

Emeritus Professor Receives Award for His Prison Ministry

“Prisoners cannot change, but my faith informs me differently.”

By Maria Markman

“I gotta go in and look at the souls, if they come out with me their souls are saved and as long as there are guys in there, I gotta go in and get them out.”
- Seemann on Schindler.

On October 5, 2015 in the Graebner Memorial Chapel, Emeriti Professor Jim Seemann received the Diakonia en Christo Award (Service in Christ Award). This honor is given once a year to a layperson of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) who has, “through Christ, reached out in care and compassion to the hurting world.” It was awarded by the Lutheran Deaconess Association, a group who devote themselves to ministering the marginalized. Seemann stated, “I feel extremely humbled to be receiving this award. In *Isaiah*, God said, ‘Go save my people,’ Israel was a lot smaller than the prison population is today.” In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus says, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger, and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Seemann has personally heard this call.

Seemann started in prison ministry at the age of 27. He was teaching full-time at the university level in Missouri, and his landlord was the warden of a prison, which, at that time, was one of the “darkest prisons in the country.” Seemann’s landlord suggested he give teaching in prisons a try.

In his first class there were eight prisoners. Seemann describes them as having “dead shark” eyes, “but I saw them as warm, engaging, intelligent, kind, and caring guys. They taught me all I know about prison ministry.” Back then there wasn’t an accreditation process, or security like there is today. Seemann just walked in and taught some poetry, and from that day on, he couldn’t get himself to stay away, leading him to life-long prison ministry.

Recently retiring from his full-time professorate at Concordia, Seemann isn’t relaxing; he has the new title District Prison Ministry Coordinator for the LCMS Minnesota South District. “I put together everything that needs to happen to bring the Gospel into prison, to touch hearts and minds and lives.” Seemann works with a handful



of different organizations -- Prison Fellowship and Amicus (Latin for friend) -- both working to build relationships with prisoners to help them rebuild their lives. And Jim’s favorite, My Father’s House, a ministry that works to recruit prisoners into a Christian halfway house on the outside. John Henderson, a former prisoner turned successful businessman, started the program and is Jim’s partner. Seemann refers to his role as that of Oscar Schindler, going into prison making connections with the prisoners. Once they have made the very unique transformation into leading a Christian life, Seemann escorts them from the prison gates to their new home. The prisoners are given a home, a job, are enlisted in a twelve-step program, and are given membership in a church. The LCMS recently bought a house for the program and Seemann has plans to purchase another himself. “There is a pop culture myth: a prisoner cannot change,” Seemann says, “but my faith informs me differently. The [Lutheran] Church is the church of the second chance. We believe in the miracle of grace and forgiveness, not just for the righteous but for all people.” In Minnesota there is a recidivism rate of 67%. In mentorship programs, that rate drops to less than 5%, but at My Father’s House those numbers drop to less than 1%.

“It’s the best thing I have ever done in my life!” Seemann says with a lump in his throat, “I cannot tell you how happy I am.” Seemann was asked by both former President Holst and current President Reis to start a program at Concordia, teaching and informing others of the impact they can have in Prison Ministry. This course is free and offered at Concordia after mid-term break. It is a six-week course that meets one night a week for two hours. Any member of the CSP community can take it for credit or not. Contact Jim at seemann@csp.edu about this life-changing experience. In the words engraved on Oscar Schindler’s ring, “Whoever saves one life saves the entire world.”