

Course for inmates helps changes lives

PITTSBURGH - Inmates at the Allegheny County Jail in downtown Pittsburgh who get accepted into a program to help them straighten out their lives know "they've got to put some work into it," said the chaplain who heads the program.

"It's very much about self-discipline. They have to get up, make their beds, keep their shirts tucked in, they cannot swear. The rules are pretty stringent," said the Rev. Lynn Yeso.

The United Methodist pastor is head chaplain at the jail. For two years she has been director of Potential HOPE, which stands for Helping Open People's Eyes.

"The key is remaking attitudes and skills in the hope that it will serve them well," said Father Malcolm McDonald, Catholic chaplain.

The chaplain's office recently received permission to enroll an entire pod, or housing unit, of male inmates. For the last five years the eight-week, life-skills course was conducted for up to 20 men at a time, but in the fall jail officials gave the office permission to take it large-scale.

Last October the class had 95 men enrolled and 71 graduated from the program Dec. 7. Inmates must go through an interview process to participate in the course.

The idea for expanding the program was met with the "approval and the enthusiasm of the jail administration," Rev. Yeso told the Pittsburgh Catholic, newspaper of the Pittsburgh Diocese.

An inmate prepared a list of inmates willing to serve as mentors to the program's students. After five years, the HOPE graduates can serve as mentors.

In the course inmates "confront the 'stinking thinking' that got them into trouble and still blocks them in life," Father McDonald said. "From that, it jumps off into different areas."

The course is taught by Christian clergy and volunteers, but all faiths are welcome.

“We stress that these are godly values that translate across different faith groups, with enough religious sensitivity and tolerance to speak to anyone,” Father McDonald said. “And for the most part we find it to be true.”

In the fall the series for the first time included an introduction to centering prayer, which required the men to sit quietly for 20 minutes.

Father McDonald said he was impressed with how they responded.

“Most men here are addicts of some kind,” whether it’s drugs or alcohol, he said, “and typically addicts are very full of energy, pretty extreme, frenetic. To see huge groups really entering into quiet and learning how to quiet themselves in prayer, it’s really impressive.”

The men who graduated several weeks ago were invited to become servant leaders to help others in the pod.

People working in the prison system, including the Pennsylvania Prison Chaplains Association, are watching the program, Father McDonald said.

Inmates can spend up to two years in the county jail, awaiting judgment, release or transfer to federal or state prisons.

“Ultimately we’re passing along the same people to each other,” the priest said.

“We’re dealing with one large group of parishioners,” he noted.

Rev. Yeso said, “We try to do lots of after-care, try to connect them with a male contact-mentor, men who would meet with them before they’re released and then walk with them on the outside for up to a year.”

“The inmates are good people whose addictions got them into trouble and they made bad choices,” Father McDonald said.

“Prison forces them to be clean and sober,” he added. “I get to see them as they really are and it’s a great time to sow seeds of God’s love for them.

“For many, it’s their first chance to think of God’s role for them. I like being part of that, (to) feel part of fulfilling that dream,” the priest said.