



DIAKONIA
PROJECT

Case Studies in Faith-based Social Service

OUR TIME

Project at Vanier Centre for Women

Johanna Lewis



About OUR TIME

The OUR TIME project is a service initiative by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints volunteering at the Vanier Centre for Women, a correctional facility in Milton, Ontario. Through OUR TIME, the women incarcerated at Vanier have the opportunity to record themselves reading to their children, giving them a chance to hear their mothers' voices while they are apart.

OUR TIME's Faith Community

The volunteers who run OUR TIME belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Latter-day Saints believe in the divine inspiration of two sacred texts: the Bible and the Book of Mormon, a book that Latter-day Saints believe is the collected record of the teachings that God revealed to his prophets in the ancient Americas. The community was first organized by Joseph Smith, who published the Book of Mormon in 1830.^{1,2} Today, there are more than 16 million Latter-day Saints worldwide;

in Canada, there are nearly 200,000, representing 0.5 percent of the country's population.^{2,3}

The OUR TIME program is an initiative of the Relief Society, the Latter-day Saints women's service organization. First organized in 1842, the Relief Society has operated for nearly two centuries according to the motto "Charity never faileth" (1 Corinthians 13:8).⁴ Its mission includes "increasing personal faith and righteousness, strengthening homes and families, and seeking out and helping those in need."⁵ Women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints automatically join the Relief Society when they turn eighteen. In each individual congregation, called a ward, the Relief Society is led by a president with the support of two counsellors and a secretary. Every ward belongs to a larger territory called a stake, which also has a Relief Society presidency to provide leadership to the larger group. Through the Relief Society, Latter-day Saint women participate in service projects at both a ward and stake level. The OUR TIME program was started by the Brampton Ontario Stake, and has grown to include women from the Kitchener and Hamilton Ontario Stakes.

Theological Motivation

For the volunteers who serve with OUR TIME, the program is a way of expressing some of the most basic elements of their faith. Latter-day Saints believe that every person is loved by God: "We believe that we are all children of a Heavenly Father who loves us."⁴ OUR TIME is one way



VOLUNTEERS BRING DONATED BOOKS TO THE PRISON

of demonstrating this unconditional love to the women at Vanier—treating them as valued people who deserve respect and dignity, rather than defining them by their traumas and mistakes. In addition, all people need and have access to forgiveness from God. “We teach our children from a very small age that we can always ask for forgiveness,” explains volunteer Tina Nabrotzky. “If we’ve learned that we can always go to our Heavenly Father for forgiveness, who are we to say that someone in prison can’t do the same?”⁶

Central to Latter-day Saints’ faith is following the example of Jesus Christ, who spent his life serving others. Indeed, OUR TIME volunteers believe that their work at Vanier is a way of serving Christ. They cite Jesus’s teaching in the Gospel of Matthew: “I was in prison and you visited me. . . . Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:36, 40). Founding volunteer Helen Warner remarks, “We think of that [Scripture] when we go, because when we’re serving them, we’re really serving the Lord. This is exactly what he would want us to do for those women.”⁷

Latter-day Saints also place a high value on family, and Relief Society volunteers emphasize, along with preserving family relationships, that anything which strengthens bonds between a mother and her child is vital. “Those children deserve to have a relationship with their mother and to feel loved by their mother,” insists volunteer Stacy Cattran. “I think it’s so important to nurture that relationship, even in little ways—like the idea of them getting to



MEMBERS OF THE LDS RELIEF SOCIETY

“We had no idea what it would be like. I had never been in a jail before. . . . The very first woman who I recorded said to me, ‘Would it be all right if I sang to my little boy?’ And I said, sure. So she said, ‘Honey, this is mom. I want you to lie down on the bed and close your eyes and pretend I’m lying right beside you and singing our song.’ And then she started singing, ‘You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.’ Then she read the book. We thought we would be going into a dark place and bringing some light, but being with those women, I was the one who was enlightened.”⁵

hear their mom’s voice when they’re in bed at night trying to go to sleep.”⁸

History and Goals

OUR TIME was started in 2007 by Helen Warner, who at the time was serving in the Brampton Stake Relief Society presidency. Warner was looking for a service project for the annual Relief Society conference when she learned of a group in the United States providing books to incarcerated women so that mothers could read to their children. She reached out to the staff at Vanier to explore whether such a program would be possible



there. When the Relief Society's proposal was welcomed and the necessary arrangements made, local members gathered donations of books at their conference and sent them to the jail.

