

“I Was in Prison and You Visited Me”: Dedicated Lay Volunteers Carry on Sisters’ Prison Ministry

by Sister Sarah Smedman

In 1989, Sister Timothy Kirby began her ministry at the Federal Prison Camp in Duluth, Minnesota, after former Bishop Roger Schweitz of Duluth suggested she apply for the Chaplaincy position. Not interested in the administrative work involved, she volunteered to work with the prisoners instead. She began a Catholic Scripture Study Group that met Wednesday evenings, where participants read and studied the Scripture passages for the following Sunday’s Liturgy of the Word. She provided brief films and Sunday by Sunday, a four-page commentary on the readings. On Sunday mornings, she presided at a Worship and Communion service, while a diocesan priest celebrated Mass on Thursday evenings.

An ironic blip in Sister Timothy’s volunteer service was that twice she was suspended for three months for violation of protocol. The first time when a prisoner embraced her, she hugged him back; the second time, she received a phone call and talked with an ex-prisoner before the limited time in which he was permitted to contact people from the Prison. Both of these occasions evidence Sister Tim’s concern, compassion, and love for those she was serving. Neither affected the impact of her work. “So many of these men,” she said, “are really good people who made mistakes.” She observed them “grow spiritually, look at themselves more deeply, rearrange their priorities, and discover they need God in their lives.” Sister Tim felt “privileged to help them through their searching.”

She continued this ministry until shortly before her death on December 22, 2010. During those years, she was awarded Certificates of Appreciation signed by the Prison’s Warden and Chaplain every year

from 1991 through 2010; in 2002, she was named Volunteer of the Year; and in 2008, she received the President’s Volunteer Service Award, a national award from The President’s Council on Service and Civic Participation.



Jim Doyle Elizabeth Liebenstein Donna Effinger Dick Larson

Sister Timothy’s ministries are continued by a faithful and faith-filled group of lay volunteers: **Donna Effinger, Jim Doyle, Dick Larson, and John Herbertz.**

A graduate of The College of St. Scholastica, now retired, **Donna Effinger** was a chaplain in various medical centers for most of her life. In 2003, Sister Timothy asked her

to consider substituting when Sister had to be out of town. After first accompanying Sister Tim and noting particularly her emphasis on God’s everlasting love and on the men’s need to take on the work of forgiveness – both God’s forgiveness and their self-forgiveness – Donna agreed to substitute. “Thirteen years later,” Donna says, “I continue to be grateful for that opportunity.” That partnership continued until Sister Tim, in the 92nd year of her life, had to withdraw from the ministry.

At that time, the Prison Chaplain asked Donna to take over the Sunday ministry. Not yet retired, Donna agreed to lead the liturgical worship service one Sunday a month; she would, she said, recruit three others to form a team. Because no one has picked up Sister Timothy’s Wednesday night ministry, the Monastery continues to subscribe to multiple copies of Sunday by Sunday in Sister Tim’s memory, and sends them with Jim Doyle to the Prison. On Wednesday night, the prisoners themselves gather to study, discuss, and respond to the following Sunday’s readings and responses.

On a typical Sunday, the celebrants follow the format for Holy Communion outside the Mass, which lacks only the Eucharistic Prayer by a priest. That rite begins with sharing of the Liturgy of the Word, which the men themselves have prepared for on the previous Wednesday, and includes opening music, the penitential rite, the Gloria, the oration, the Scriptural readings for the day (in both English and Spanish), a reflection on the readings, and the petitions of the faithful. The Liturgy of the Eucharist follows, with the Lord's Prayer, and the Communion rite. The men are invited to participate in various aspects of the Communion service, some of them reading in public for the first time and reading God's word; some provide music for the service that varies with their talents.

To form that team of four, Donna turned naturally to **Jim Doyle**, whom Sister Tim had already engaged

to assist in the Prison ministry. (At present, other members of the team who alternate Sundays are Dick Larson and John Herbertz.) Fifteen years ago, Sister Timothy invited her former student and lifelong friend, Jim Doyle, to work with her at the Prison. He accepted and began to work with her at the Wednesday evening Study Groups. During those evenings, Jim was impressed by Sister Tim's non-judgmental attitude, her emphasis on the men's need for self-acceptance, and her ability to relate their lives to the Scripture readings. As Sister Tim's health declined, Jim also participated more fully in the Sunday service. Through the work that Sister was doing, Jim noted, "the men seemed more at peace with themselves . . . and were developing a type of support group to help themselves."

