



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

'I was in prison and you visited me'



Spiritual Director Fr Paul Pang (centre) with RCPM Volunteers. The group needs more male volunteers especially.

FOR those who have served time in prison, the punishment usually extends well beyond the period behind bars. It remains a stain on their record, a blemish on their lives that often stays with them for life as people shun and fear them.

However, there is a group of volunteers who try to do exactly the opposite, by helping ex-offenders integrate back into society.

Since 1995, the Roman Catholic Prison Ministry (RCPM) has been helping ex-offenders with a mission to be compassionate to the prisoners based on this line from Scripture, "I was in prison and you visited me" (Matthew 25:36).

RCPM began in 1977 with just three priests. Now it has a team of volunteers comprising 150 lay members, chaplains, religious Sisters and seminarians who help more than 250 prisoners and more than 50 ex-offenders and their families.

The in-care ministry provides counselling, communion service and Scripture reading with the prison inmates. It seeks to counsel them through the word of Christ, believing that only when hearts are transformed for the better, can individuals truly heal.

RCPM leader Mr Kevin Yap said: "The goal is to transform them eventually, to become a better citizen and a better person."

Added Mr Edward Choo, who is in charge of the group's Resource and Programme: "We use the word of God to change their mindset, to teach them to think differently."

Volunteers of the Roman Catholic Prison Ministry put these words from the Bible into action, helping prisoners and ex-offenders trying to reintegrate into society.

Many inmates are not able to start a meaningful life upon release because they cannot secure a steady job, have no money and no roof over their heads as their families refuse to take them in. In desperation, some may resort to crime and land in prison again.

Three out of 10 inmates go back to prison within two years. That is why RCPM intends to push out a "Walk With You" aftercare programme.

Its mission is to continue to journey with the ex-offenders in their faith formation and to provide them with the necessary financial help and support to be re-integrated into community, living a life free of crime.

Mr Yap said: "The more challenging work is in after-care. Usually, the problems that the newly-released inmates face are multi-dimensional and we felt that we could not just deal with them on an ad-hoc basis. We will walk with them, journey with them."

Another new initiative is to begin an intensified in-care programme. Eighteen months before an inmate is due to be released, RCPM will offer intensive counselling.

Father Paul Pang, Spiritual



RCPM volunteers get to know each other at a sharing and reflection session.

Director of RCPM, said: "Some of them get very stressed when they think of their release. It's supposed to be a happy time, but many worry about seeing their families, or meeting their 'old friends' again."

RCPM will impart to them life skills to help them adapt to life outside prison.

A severe limitation to RCPM services is the lack of a shelter. Some newly released inmates are rejected by their families and have no place to go to. A shelter would serve as a temporary place for them to stay before they find more permanent lodging.

It will provide for their spiritual needs and formation, and help them to physically re-integrate into society.

Said Mr Yap: "It's not just a place, but having a group of friends too, to offer them

support."

Third on the agenda is for RCPM to have parish ambassadors. It hopes that its work, especially the aftercare programmes and services, will be shared and supported by all parish communities, especially those with RCPM members or with ex-offenders living nearby.

"Said Mr Choo: "We want to make it easier for ex-offenders to reintegrate into the parish in community. If there is parish priest support in their immediate community, they are more likely to want to go to that church. They can form new friendships there."

With the support of family and friends, it is easier to reintegrate into society.

Father Pang said: "Once there's internal change, they are free from within."

Ex-offender turns volunteer

The only thing that Leo (not his real name) is thankful for, when he thinks about the time he spent at the Selarang Drug Rehabilitation Centre, is that it brought him back to church.

Arrested for drug consumption in 2007, he was sentenced to six months at the DRC.

"I had lost my faith, but RCPM's counselling sessions brought me back to church," he said.

He had heard of a counselling session and decided to go and challenge the volunteers.

"I used to be quite rebellious in the past," he added with a laugh.

The 50-year-old used to have questions about his faith and never found satisfactory answers. But the RCPM session changed him.

"The volunteer gave me all the answers to my questions. He pointed me in the right direction," said Leo.

Thankfully, he had the support of his family and now works in the family business. Whenever he has time, he volunteers with RCPM, offering them perspectives about life in prison and how to better deal with the inmates who may be unreceptive to volunteers.

"The volunteers are very decent people. They have never been in that section of society and so it becomes a constant guessing game as to what the inmates want. But you can't outguess the inmates," he said.

He tries to help RCPM volunteers to understand matters from the inmates' perspective, and vice versa.

"There's a very clear line between what's inside and what's outside," he said.

Who's Who at the Roman Catholic Prison Ministry

- Spiritual Director : Rev Fr Paul Pang, CSsR
- Acting Chairman : Kevin Yap
- Prison Liaison & Volunteers Resources : Melvyn Sum
- Treasurer : Charles Chua
- Aftercare & Outreach : Matthew Tay
- Resource & Programme : Edward Choo
- Practice & Compliance : Brian Campos
- Aftercare, Office & Logistics : Joselyn Chan

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