

BRIEFS



Courtesy Archdiocese of San Antonio

Auxiliary Bishop Michael Boulette, left, Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller and Rebecca Simmons, director of Old Spanish Missions, discuss the new center and garden.

Pope Francis Center, Klesse Garden by Mission Concepción underway

The Archdiocese of San Antonio has begun preparations for the latest projects of its capital campaign: the Pope Francis Center, and the Margie and Bill Klesse Garden, adjacent to Mission Concepción.

In a small ceremony Dec. 1, Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller blessed the ground where the center and garden will be constructed. The center also will house the mission's parish offices.

The archbishop thanked the Klesses and said, "The Pope Francis Center is a place where pilgrims and the community can meet and grow in faith and fellowship."

The archdiocese launched the On the Way – ¡Ándale! capital campaign in fall 2017 and reached its \$60 million goal earlier this year.

St. Mark's Episcopal Church offers virtual Advent lessons and carols

St. Mark's Episcopal Church is offering its annual Advent lessons and carols virtually this year. The event will be held today at 5 p.m. and 7 p.m., and will feature readings, carols, hymns and anthems, with performances by the combined choirs of St. Mark's. It will be streamed on the church's website and app, Facebook page and YouTube channel.

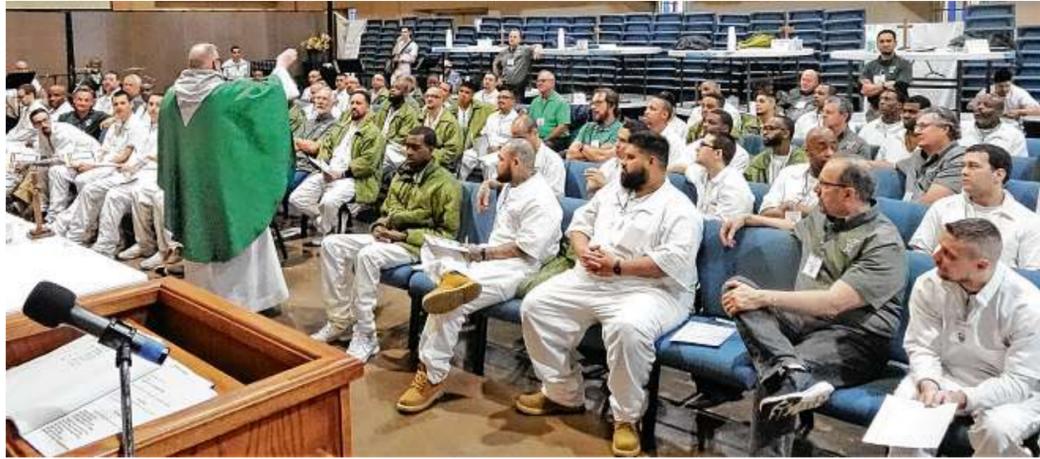
Guidance center seeks donations so children will have holiday gifts

Clarity Child Guidance Center is hosting a virtual Giving Tree for the children at the hospital and is seeking donations. Donations will provide gifts to the children, 60 percent of whom are below the federal poverty line.

Donations may be made on Clarity CGC's Amazon wish list at amzn.to/2VYvwSE by Friday to ensure the children it serves do not go without a gift this holiday season.

Those wishing to donate directly to Clarity CGC may visit www.claritycgc.org or call 210-616-0300.

Clarity CGC is the largest San Antonio nonprofit mental health treatment center specializing in helping children ages 3 to 17 who struggle with mental, emotional, or behavioral issues.



Courtesy photo

With Kolbe Prison Ministries, St. Anthony's of Padua Catholic Church in The Woodlands had "adopted" a unit at the Ferguson Unit state prison in Midland. Such activities have ceased during the pandemic.

Pandemic lockdown leaves inmates spiritually bereft

Isolation, lack of contact with clergy taking its toll

By Lyra Walsh Fuchs
RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

The men incarcerated in a New Jersey state prison have a favorite prayer to chant along with the volunteer rabbi who, before coronavirus lockdowns, visited every Friday evening for shabbat: Shalom alechem.

"It resounds throughout the room when they sing it out, the idea that angels are with them," the rabbi, who did not want to use her name or the name of the prison in case it led to her visiting privileges being revoked.

"The men bring this lens of their lived experience to the text. So many of the stories are written in the context of pain and isolation and historical oppression. ... To me it reveals the meaning behind them," she said.

Since the lockdown began in March, the rabbi hasn't been able to see the 15 or so men – some who practiced Judaism before, some who found it inside – who usually come to worship every week.

