

Trinity's Prison Ministers

Deacon Charlie deGravelles, Trinity's parishioners, and Trinity's friends have played a vital role in many spiritual lives at Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola) for twenty-five years.

The following pages provide a glimpse of God's work done by Trinity's prison ministers.

Deacon Charlie's Story

My involvement with the ministry at Angola began in August of 1990 when I served as a volunteer with an inter-denominational ministry weekend. I had only returned to the church myself a few years before so felt profoundly unprepared but also eager and excited to do something meaningful and challenging, something to “get my hands dirty.”

And so I spent that weekend going cell to cell in a lock down unit of Camp D, meeting the men, sharing the Good News of Christ, and sharing my life with theirs. I was so deeply moved by this experience –not only by the lives and stories of the men but by the presence of the living Christ in and among us –that when the weekend was over, I decided I had to keep coming back and to continue my journey of faith in this place.

Under the tutelage of a Catholic chaplain, Father Eugene Engels, I made my first contact with the Episcopal inmates at Angola –all six of them. I also went back to see those men I had first met in Camp D, and I soon began to meet new men as well. Sometimes I brought a priest, Father Ken Dimmick, rector of Grace Church, St. Francisville, to visit men and take the sacrament. Other frequent companions in those early days were Michael Hackett from St. Augustine in Metairie and Cliff LeBlanc and George Price from my home church, Trinity, Baton Rouge. Before long, some of the inmates requested a worship service, and with the help of our Episcopal inmates, we began a monthly Eucharist service in the Interfaith Chapel at the Main Prison complex.

Over time, other volunteers from around the diocese began to join us for these services. We would meet at the front gates for prayer, and, armed with prayer books, guitars and high spirits, we would “break in” to prison. Over and over again, I witnessed in others what I continued to experience myself –the joy of discovering Jesus in serving in this place. Eventually as many as twenty or thirty of us were meeting on the first Tuesday of any month for worship, ministry and fellowship.

Around 1992, Bishop James Brown came to Angola confirm an inmate I had prepared. He later called my rector to ask if I would consider the diaconate. I was ordained to the Sacred Order of Deacons on June 10 of 1995. Bishop Brown strongly supported the ministry and began to come every Christmas to lead worship and visit with the men.

The Episcopal prison ministry continued to grow and prosper. When Charles Jenkins was consecrated Bishop in 1998, one of his first acts was to make the Angola congregation a Mission of the Diocese: The Episcopal Chapel of the Transfiguration. We formed an Advisory Committee of inmates and “outmates,” as we called ourselves, to guide the ministry. With the energy and leadership of people like Michael Hackett and Cindy Obier –both of whom were also later ordained deacons—Jenny Hastings, Audis Thornton and others, the Disciples of Christ in Community Christian education program was started, and inmates were trained as Eucharistic Ministers. Inmate leaders of the ministry have included Ricky Smith, Kerry Myers, Samuel Overton and Michael Shoemaker.

The ministry was further expanded in 1997 when I became spiritual advisor for a Death Row inmate, Feltus Taylor who was executed June 6, 2000. For a time, Episcopal inmates serving as Eucharistic Ministers were allowed to take the sacrament to the men of Death Row.

Over the years, the ministry has also been a help and support for inmates who have been released from Angola.

Bishop Morris Thompson has been a supporter of the Angola ministry since his consecration in 2010, visiting Death Row and the rest of the prison early in his tenure. Current ministry leaders are Father Roman Roldan, rector of Grace Church in St. Francisville, along with Carolyn Douglas and Peter Kang, both members of Grace. Peter is also employed as a staff chaplain at Angola.

Ann's Story

In the spring of 1995, the Trinity Newsletter posted a request for a volunteer to assist (through correspondence) a resident at Angola in his preparation for confirmation. I volunteered and asked Charlie deGravelles for guidance. I put care and thought into the letters so that the process would be both informative and meaningful. And I was humbled by the insight, sincerity, and readiness to study in the responses. I both sensed and was told that my efforts were deeply appreciated. Through the process Curtis and I became friends, and we both learned. When the time came for the confirmation, Charlie said, "Well, I guess you will be attending the service." Surprisingly enough, I had not even considered that. But on the very cold, very dark night of January 2, 1996, I walked down the walk to the Main prison chapel. The doors opened, and light flooded the smiling face of "Red" and a bunch of others behind him – one of whom was Curtis. At the end of the service, I knew that I would go back. It's odd really how comfortable I felt from the beginning. I can't explain it. I had come to worship and be a friend and found myself being ministered to. Over the next thirteen years, I attended the first Tuesday of the month Eucharist and made many friends – both residents and dedicated volunteers. Month after month, we came together - worshipping and singing, talking, laughing, and praying together – that's what I experienced. We always sang the Servant Song as we circled at the end of the service and that said it all.