The initiative began with four volunteers going to Vanier every other week to help the women who had signed up to participate choose their books and make recordings. "We got a bunch of cassettes donated, and that's how it originally launched," recalls Penny MacLean, who was working as Vanier's program coordinator when OUR TIME first started. "[Later] we were able to catch up with the 21st century, and it went to CD."⁹ The program was received with enthusiasm and gratitude, and more volunteers joined the rotation as OUR TIME became a regular feature at the jail.

Activity and Impact

The women incarcerated at Vanier choose a book from the collection donated through the OUR TIME program. Relief Society volunteers record each mother greeting her child with a short introduction before reading from her chosen book. The mother then writes a note to her child inside the book, which her child receives in the mail along with a CD or digital memory stick of the mother's recording. Each woman has the chance to make a recording—to her children or to grandchildren, nieces, or nephews—every two weeks.

A total of twenty women in the Relief Society have been volunteering at Vanier, two each

"You can't make the trauma not happen, but there could be restorative experiences. . . . You can't say to the kid, 'Well, Mom read your book, so that means everything is good,' but it might give that child some hope, might give that child some feeling of not being alone."⁶

week for the first four Wednesdays of every month. At the height of the program, OUR TIME was reaching well over five hundred children every year. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, however, the jail was closed to volunteers and other visitors, forcing OUR TIME's leaders to temporarily pause the program.¹⁰

An indirect but powerful impact of the reading program is the friendly conversations it offers to women incarcerated at Vanier. "We don't even talk about that aspect of it, but for some women, just to talk to someone who smiles at them and says, 'Good morning, how are you today?' and 'What a great job you did on this story!'"—just that human contact alone can be very meaningful," notes MacLean.⁹ The large collection of books that the women can choose from also offers them the opportunity to exercise the dignity of control, which is otherwise virtually nonexistent in the jail environment.

Not long after starting the reading program, OUR TIME volunteers began assembling backpacks for women who were being released from custody. Some women spend months at Vanier awaiting their trial. Depending on her case, it is possible for

“[One woman] was talking to me about how grateful she was for the program, because she had gone through life feeling unnoticed. People didn’t look her in the eye, and so she felt like she was just walking through the world unknown. And she said that something she really appreciated about us being there was not only the program but that we looked them in the eye and talked to them and made them feel like humans. . . . Such a simple thing as talking to them face-to-face and looking them in the eye as we spoke to them—what a difference that made to them.”⁶



THE TORONTO ONTARIO STAKE CENTRE

a woman to be released directly from court, but some of these women have very few possessions with them when they leave custody. “I heard of one woman who left the jail and decided to stay in Brampton,” Warner explains. “She crawled into a dumpster to get an empty plastic water bottle that she could fill with water. And I thought, ‘We cannot allow this to happen.’”⁷ To help these women start on their feet, OUR TIME started providing backpacks filled with basic supplies: a toothbrush and toothpaste, deodorant, mini bottles of shampoo and conditioner, soap, sanitary products, Band-Aids, lip balm, a water bottle, a phone card, and a Tim Hortons or McDonald’s gift card so that the women can buy themselves a meal. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, washable face masks and a mini bottle of hand sanitizer have been included in each backpack as well. Last year, OUR TIME gave out 250 fully stocked backpacks to women leaving custody.¹⁰

