studies, MOM's in Touch, ALPHA and knitting along with church services made up 20+ hours of programming each week. The ministry also established a benevolence fund to help returning citizens as they re-entered the community. This fund helped cover rent, transportation, clothing and specialized tools to help with employment.

In 2007, Jail Chaplains operating expenses were \$62,900. That year, \$115,050 was raised through donations to the ministry. In 2008 and 2009, operating expense grew to \$99,620 and \$108,829 respectively.

Sargent Ben Schwandt, Programs Administrator at the Cass County Jail, said Jail Chaplains volunteers have access unheard of at other facilities, largely thanks to the trust Frankhauser built over three decades. "I've heard from many inmates that the Cass County Jail is really where they learn their lesson in life and really where they find their faith." "They've not been exposed to this kind of programming before," Schwandt said. He credited Jail Chaplains as "being very helpful in maintaining an environment of a well-run and quiet facility".

The work of Jail Chaplains was also fundamental in achieving Sheriff Paul Laney's mandate that the jail not warehouse people but give them a chance at rehabilitation and reintegration into the community.

While Pr. Curt continued to serve Jail Chaplains on a part-time basis, it was during the year of 2011 he felt God's call to begin stepping back from the ministry and to seek a new Executive Director. He was very excited when he learned that Gerri Leach,

then Community Relations Director of the Salvation Army, would consider the position. On May 1, 2012 the Jail Chaplains board hired Gerri as the first full-time Executive Director. Gerri was mentored by Pastor Curt until his retirement in December of 2012. Deb Trombley served as a part-time development support staff person from July 15, 2009 to April 25, 2012.

Gerri's tenure with the Salvation Army provided the opportunity to build relationships with first responders, businesses, service organizations, churches and media. Those relationships and her leadership skills have been helpful in expanding the awareness of the work the Lord has entrusted to the Jail Chaplains team.

Under Gerri's leadership, from February 1, 2013 to May 31, 2017 Jail Chaplains was involved in providing faith-based accountability housing for men in a rented property the ministry referred to as Project HOME. Elizabeth Williams was affiliated with Jail Chaplains from June 2012-December 2014. During this time she completed Correctional Chaplain training and served as a part-time female chaplain with the ministry.

In 2015, the Jail Chaplains Board of Directors set up a designated fund where North Dakota donors could receive a tax credit for qualified contributions. The fund was established as the North Dakota Tax Credit Endowment Fund. By August of 2020, the fund had grown to over \$80,000.

The opioid drug crisis hit Fargo-Moorhead in the spring of 2016. Law enforcement leadership came to the faith community saying, "We can't arrest our way out of this; we need your help." The Jail Chaplains team saw church leaders struggle with what they could do to be helpful. A few months later, a faith-based small group model called Living Free came to the attention of Executive Director, Gerri Leach. Gerri shared the information with the Jail Chaplains Board of Directors who later approved adopting the new model in September 2017, seeing it as a way to build a strong bridge for inmates as they re-entered the community.

On November 1, 2017, Dr. Jack Klugh joined Jail Chaplains on a part-time basis as the Living Free Coordinator to help integrate the small groups into the ministry. The first Living Free Seminar was hosted in January of 2018 with an attendance of 93 participants who came from 23 different churches. The Jail Chaplains team of volunteers grew significantly, both in numbers and the impact made in the lives of the men and women disciplined. The Living Free training provided a consistent method and process for equipping Jail Chaplains volunteer team members. Living Free groups began in the jail, and inmates could complete the curriculum after they were released.

July 1, 2018, Jail Chaplains hired Eric Johnson as the full time Living Free Coordinator. Eric's job was to manage the Living Free groups in the jail as well as the small groups hosted in a variety of locations across the community and in churches. It was amazing to see the number of volunteers who became engaged through the training. These volunteers began to faithfully serve as facilitators for groups which covered a variety of topics including anger, fear, depression, grief, stepping into freedom, godly parenting, committed couples and concerned persons.

In 2019, there were 9373 inmates booked into the Cass County Jail. Integration of the Living Free model has strengthened the faith-based programming Jail Chaplains provides in the facility. Group facilitators build continue to build relationships with the group participants while sharing life skills from a biblical perspective and encourage individual sharing.

Peace Officer Jail Chaplains Association continues to do business as Jail Chaplains and our mission: Sharing the message of salvation as we serve and disciple through the love and compassion of Jesus Christ.

Origination: September 8, 2020