Over the years, I sponsored other residents - Travis, Milton, Kelly, and Bob, served on an Advisory Committee, wrote many birthday card messages, led in the creation of a spiritual library, wrote a few messages in Charlie's monthly newsletter "Notes Along the Way," very briefly participated in the Disciples of Christ in Community Program at the Main prison, helped in the preparation of a booklet to distribute to those interested in prison ministry, attended a monthly Episcopal service at the State Police Barracks in Baton Rouge, prepared Bible verses to distribute at the service, and corresponded with and, for a short while, visited Feltus Taylor on death row. I was one of many volunteers who participated in multiple ways.

After I met Feltus, "Mr. Smile," twice he was given execution dates. Both times I wrote him a very short letter each of the days he was awaiting execution. Usually these contained a Bible verse and a reflection. I wanted to do this for him, and I needed to do this for myself. The first time he got a reprieve; the second he did not. Feltus was funny and humble and deeply remorseful and had a heart wide open to receive all the plentiful grace given to him.

I have not attended the monthly service at Angola in quite some time, but I am still able to participate in the ministry. I have heard and read the Bible for most of my life. Reading the Bible, reading books of all kinds, singing hymns - these are ways I pray. I very much need these disciplines. Sometimes I am less faithful in keeping these disciplines than I am at other times. I struggle. These practices remind me that everything good is a gift from God. After I started attending the service, as I read the Bible, I began to look for verses that would be comforting and uplifting to share with the men. In June of 1996, I began preparing and taking to the service brightly colored, laminated scripture verses. One of the residents crafted a beautiful box for these. After the service, during the fellowship time, the box was passed around and each resident and free person drew a verse. Sometimes a resident took more than one so that he would have something to give to a friend. After I was unable to attend the service, I had stopped sending them for a while; but they were asked for, so I began again with gladness. — Ann

Jenny's Story

Charlie DeGravelles will be known for many things but for me he will always be the Pied Piper of the Angola prison ministry. Most of the people I know in the ministry have gotten there on Charlie's coattails and through his inspiration. When I think back on it, it is very surprising that it has all worked out so well for me.

Nothing in my life would have prepared me to be an asset or contributor. I had nothing to take with me but a love of Christ and a feeling of urgency that I needed to something to make the world a better place. I expected it to take a year or more before I would be accepted. I expected my motivation to be questioned. I did not expect to make friends easily or quickly. That was my first mistake.

What I found at Angola was an established faith community full of eager, spirit filled men who appreciated the opportunity to worship Christ. They valued contact with free people. Many had little contact with their families and it touched them to be accepted by outside people. Some were learning about the Episcopal Church having been raised in other faith traditions. Some were enrolled in the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary headed to a degree in theology and earning the right to become an inmate minister. Just like other faith communities, backgrounds were varied but the constant was a love of Christ and a genuine appreciation of the opportunity to worship.

My second mistake embarrasses me even today. If I ever had the slightest idea that I would go to Angola to give, to serve and to model a Christian life, I was wrong. I have worked to make these things happen but the real deal is that I have received, I have been served, I have been prayed for through some really tough times, and I have found myself standing on Holy Ground right in the middle of a 15,000 acre prison. Sharing the peace at these services is filled with joy. Gathering at the communion rail is reverent. Singing is heartfelt and energetic. Prayers are freely offered.

We never know where we will find God. Thank goodness He always knows where to find us. I count my blessings that He chose to send me to prison.

Autis' Story

In 1990, a saint that I know named Charles deGravelles, who worked at the same company I did and I had lunch with a couple of times a week, told me of a new ministry he had started. (This was before he was Deacon Charles deGravelles and Archdeacon Charles deGravelles.) This ministry was at the Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola). He invited me to join him in this ministry which I resisted for many months, secretly thinking that he must have lost his mind.

His enthusiasm was, however, overwhelming and I finally gave in and said "OK, I'll go one time." My reluctance soon changed to my own enthusiasm for the ministry and the inmates at Angola. This "one time" has evolved into a dedication to and joy in serving as a volunteer chaplain and DOCC instructor for nearly 24 years. During this time I have gone there to minister to these guys who are incarcerated but it is I who have been, without fail, ministered to on every visit. That is why I volunteer.