And in New Jersey, as in New York, Illinois, Texas and many other states, volunteer chaplains – volunteers of any sort, in fact – are not allowed to remotely contact the incarcerated people they have relationships with: no phone calls, no Zooms, no letters, no emails.

That rule hasn't changed despite the fact that coronavirus lockdowns have kept chaplains from visiting in person – as well as friends and family – and paused all regular educational and religious programming.

"It's scary. I don't know what they are going through. I can't imagine what it's like right now to be utterly cut off from community and from family," the rabbi said. "The men have said the services help them transcend the walls of the prison. ... We can create a sacred mo-



Staff file photo

An inmate reads from a ministry pamphlet at the Bexar County Adult Detention Center in 2015. Experts say faith plays an important role among the imprisoned.

ment in a chaotic and hectic environment."

In their place, in prisons across the nation, new battles have arisen: for dignity, for hand soap, for adequate cleaning materials and for hand sanitizer and masks, both of which were banned (for their alcohol content and face-covering effect, respectively) prior to the pandemic.

Experts have pointed out that social distancing is impossible in prisons, and the ACLU estimated the coronavirus could claim 100,000 more lives than most models predict, due to the country's refusal to release at-risk incarcerated people.

Jeffery Parker, executive director of Restoration Outreach of Dallas, a Christian-based nonprofit that works in five prisons in Northern Texas and serves around 1,200 incarcerated and recently released men every year, described the lockdown as "very lonely" and "really horrific" for the people on the inside.

"Faith plays a huge part for the prison population and prison community. Without it, there's just a huge void. With no church and no contact from family, depression increases,"

Parker said.

The sense of isolation is enormous. "I'm indigent and have no family or outside support," wrote C.V., who is incarcerated in Texas, in a letter from late August shared with RNS. "I'm only with the Islam community in here and we can't attend Jumu'ah (Friday prayers) or gather with each other."

"A lot of these brothers in here are struggling," he added in the letter.

Religious practices of all sorts are fixtures of community for those inside – and all have been stymied by the pandemic lockdowns.

Chase Wilhelm, the chief chaplain of the Illinois Department of Corrections, noted that "while (due to social distancing restrictions) communal worship has looked different, we've successfully passed through Easter, Ramadan, Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah."

One of his main priorities, he said, was "making sure the facilities find comparable material for the minority-faith religions."

In Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York, where almost 650 women are incarcerated, for example, the practice of restarting the clock on a 14-day lockdown for 22-23 hours a day whenever a new coronavirus case was identified made the isolation on many units feel unending.

According to a June report from Unlock the Box, since the beginning of the pandemic at least 300,000 people have been placed in solitary confinement – an increase of 500 percent – a practice known to produce dire psychological and physical harm.

At Bedford Hills, as well as Mansfield Correctional Institution in Ohio, people who tested positive were moved to solitary on old death rows; in Connecticut, people who tested positive were moved to the notorious maximum-security prison Northern Correctional Institution.

Other states besides Illinois, too, have relied on distributing readings they have approved as sub-

stitutes for services – with the same limitations.

The head of communications for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice said it had distributed "over 10,000 DVDs of various faiths to all units" to be played on day-room TVs.

The director of communications for the New Jersey Department of Corrections wrote in an email that "inmates were provided various faith-based materials from the (Quran) to daily readings and other inspirational material as requested."

Some chaplains employed by the state, such as Wilhelm, have been able to go into facilities and visit people in their units. But because states are so dependent on volunteers the fact of the matter is that without them, and without the community that comes from gathering with other worshippers in person, the tenor of life inside has deteriorated.

Writing letters, calling home and getting necessities at commissary costs money, and as widespread unemployment looms for their families on the outside, many have been writing to Malik Johnson, the director of prison outreach at Masjid al-Rabia to ask for funding through the mosque's mutual aid fund.

Others have requested books and rugs for prayer, which Johnson sends through the mail. "If I were to get 30 letters in a week," Johnson said, "15 are talking about 'can you help get this service back.' Ten are asking for aid because there isn't a lot of food coming in. The other five are just because they're lonely and want to talk to someone. They're more isolated than they ever have been before."

In a representative letter Johnson shared with RNS, sent to him from Louisiana in late September, a correspondent wrote, "Thank you for being considerate enough to respond to my call for spiritual support. ... Over 100 inmates in my dormitory tested positive for the coronavirus (myself included). And we are now on quarantine. Allah Ta'ala has sustained me throughout this ordeal."

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