

## Seeds of Grace: An Emerging Ministries Project

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Some years ago I was Director of Children's Ministries at Grace United Methodist Church in Dayton, Ohio. One evening after Wednesday night Kids Club I was walking down the hallway with a nine-year old who regularly attended Grace. She was an alert and thoughtful child, a good student, and a positive presence in our community of children. She lived with her grandmother whom I had come to know and respect. As we walked along, she mentioned her mother and I asked her whereabouts. She told me her mother was in the army.

The next morning her grandmother called to tell me that the mother was actually in prison and that her granddaughter was ashamed to tell me the truth. She said it had happened while I was overseas on a mission trip. The mother had been taken from prison to the county jail. She wished a pastor would visit. I did not even know where the jail was or how to go about a visitation, but I heard that wish as a call from God and I began the journey that eventually led to the Seeds of Grace emerging ministries project funded in part by a grant from the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church.

Early in the journey I learned that the experience of my nine-year-old was not unusual for a child growing up in poor, inner city communities such as the neighborhood bordering Grace. Nor would she be the only child attending Grace with an incarcerated parent. In 2011 the student enrollment of the local preK-8 school, with whom I had developed a church-school partnership, was 96% African American and 100% economically disadvantaged. My counterpart in the school told me that "a lot of students mention incarcerated parents or relatives." Her estimate was that one in four have a parent who is currently in jail or has been at some point." These children suffer collateral damage from mass incarceration and what Michelle Alexander has documented as "the new Jim Crow."

The Seeds of Grace emerging ministries project was conceived as a grass roots intervention to heal the brokenness of the American criminal justice system and end mass incarceration. The envisioned scope of the project included discipleship with persons currently or recently incarcerated, and advocacy for restorative justice within the local church and community. Advocacy, education, networking, and re-entry have all been part of the Seeds of Grace project, but the core strategy is spiritual empowerment through engagement with biblical stories by local church members together with incarcerated individuals in a small group process. The remainder of this report focuses on the Seeds of Grace core strategy which I call "Circle of the Word."

Circle of the Word is a small group spiritual formation program created, developed, and implemented in the Seeds of Grace project. With the aid of a "talking piece," in a Circle of the Word, everyone can speak and listen in peace. The goal is to empower our spirits to experience God's love and share it with others. Circle of the Word integrates the practices of a biblical storytelling workshop with the processes of a peacemaking circle. Peacemaking circles are a restorative justice practice. The weekly Circle of the Word program at the Montgomery County (Ohio) Jail goes by the name "Sacred Stories" to distinguish it from the "Women's Circle" program. A Sacred Stories circle consists of two to three "Circlekeepers" from local congregations and eight to fourteen incarcerated women. The women are all there on a voluntary basis and the class make-up is different every week due to the unstable nature of jail populations.

In Sacred Stories we learn, tell, and interact with biblical stories through a variety of creative activities. We also get background information on the stories in their ancient context and we explore their connections to our lives now. Biblical stories have been a source of hope,

courage, comfort and wisdom for many people in many times and places. We believe they can empower our spirits and make us strong. Each circle engages a relatively short story from the biblical tradition as recorded in a standard translation. The stories often comprise a mini-epic over a period of 5-9 weeks. This past year our themes were “Good News” (Mark 1), “Journey to Bethlehem” (birth narratives), “Journey to Resurrection” (Mark 14-16), Resurrection According to John (John 20-21), and “Founding Mothers” (stories of Sarah and Hagar from Genesis).

Seeds of Grace accepted the challenge of bridging the gap between the local church and the community, between “respectable” middle class folk and people living behind bars. Seeds of Grace is a new ministry of Grace Church that offers laity the opportunity to grow in discipleship, serve marginalized individuals, and impact the system of mass incarceration.

It was easier than I anticipated to build a team. After the first two recruits, additional team members approached me to join Seeds of Grace. None of these women had ever been inside a jail or prison, and all were initially afraid. That changed after their first Sacred Stories circle. In written evaluations, team members identified ways in which Circle of the Word relates to the mission and ministry of the church:

- The Bible tells us very directly to visit those in jail. It is a ministry of love, mercy, and teaching so we may be God’s instrument in this situation. It helps us overcome feelings of us versus them, affirm that we are all God’s children. Also, it helps us know the importance of reaching out to others...
- Encouragement to reach out beyond the church walls
- It is feeding God’s sheep with spiritual and emotional nurture. It is siding with the sheep, and not the goats, and visiting Jesus in jail. It is caring for our sisters in Christ.

Team members express appreciation to me for initiating the ministry and sustaining it. They feel that through the Seeds of Grace ministry I have helped them be more faithful disciples of Jesus.

