

OKC incarceration outreach church seeks support

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Crystal King created the children's Sunday school craft lesson with her fellow church members in mind.

The volunteer at Pennsylvania Avenue Redemption Church recently helped each youth create two magnet picture frames — one to give to their caregiver and one for their parent to take with them when they returned to a metro-area community corrections facility after church.

Like the young peoples' parents, King once was incarcerated and awaiting her release from the state Corrections Department. Volunteers from Pennsylvania Avenue Redemption drove vans to Kate Barnard Community Correctional Center to take her to the church, 1320 N Pennsylvania Ave.

King said she served a 42-month sentence and came to find prison to be a lonely place "even when you are in the middle of a dorm full of women." She said she would have loved to have had a memento like a picture or drawing from her children, but they lived in another state.

Pennsylvania Avenue Redemption is a church where the incarcerated are welcome for worship, where many of the volunteers are people like King who love on them because they, too, have experienced imprisonment. In addition to the Gospel, people visiting the church are treated to a free meal on Sunday and an opportunity to visit with family and friends. Volunteers continue to provide round-trip transportation for men and women from metro-area community corrections facilities to the church.

The Rev. Brad Rogers, the church's bi-vocational pastor, said the church is run by caring people like King who have continued to be part of the congregation after their release from prison.

Rogers said the church's mission won't ever change, but it is in need of more support because of a recent funding change.

Finding funding

Criminal Justice And Mercy Ministries or CJAMM, an affiliate of the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference, had been the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference's avenue to funnel money to Pennsylvania Avenue Redemption, but earlier this year the organization notified church leaders that the funding process had changed.

Kristen Harlin, CJAMM's executive director, said the original vision for the Redemption Church program (there are two other Redemption churches; one in Lawton and one in Tulsa) was that it eventually would consist of free-standing congregations responsible for their own funding.

Harlin said the recent change in the way the program is funded reflects that original vision for the congregations. She said Pennsylvania Avenue Redemption has assets and its own governing board so it is well on its way to fulfilling the original vision for the church.

Harlin said in previous years, the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference gave CJAMM an apportionment that would be dispersed to programs like the Redemption churches. However, the conference recently voted to do away with the apportionment, opting instead to make funding for CJAMM a "connectional giving" opportunity, which means United Methodist churches may decide on their own if they want to give to the Redemption churches.

Harlin said Pennsylvania Avenue Redemption was given an opportunity to apply for a grant from CJAMM, and they did so. She said the ministry always will be linked to her agency in some way.

"We still feel very connected with them," she said.

Rogers said the grant from CJAMM was appreciated. But he said the grant was less than what the church generally had received in previous years, so he is concerned.

Rogers said the church needs more funding to help pay for things like vehicle maintenance, fuel and insurance for the vans that transport inmates to and from worship services.

He said church members give monetarily, but many of them are just getting back on their feet after returning from prison. Also, he said some church members are among the homeless, and they come in for a free meal each week and an opportunity to hear a life-changing sermon, but don't have a lot of money to give.

And with about 70 percent of the church members still incarcerated, church leaders traditionally have not expected much of the church's operating funds to come from people in the pews.

In that way, Pennsylvania Avenue Redemption is missional, Rogers said.

He said he has been visiting local Methodist churches to explain the church's situation with the hope that the Methodist faith community will step up to help provide more funds and volunteers to continue the mission-minded church.

"We change lives through what we do," Rogers said.

"Honestly, it provides a place where they can go and know that they are not going to be judged."

Original visionary speaks

Meanwhile, the Rev. Stan Basler teaches confirmation classes and also preaches at the church each Thursday. The retired United Methodist minister was one of the original visionaries behind Pennsylvania Avenue Redemption.

"My original vision or understanding was that I had met people who had a sincere faith that was nurtured or born in incarceration, and I didn't find those people in churches when I got out. I thought the Church had an obligation to build a bridge over what I thought was a chasm that separated the prison gate from the church door, and that was how Redemption Church was envisioned," he said.

Basler said he sees a continued need for congregations like Pennsylvania Avenue Redemption and hopes the church can find the support it needs.

"What we have here is a slice of the culture. One of our goals is that the ex-offenders will be our leaders, and many have," he said. "We don't look at it so much as a ministry. We think of it as a church finding a way to be the Church to an overlooked population."

How to help

For more information on Pennsylvania Avenue Redemption United Methodist Church or to make a donation to the church, call Marcia Manning, administrative assistant at 528-0963, email redemptionumc@coxinet.net or send donations to Manning at 1320 N Pennsylvania, Oklahoma City, OK 73107.

The church meets for worship at 10:45 a.m. Sunday and 6:45 p.m. Thursday at 1320 N Pennsylvania Ave.

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