

McMannen UMC Faith Team By Cathy Carlson

A faith team is a group of people working in conjunction with the Religious Coalition for a Non-violent Durham. Its purpose is to nurture and support individuals returning to the community after release from prison as they struggle to find housing, jobs, meaningful connections, and build a productive life.

We came together for training--eight very different and somewhat apprehensive people--whom no one would probably have thought to put together. All of us were drawn there by our recognition of the great need that existed in our community and of the church's responsibility to make a difference.

As we shared our reasons for participating, we learned that we had come in spite of our uneasiness about working with people outside the prison setting, our fear of becoming too involved, our belief that we had little or nothing to contribute, and spouses or church members' fear for our safety.

Expecting to learn about the adult with whom we would work, we were stunned when Marcia Owen of the Religious Coalition asked if we would be willing to serve as a pilot project and work with a thirteen year old on probation for a felony. Judge Marcia Morey was willing to order her to meet with our faith team once a month, write essays, and complete 50 hours of community service as an alternative to sending her to the correctional facility for the next six years of her life.

Trusting that the Holy Spirit was at work and presenting us with this opportunity, we agreed to meet the juvenile and her family. Since this was a pilot project we had no guidelines other than to be supportive of her. We were told to report any physical needs to the Religious Coalition rather than supplying them individually. We were not expected to police her actions or report them to the courts.

As we discussed how to proceed we decided:

- That we would spend several weeks getting to know each other.
(The Ungame proved to be a very useful tool in that process)
- That our standard of success for the project would be based on how faithful we were to our commitment and not on her success or failure.
- That we would maintain confidentiality regarding information our faith team partner shared with us.

Our meetings began and ended with prayer. There was no set agenda. We tried to make it clear that we cared about her and asked her what kind of help she needed from us. Tutoring and help finding fifty hours of community service were her major expressed needs. We discussed questions she had on her mind, the temptations she faced, problems, anger and other issues. She shared some of her poetry and her dreams with us. We quickly determined that meeting once a month was not enough to build the kind of relationship she needed to support her through the probation process. We finally settled on meeting the first three weeks of the month.

Interspersed with our meetings were birthday parties, cookouts, a sailing trip, and one on one activities where we could just enjoy being together.

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During our discussions, it was a delight to discover why each of us had been drawn to this group. When our young lady was being bullied and was trying to deal with her anger, one of the women who thought she had little to contribute shared her experience with being bullied in high school. When our member attended the funeral of her bully's mother, the only one in her class to do so, the girl thanked her for coming, apologized, and shared a lot of the pain she had been experiencing that past year which helped explain her behavior. Much later in our sessions, another woman who rarely expressed herself in the discussions shared her choice to have a personal relationship with Christ and the change that had made in her life. In both cases their contributions were exactly what was needed at that time in our discussion. One of our members was able to provide tutoring. Another member had expertise as a job counselor. Others provided expertise in writing essays and organization.

We helped our faith partner find places to do her community service. She worked with Habitat, helped hand out groceries and serve meals to the homeless and needy at Asbury Temple United Methodist church, helped with Asbury Methodist church's Angel Food ministry, helped cook and serve shelter meals for Urban Ministries with the United Methodist women, put council notebooks together for the McMannen staff and participated in a multi-media project at the church. One of her favorite activities, and an attitude changing experience for her, was speaking to a group of mothers whose children had been murdered on the streets of Durham. She shared her knowledge of life on the streets and participation in gangs. In that process she realized that her own mother could be a member of that group if she continued in the direction she was going. Feedback from the mothers indicated that her honest sharing was greatly appreciated and was a self-affirming experience for her.

In the beginning it was obvious that she cooperated but would break the rules of her probation if she thought she could get away with it. We were often frustrated by her failure to be at home when we went to pick her up for an activity and with her failure to let us know if she was ill or couldn't attend an event. We had to keep reminding ourselves that she was a young teenager and wouldn't learn those lessons overnight. As she learned that we were consistent in doing what we said we would do, she became more reliable.

A couple of times during the year we were afraid that problems she had with tardiness, skipping school, drugs and other infractions of her probation were going to result in her being sent to the correction facility. We attended her court hearings, spoke on her behalf when asked, and prayed a lot that whatever was best for her would be the result. At a low point for her, she was locked up for fifteen days as a last chance before being sent to the correctional facility. We arranged to meet with her at that facility and continued to demonstrate our care for her. We saw a big change in her attitude after that experience.

On October 5, 2009, approximately one year after we started meeting with her, we attended the final court hearing for our faith partner. Her court counselor recommended her release and said that she had fully expected that our partner would be sent to the correctional facility. The Assistant District attorney spoke and recommended her dismissal. Her lawyer talked about the changes he had seen in her. Our faith team was invited to speak and did so. Judge Morey told her that at the time she assigned her to the faith team, she gave her a one in one hundred chance

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of turning her life around. She told her that no juvenile who had come through the court system had ever had the kind of support she had with our faith team. She congratulated her on her success, reminded her that her court family and her faith team family would always be available for her to call upon, and cautioned her that the most difficult part of her journey was ahead of her as she had to stay on track without the supervision of the court. Judge Morey disappeared while we were congratulating our partner and then reappeared with refreshments which she served to all the court personnel and faith team-a first for Juvenile Court.

In interviews with Judge Morey and the court counselor regarding the effectiveness of this pilot project, they said:

I was hoping you would be able to give her a structured setting, be able to help her see herself clearer and also give her a faith base. She wanted that but she didn't know how to go about getting that, so I was looking for her to have someone present in her life that she could count on to be there for her.

How well do you think the faith team accomplished these goals?

On a scale of one to ten, I would say 150. WOW! I am just so impressed. I am telling everybody that I know about the good things that the Faith Team has done.

Gayle Taliaferro, Court Counselor.

We believed she had a family that was trying to help the best they could. They needed more support. She needed constant supervision, but most of all she needed to know that she mattered, that people were there for her. They weren't getting paid \$11 per hour for services that started at one o'clock and stopped at two o'clock. I know it's been rough and I know it's been a challenge, but it will change her forever.

We couldn't ask for more and as a judge with all the laws or the resources of social service and, drug agencies, it doesn't light a candle to what sincere committed volunteers can do to help a child. If there is an answer to help these kids this is it.

Judge Marcia Morey

One of our members drew the parallel between the task of the faith team and the parables of the lost coin or the shepherd and the lost sheep:

Mainly what we have been involved in is the parable, for example, of the lost coin. The coin did not choose to be lost. People do not choose to be lost but sometimes people are lost. You have the sheep that wandered away that made bad decisions, that followed folly and got lost ... and yet someone went out and found the sheep and brought the sheep back. People make foolish mistakes and are lost and you have the prodigal son or a child who is just flat out rebellious. What all three have in common is that we have to go get them. We have to bring them back.

Jimmie Modlin

As we reviewed our experience, we unanimously agreed to maintain contact with our faith team partner and to receive another faith partner when Judge Morey assigned one to us. We are delighted that this experience had a positive outcome and feel fairly confident that our partner will not be a prison statistic in the future. We also realize that our next experience may present very different challenges and have a different outcome. We are resolved to be faithful and to rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us in our new adventure.

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Tutoring



Habitat community service



Sailing trip



Cookout



Playing the Ungame



