



Home : News

## UCC members share time, talents, church via prisoner visitation and support ministry

Written by Jeff Woodard

March 20, 2012

Sensing safety along his path of compassion, the Rev. M.S. "Des" Desmond has been going to prison for 22 years.

"It's a landmark for me every month," said Desmond, a retired UCC pastor and longtime volunteer in the Prisoner Visitation and Support (PVS) program. "There are no cell phones, no one can reach me there — not my wife, not parishioners, not anybody. I am safe to do the job of visiting."



M.S. (Des) Desmond

Desmond and Betty Woodman — a 33-year PVS volunteer who served for 12 years on the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries (now part of Local Church Ministries) — have a shared passion for a visitation ministry that has benefited hundreds of inmates in federal and military prisons throughout the country.

Subject to searches like any other visitors, the pair promise officials at the all-women Danbury (Conn.) Federal Correctional Institute to check at the door any penchant to proselytize. "We come not to convert them," said Desmond, "but I haven't met a prisoner yet who wasn't bringing religion into the conversation on their own."

"I don't think they're missing the point that Jesus came for them, and that he actually is there," Desmond said. "There's really no difference between these prisoners and the people on the outside."

Woodman, a member of First Church of Christ UCC in Redding, Conn., shares that feeling.

"If you haven't been in a prison, you don't realize how 'normal' most people are there," she said. "We all make mistakes in life."



Betty Woodman

Desmond officially retired 15 years ago but says he's been "ministering off and on" since 1956. He calls Woodman his "mentor."

"I went with her on my first prison visit," said Desmond. "I had worried about what we would talk about with the prisoners. I knew we weren't allowed to initiate any conversation about why they were there or how long they'd be there. They share what they wish."

"You sort of become friends over a period of time," said Woodman, who served on the UCC's General Synod nominating committee for six

years and on the Back Bay Mission board for eight. "We don't set any agenda, but they will ask about my life, family, friends and work. One inmate I visited said, 'I love your visits, but could you come visit my cellmate? He hasn't had a visitor in 25 years.'"

Founded in 1968 by Honey Knopp and Bob Horton to provide visitation to imprisoned conscientious objectors during the Vietnam War, the Prisoner Visitation and Support program shifted its focus in the mid-1970s to share visitation with any prisoners seeking it.

"They are very dedicated people," said Eric Corson, PVS executive director, of Desmond and Woodman. "Prison visiting is not for everyone. It's a very special calling. It's not just going and visiting with the prisoners. It's dealing with prison staff, it's dealing with all the regulations and rules — and there are a lot of them."

Calling the long-term relationship between the UCC and PVS a "wonderful thing," Corson cited studies showing that recidivism rates are lower for prisoners who receive visitors than those who do not. In addition, he said, the benefits of shared visitation to those incarcerated in federal prisons may be greater than average.

"People in federal prisons may be far, far from home and less likely to get family and friends to visit," Corson said.

Initially, the Danbury prison housed men only. After a period of housing both men and women, it became an all-women's facility in 1996.

Woodman said that each time she walks away from the prison, she feels reward in return. "You feel good when you come out," she said. "It gives them a lift. And just about all of them get released."

Added Desmond, "It's a beautiful thing when one of the prisoners completes their term."

Find out more about the [Prisoner Visitation and Support program](#).