

# Press-Republican

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## Finding faith inside

### Dannemora prison offers spiritual outreach programs

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DANNEMORA — Built on a low rise above the village, Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora stands fortress-like, housing 2,800 men convicted of serious and lesser offenses.

Solid walls of stone, watch towers, strategically placed heavy metal gates, tested security measures and prison personnel are deterrents to internal disorder and escape. Inside, immaculately groomed, well-lit hallways are devoid of any distracting decor. This is a state prison, not a tourist destination.

Karla Rae Barker, supervisor of Correctional Facility Volunteer Services for the Clinton Hub, and James Proulx, deputy superintendent for Program Services or correction officers accompany visitors to Dannemora.

In Dannemora, spiritual outreach opportunities are available to offenders. They offer comfort, companionship, guidance and basic religious tenets. In Dannemora, regularly scheduled meetings focused on Christian precepts are held weekly. An interdenominational team of volunteers and chaplains along with a handful of prison officials are present. Participating inmates are limited to 42 in number. There is a waiting list. Similar programs exist for Muslims, Jews and other faiths.

The Christian ministry in Dannemora is associated with Kairos, an organization begun in 1979 in Florida. It is now active in 165 prisons nationwide. Thousands of offenders choose to participate in this Christian program annually. Long-serving volunteers realize that if you can reach some "offenders," you can reach others. Kairos volunteers stress in their literature that, "Our goal is to take Christ to these men. We are an ecumenical group; members of a team may only refer to principles shared in common by all Christian denominations."

Kairos meetings emphasize warmth, friendship, consideration for others and self respect. The essential message is that God forgives, is merciful and supportive. This outlook is reflected in the autobiographical sketches shared with one another by the offenders, in the songs and hymns they share and by a brief message from the presiding pastor. Meetings include time for coffee and a chocolate doughnut and informal moments for inmate conversation.

Kairos periodically sponsors three-day weekend retreats for group members. Retreats are held within the prison walls. Volunteers sign up to be involved for "we get as much out of a weekend as the inmates do." Comments from the offenders have been recorded by Kairos volunteers in recent years. These

unrehearsed offender comments empathize the import and meaningfulness of this Christian outreach program. None are identified with the name of an offender.

"Some of us came here feeling very discarded. We came in need of renewal. Even though my body is incarcerated, my mind's no longer locked up. I was on shaky ground spiritually when I arrived; a lot of us were. But we got to know each other and grow with each other and we all grew spiritually."

"I found some real powerful stuff here. And I am never going to forget these volunteers. You gave me the opportunity to find God again. Here's what I learned: when you give your life to God, the healing process begins."

"Jesus loves us and died for us. That's something I knew but I never really grasped before. Broken hearts need bleeding hearts to heal. These three days (at a retreat) did that. They have done more for me than any other program the facility offers. The burden I came with is gone."

"What did I get out of it? I discovered God and myself."

"I learned when you listen hard; you can find God and yourself."

"To all you folks on the outside, thank you for caring."

On occasion, Barker arranges individual inmate interviews for visitors. She may select individuals such as Jerry Pitts of Afro-American heritage and Robert Fulsom, white.

Pitts reinforced the thoughts of other offenders.

"After being arrested, I needed to find meaning in my life. I wanted to understand the Word. I began to read the Word and I began to understand it. It gave meaning to my life."

"It began to offer a spiritual presence in my life.... I found myself. I found love from others. I found the Holy Spirit....I learned when you listen hard, you can hear God clearly."

Fulsom emphasized the value and meaning of rebirth.

"I found this program soon after arriving at Dannemora. It makes such a difference in your life. I had to lose myself in order to find myself. To all you folks from the outside, thank you for caring. God bless you!"

Inside Dannemora, numbers of incarcerated men have found an avenue leading to a compassionate Christ, a merciful God. Some have discovered that in this spiritual path brings freedom. Others have found a compassionate Christ and God. The waiting list to participate this program testifies to its value.