During the Christmas season, Relief Society volunteers deliver cards at the jail. Latter-day Saint

children colour the Christmas cards and write messages to the women at Vanier, who are often incredulous that children would write to people they knew were in jail. “I remember a woman [saying], ‘Do these kids know who these cards are going to—that these are going to women in jail?’” Nabrotzky recalls. “And when they found out that the kids definitely knew who they were colouring the cards for, they couldn’t believe that children would do that for them. It meant a lot to them.”⁶

Support and Budget

OUR TIME is supported entirely through the donations and volunteer service of individuals, who have kept the program running steadily for over a decade. “Sometimes you get a huge dumping of service, and then it kind of dwindles off,” remarks Nabrotzky, “but this is something that’s been going on for a long time. A lot of people have given many years of sacrifice and service to keep it running.”⁶

The books are donated by the community—sometimes from individuals (both within and outside the local ward), other times from libraries or from book sales that have leftover stock. Authors have also donated books to OUR TIME. The most popular book in the program is *Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch, whose publisher donated hundreds of brand-new copies of the book, which the women at Vanier have been able to record and send to their children. One of the OUR TIME volunteers had a connection to the American poet Maya Angelou and wrote to her about the program. Angelou responded to the letter by sending a copy of each of her books and a large poster of her poem “Still I Rise,” which has been framed and is used every year for Black History Month programs.

The backpack program is also supplied by donations. Women in the Relief Society, members of the local ward, and other supporters from the community provide essential supplies based on the list of items suggested by Vanier’s staff. For example, one member of a local ward might donate a few dozen backpacks, which families can then sign up to fill as a service project. Some contributors add coats or handmade scarves and hats to their backpacks, which are given to women who are released in the winter and may not have warm clothing.

Conclusion

The OUR TIME initiative has been a powerful source of hope for the mothers and children who have been able to connect, even from far away,



THE BACKPACK PROGRAM DELIVERS ESSENTIAL SUPPLIES TO THE WOMEN IN THE VANIER CENTRE

“To have a bottle of shampoo and conditioner and lotion, and maybe a Tim Hortons gift card so that they can get something to eat—all those things are really important to provide a little humanity for the women.”⁸

through the program. In a letter to one of the volunteers, one mother wrote, “In this rough period of my life, where my freedoms are taken away, this program is not just a ray of sunshine and hope, you are my voice, my connection to my most precious possession, my little girl, who can’t be with me nor I with her. Now she is able to hear her Mummy’s voice to comfort her when she needs it most. There are not enough words to express how grateful I am for the difference you are making for us.”¹¹

Volunteers who have witnessed the impact of this hope at Vanier have come away with an enthusiastic desire to see a similar program adopted at other jails and prisons. “I would love to have more women who are incarcerated be able to connect with their children,” Warner says. “Many of them live hundreds of miles away, and they can’t see them while they’re

incarcerated. What if they had this program going in every jail, so every mother could connect with her children or her child?”⁷ Likewise, participants and volunteers hope that it will eventually be possible to expand OUR TIME to the men’s side of the jail. “Fathers want to connect with their children too,” Nabrotzky points out.⁶

Through both the book recordings and the backpack program, OUR TIME has offered

hundreds of incarcerated women the chance not just to connect with their children or to buy a meal but also to be treated with dignity and humanity. “So many people have negative feelings about people who are incarcerated,” Warner explains. “And the more I worked with them, the more I realized that they’re much like me. They love their children, just like I do. They miss them. They feel guilty because they’re not with them. And they would do anything to keep in touch with them.”⁷

References

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8. Interview, Stacy Cattran, OUR TIME volunteer, October 15, 2020.
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DIAKONIA PROJECT

The Greek word 'diakonia' expresses the act of being called to serve. The Cardus Religious Freedom Institute's Diakonia Project presents a series of eight different initiatives in which Canadians of faith serve their community. This highlights a core aspect of religious freedom: the freedom to live out one's deepest held beliefs through concrete actions that serve the common good.

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