

Catholic Courier

DIocese of Rochester, New York ■ VOL. 106 NO. 54 ■ THURSDAY, October 12, 1995 ■ 75¢ ■ 24 PAGES 2 SECTIONS

RIJM marks 25 years of prison work

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

When the free help the imprisoned, both parties benefit, according to R. Bruce Colburn, executive director of Rochester Interfaith Jail Ministry, Inc.

Asked what motivates him and others to devote their time to inmates in the Monroe County Jail system, Colburn commented on the warmth volunteers can share with men and women who have often felt frozen out by uncaring families and an indifferent society.

"We're non-uniform," he said of jail ministry workers. "We're non-system."

According to a RIJM history, the ministry's founding in 1970 coincided with the opening of Monroe County Jail in downtown Rochester. Area clergy were called to serve as friends and advocates of the men and women in jail, and by the end of the 1970s, RIJM's clerical and lay volunteers were serving 350 prisoners annually.

Today, RIJM's 25 active volunteers range in age from 18 to 70, and work on projects ranging from referring prisoners and their families to various services, to delivering lectures to educate the wider community about prisons. Although they are allowed to share their experiences of God with the inmates, volunteers do not proselytize, Colburn stressed.

The volunteers come from every walk of life, according to Colburn, who said most are attracted to the ministry by a combination of religious faith and altruism.

"It's a chance to help someone who has lost their liberty," he said. "It's a chance to give some of your time. It's a chance to be a listener."

On Sunday, Nov. 5, Christians, Jews and members of the Baha'is Faith, among others, will gather at Brighton's Temple B'rith Kodesh to celebrate RIJM's 25th anniversary. The celebration will begin with an interfaith service at 5 p.m. with a homily from Sister Barbara A. Moore, RSM, RIJM's executive director from 1980 to 1990.

A reception and dinner are scheduled for 6:15 p.m. The featured speaker will be former inmate Jean Harris, convicted in 1981 of shooting and killing Dr. Herman Turnover, creator of the Scarsdale Diet. Since her release from prison in 1993 — when then-New York Governor Mario Cuomo granted her clemency for her work with inmate mothers and their children — Harris has become an outspoken advocate of prison reform.

RIJM itself has long raised its voice in behalf of prison reform and alternative sentencing, and has stressed the importance of keeping family

Continued on page 18



Angela Palmieri (left), a parishioner of St. Joseph's Church in Penfield, leads Groveland Correctional Facility inmates in prayer at the conclusion of a Sept. 21 session.

Inmates value ministry efforts

As the Groveland Correctional Facility inmates wandered in to a Christian meeting room on Thursday night, Sept. 21, Angela Palmieri, a member of the Diocesan Synod Implementation Commission, talked about the small Christian community she's starting at the prison.

"If I had to give up everything, I tell everyone that this is the one I'd keep," she said of her work with the inmates.

An active parishioner at St. Joseph's in Penfield, Palmieri said she is trying to combine the synodal goals of lifelong faith formation and small Christian communities in her work with the 12 to 15 prisoners who attend weekly two-hour sessions at Groveland, located in Sonyea, Livingston County.

The sessions consist of prayer, Scripture readings and reflection, and lots and lots of talk among the inmates. At the Sept. 21 session, for example, Palmieri asked the inmates to tell her what kind of gifts they can offer others.

Some of the inmates remarked that they were good listeners, or that they had a winning smile. One prisoner said his faith in Christ was the greatest gift he could share with others.

"Look in the mirror," Palmieri told the inmates, "and say 'God made me, and He was glad He made me.'"

Used to being social outcasts, not many of the inmates — or for that matter of the general public — would at first agree with Palmieri's statement.



Allen Pitcher listens attentively to discussion during the Sept. 21 session.

But that's precisely the point, according to her and others who work in prison ministry: It's up to God — not human beings — to determine the worth of inmates. And it's through prison ministry that many inmates come to realize that fact, noted Carl Fair, who attended the Sept. 21 session.

"I've seen a lot of guys leave out of here with a better attitude toward life," he observed. "Once you attend groups with people, you see them in a different light."

Those who work in prison ministry share Fair's perceptions. Again and again, Catholic prison-ministry volunteers throughout the diocese pointed out how they

came through their work to see inmates in a light vastly different from that in which they initially had perceived them.

"They're not really different," concluded Maureen Nielsen, a resident of Corpus Christi rectory in Rochester, who works with one of Corpus' four prison ministry groups that visit the Monroe County Jails in Rochester and Henrietta, as well as Groveland.

Nielsen asserted that good families and good economic backgrounds often save many people from making — and paying for — the costly mistakes that doom the lives of so many inmates.

"It's just a simple incident that separates us from them," Nielsen continued. "The choices that they made were choices anyone could have made."

Indeed, "There but for the grace of

Continued on page 18

Story by Rob Cullivan, photos by S. John Wilkin