My perception is that all humans are in need of healing and liberation, supportive community, repentance, forgiveness, empowerment and hope. Through the Seeds of Grace project I learned that people in detention settings have the time and in some cases the will to pursue fulfillment of these needs. As the jail chaplain told me, “You don’t have to tell an inmate that they’re wrong. They know they’re wrong—they’re in jail...Some folks come in and they’re just ready to change.” In their readiness for change, their desire for transformation, they inspire us to consider our own need for transformation. They lift us to a higher plane of consciousness about our relationships, our priorities, our problems, our need for the grace of God.

The Seeds of Grace project has shown me glimpses of the kingdom of God. I have seen it when a room full of strangers on the opposite side of so many boundaries—free and imprisoned, middle class and poor, educated and illiterate, black and white, youthful and elderly— find common ground and mutual affection in the course of just ninety minutes. The kingdom is experienced when hanging heads, shuffling feet, and cheerless expressions are replaced with uplifted postures, attentive eyes, beautiful smiles, and genuine laughter.

The kingdom is experienced when stories of a deeply personal nature are shared in the safe place that our circle becomes. We had a full room for our first circle of this past summer: three of us from the church and eleven from the jail. The two suggestions for connecting to the story of “Hagar Conceive a Child” were invitations to tell about “someone you know who couldn’t have a baby, or a time you were treated with contempt.” I started with a story about a friend who couldn’t have a baby. Then all but one of the others chose to speak on that connection. Every situation described was unique, including recognition that sometimes the issue is with the man and a story to illustrate. The woman who chose the contempt theme shared an experience much like that of Sarah and Hagar. Some of the stories were sad; some had happy endings; all were poignant.

In these times of sharing I sometimes feel like Jesus reaching out to touch a leper, getting in touch with deep woundedness, pain, shame. But I am not Jesus, and initially was not sure I

could shoulder the burden of these troubles in a helpful and healthy way. As Gregory Boyle asks in his book on ministry with “gangbangers” in L.A., “How do those who ‘sit in darkness’ find the light?...How does one hang in there with folks, patiently taking from the wreck of a lifetime of internalized shame, a sense that God finds them (us) wholly acceptable?” I’m convinced that internalizing certain stories from the Bible in a creative, safe atmosphere is one approach to answering these questions. I considered how else church members might participate in the Seeds of Grace project besides those who join me as Circlekeepers in the jail. Out of this came the prayer card activity. At the close of each circle the women are invited to write prayer requests, or just their names, on an index card if they would like the Monday morning prayer group at Grace to pray for them. They always accept the invitation and write with concentration. Sometimes they write their own prayers or express gratitude for the prayer group.

This prayer card activity has transformed the life of the congregation. The women are prayed for by the group on Monday morning, then the cards are distributed to group members for daily prayer throughout the week. Grace’s senior pastor is a member of the prayer group and has observed how the cards have impacted it: “Through the prayer ministry for the women our Grace prayer group has connected with a world outside themselves. This connection has brought a growth in the prayer group participants’ understanding and experience of God’s love and God’s people.” Through this component of Seeds of Grace I learned as never before the importance of local church spiritual practice. I am grateful to have been shown a way to mobilize that practice in response to the needs of the wider community.

Every time I take prayer cards to the Monday morning prayer group I connect the community to the church. Every time I go into the jail I connect the church to the community. Every time I bring a church member with me, or train them to go by themselves, I connect the church to the community. And it is all around telling and teaching the Word. Needless to say, I sense an overwhelming sense of fulfillment of a Deacon’s call to ministry, which brings me joy.

I have been surprised, though I shouldn’t have been, given the stories and statistics we regularly see in the daily paper, at the number of young women in jail, the number who are there because of drug and alcohol addictions, and the number who are mothers. Many of them are well aware of how their behavior has burdened their families and made victims of their children. I have been surprised at how many have little or no knowledge of even the most familiar stories. And yet there are those who articulate profound understanding of spiritual knowledge in beautiful statements of faith. I have been amazed at the general level of cooperation and participation in Circle activities and how much I grow in my understanding of and appreciation for God’s Word from engaging sacred stories with them.

The Seeds of Grace project helped me internalize what Jesus taught in his seeds parables. I have learned the value of small efforts to impact the behemoth of mass incarceration. Bryan Stevenson has addressed the ills of mass incarceration in big ways: by directing the Equal Justice Initiative in Alabama, teaching at New York University Law School, and litigating on behalf of condemned prisoners, the poor, and people of color. Yet in his recent book *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, Stevenson writes, “I have discovered, deep in the hearts of many condemned and incarcerated people, the scattered traces of hope and humanity—seeds of restoration that come to astonishing life **when nurtured by very simple interventions.**” [emphasis mine] These “seeds of restoration” are already within individuals, and even within social systems. Those of us on the Seeds of Grace project team have experienced God’s power to transcend bars of imprisonment—whether physical, psychological, social, or spiritual—through the “very simple intervention” of learning, exploring, connecting, and telling stories from the biblical tradition.