Jim was privileged to be with Sister Tim at her last meeting with the prisoners. "I watched," he said reverently, "as she was stepping down from the altar with two large men, one on either side, carefully guiding her. They were near tears. They knew she was near the

end of her life on earth." Jim reflected, "I cannot put into words the lessons I have learned from my ministry at the prison." As Jim is there only a short time each month, he doesn't get to know the names of the men. "However," he says, "there is an instant when I give them Communion and our eyes meet – they always look directly into my eyes – when names don't matter. Our souls connect on a deep spiritual level that cannot be defined." Jim attributes such connections to the environment Sister Timothy developed, now some years ago.



*Sister Timothy Kirby at the prison entrance, 2006
(photo by Clint Austin)*

When **Dick Larson** was invited to join Donna and Jim in sharing the Sunday services for Catholic inmates of the Prison Camp, Dick says he "thought of the Gospel passage where Jesus tells his disciples [and me] not only to care for the poor but also to visit those in prison. It was easy to say 'yes' to their invitation."

In the five years since, Dick claims to have become a small part of the prison community. By prison policy, Dick's time with the inmates is limited, but "I still have to be able to see and feel the confinement they experience and their need for hope and patience." Some, perhaps many, "see prison time as a turning point where they can be socially and spiritually free to be themselves." Dick notes that during the Sunday service, while offering the reflection on the readings, he is conscious of the need to be sensitive to the prison environment, but still hopes to touch on relationships and attachments that have cast a shadow over their lives. It is Dick's habit during the recessional hymn to linger at the back of the chapel to wish each person well until he sees them again. Dick feels he receives great benefit from his ministry, and hopes "that the inmates of the Prison Camp . . . find spiritual benefit also."

John Herbertz is the newest member of the Prison Volunteer team. Currently a social worker at the Lake Superior Community Health Center, he met Donna

and Dick at St. Benedict Catholic Church in Duluth, where he and his family have been parishioners for 23 years. Possessed of an infectious sense of humor, John not only speaks Spanish to be more inclusive of the Latino prisoners, but intersperses his reflections with jokes that evoke laughter and lighten the moment; an example: “What instrument do the apostles enjoy playing in their boats? The castanets!” John muses, “I do feel it is a great privilege and blessing to be with the men because we are there in their time of real need.”

Chaplain Liz Liebenstein, who was a chaplain for the Federal Bureau of Prisons from 1993 to 2015, ministered at the Duluth Prison beginning in 2011 and so had never met Sister Timothy. However, for four years she oversaw, worked with, and knew these lay ministers well. Her words – and the following are but few – testify to their commitment to carry on this ministry of our Benedictine Sisters. Sister Timothy’s “care for the men and commitment to the ministry at the prison,” Liz says, “are reflected in the work of those who succeed her, serving in honor of the work she had begun years ago.” She continues, “Although faith formation, scripture study, and worship are vitally important, what is even more basic is that the men understood – without a doubt – that they had not been forgotten, and that they were never alone. Prison is an exceedingly lonely place . . . and to discover that they have people, they belong, and they are loved without condition is fundamental to their healing. . . . [M]en would tell me they had found loving family and a deep sense of belonging in the church – in prison!” The four volunteers carrying on this ministry of the Benedictines, Liz avers, have continued to create “a sense of community for men who have lived lives defined by loneliness, chaos, and alienation [They have] helped the inmates to realize their own sense of giftedness and call upon their own lives . . . through shared worship.”

Then, specifying special gifts of each volunteer, Liz continues: “Jim can be counted on to bring humor and always a thoughtful message that leans toward social

justice. As a convert, Dick brings a great sense of respect for the tradition. Donna helps the men to feel more comfortable, being tender as she invites them to come closer, to really share in the experience of Holy Communion. And John wants everyone to know they are welcome, spending hours translating his reflections into Spanish for our Latino inmates. . . . I loved to hear how Sister Timothy continued to minister as she grew older and certainly more frail, giving a blessed opportunity for the men to show tenderness and the love of God toward her.”

Chaplain Liz, now serving here at the Benedictine Living Center, also expresses her gratitude to the Sisters for keeping in prayer the men, their families, and “our government who holds their fragile lives in its hands”. She thanks us for providing *Sunday by Sunday*, “cherished by some of the Catholic men,” which helps them prepare for Sunday worship and is a “powerful reminder that faith is not so much about our set of beliefs, . . . but how we live our daily lives in response to the graciousness of God.”

As we Sisters age and grow fewer in number, we are grateful beyond words to God for the lay women and men who carry on our ministries in today’s world. Likewise, we cannot sufficiently express our gratitude to these women and men, dedicated to our charism and values, who are as committed as we Sisters to keeping Benedictinism alive and well, and in the future.

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