

projects that require significant time commitment? We decided to send me to nursing school – it was a career that fit our service ethic and that would be versatile and pay reasonably well.”

In 1991 Beth and Michael made a family farmhouse east of Freeman, S.D. their home base. During this time they networked with other Catholic Worker groups in Iowa and Wisconsin. Throughout those years, Beth worked at Freeman Academy, ran a small drop-in clinic and did public health. Michael and Beth also ran a small publishing house, Rose Hill Books, while living on the farmhouse.

“We spent a year talking to our local contacts and praying about what we should be doing,” Beth says. “We didn’t set out to start a Catholic Worker community in Yankton but that’s what happened.” It became increasingly obvious to us both that the hospitality for prisoners’ families was one pressing need.

South Dakota has the largest incarceration rate per capita in the six-state region that also covers Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska and North Dakota. After Michael served a 60-day sentence for civil disobedience at the Federal Prison Camp in Yankton in 2000, he and Beth and others in the community who were active in peace and justice issues began to notice the often-forgotten needs the prisons created. Michael states, “my time at the Federal Prison Camp in Yankton taught me about how many prisoners have family in need of hospitality when they make the long trip to our little corner of the map.”

“What I learned from MCC and from my parents’ work responding to needs is that you have to have a long-term service understanding,” Beth says. “You have to learn to see the need in the community.”

In 2004, they bought the house in Yankton and Michael and others worked on rehabbing it. Beth and Michael split their time between the Freeman farmhouse and Yankton while preparing to open the hospitality ministry called Emmaus House.

Emmaus House provides women and children a place to stay while visiting inmates at the Yankton Federal Prison Camp, the Yankton Trusty Unit, the Human Services Center, the Mike Durfee State Prison in Springfield and the Springfield Academy. No adult men are allowed, and women and children can stay with them for no more than two days.

There is no charge for lodging or food and no income limitations.



It’s not charity, “based on economic need,” Beth says. “It’s a model of justice that fosters mutual aid. People find it helpful to spend time with others who have a common experience. We’re helping to create a culture in which it’s easier for people to naturally come together and serve each other.”

Typically, this means a houseful of eight to 12 folks each week from Thursday thru Sunday. Those are the regular visiting days at the institutions.

Emmaus House visitors find out about it through information posted at the prisons and hospital, through chaplains and institutional staff and through word of mouth. Michael provides the primary hospitality, and the house runs on Beth’s salary (she currently is the director of cardiac rehabilitation at Freeman Regional Health Services) and outside donations. Often those who stay in the house will leave a gift of money or a gas card to be used by someone with more limited funds, or will buy or cook food.

Because Emmaus House is small-scale, “it stays manageable,” Beth says. “In the Catholic Worker, we say just because it’s small doesn’t mean it can’t have a powerful effect. This is not intimidating – others can look at it and say, ‘I could do that.’”

■ By Melissa Bader

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