

Ministry of Presence

The Prison Ministry at First Community Church

Mission Statement

In the spirit of Matthew 25:36, "I was in prison and you visited me...", we, the members of First Community Church, strive to follow Jesus' example to visit the imprisoned, offering fellowship, a compassionate listening ear and simple presence.

It is our mission to listen and respond with love for the goodness and humanity in all people. God offers forgiveness and grace to all.

We, as members of the body of Christ, emulate God's grace to those who are alone, afraid and incarcerated.

As Jesus ministered to the outcast of society, we offer our presence regardless of a person's crime, belief, religion, gender or sexual preference.



Senior Minister of First Community Church Dr. Richard Wing, right, shares time with Jerry Reynolds, a Stephen Minister and inmate of Franklin Medical Center.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL BARBER

History

First Community Church responded to a plea from death row inmate Anthony Aponovich in 2013 informing Rev. Dr. Richard Wing that about half of death row inmates receive no visits from family or friends.

This request for human contact spawned three programs which continue to evolve today. (1) Death Row visitors, (2) Franklin Medical Center (FMC) volunteer program, and most recently (3) a pen pal program. The programs involve about forty members and non-members of the church.

Death Row Visitation

The death row visitation program is an individual pairing of inmates wishing to have a visitor, and a participant wishing to follow Jesus' example to visit the imprisoned.

This is a personal relationship and there is no church-sponsored agenda other than to extend human contact to those who have been dehumanized by society as they await execution.

Our purpose is not to judge, offer legal advice or convert those whom we visit. Ours is simply to listen and provide

conversation other than the usual prison banter.

The Ministry of Presence death row group of visitors gathers quarterly for fellowship and to support each other to share stories, seek advice from one another and a member psychologist and give information to potential new participants.

Many of the participants carpool to Chillicothe or Toledo about once a month and exchange emails with their new friends via JPay between visits.



First Community Church member Vickie Murphy, right, plays guitar and sings with Franklin Medical Center inmate Scott Abram during a memorial service for inmates who recently passed away. PHOTO BY MICHAEL BARBER

Pen Pal Program

Some of those who want to participate in the Ministry of Presence live out of state, have difficulty hearing or have mobility issues. The Pen Pal program is especially meaningful for them.

Most communicate with inmates who express an interest for a pen pal by writing emails via JPay.com. J-Pay is a third-party company that provides the ability to exchange emails and protect the anonymity of the sender's email address. This program is just beginning, but pen pals are already writing to inmates in Chillicothe, Dayton, Toledo and London, Ohio.

Franklin Medical Center Volunteer Program

Individuals involved in the FMC program bring their personal strengths and artistic talents to the elderly, ill and infirmed inmates of the state's medical facility on Harmon Avenue in Columbus.

Volunteers go to the prison several days a week to teach inmates how to crochet or knit, play games, read to them and share book reviews. The inmates are pleased to know that the hats and scarves that they make are given to under privileged people of Mexico on the church's annual mission trip, Heart to Heart food pantry, The Tri-Village Trading Post

or sold to raise money to purchase yarn and supplies.

There is also a small "Threshold Choir" that sings to people in their rooms if they're too ill to get out of bed.

There are two palliative care rooms at FMC. This group of volunteers took it upon themselves to paint the rooms in bright colors, installed soothing fountains and hung art and quilts made by church members on the walls to make it a more comfortable place for those who are spending their last days and their vigilant families.



Jeff Leister, left, and Greg Esparza, photographed on death row.