

Church helps sex offenders turn their lives around

Feelings of abandonment, addictions to sex and pornography, and the suicide of his mother all stormed Nick* before he was old enough to vote. He tried to find ways to cope and ended up doing two years in a federal jail for a sex offence.

Now, Nick says, a small group of volunteers is helping him stay away from crime and teaching him that, troubled and ostracized as he has been, his life still has value.

“Because of my past, my present circumstances are really difficult to live with,” Nick told about 100 prison ministry volunteers and staff at a dinner Feb. 20. He wears a tracking anklet and is not allowed to use the Internet.

“When I experience frustration at my present circumstances, I go backwards and beat myself about all the bad decisions I’ve made.”

Those frustrations make him feel caught in a “revolving door,” and, if he didn’t have volunteers invested in meeting him weekly and encouraging him to turn his life around, Nick doesn’t know where he would be.

“We are our own worst enemy, each and every one of us,” he said.

The volunteers “see the authentic me, not the impostor I have always seen, that I’ve lived half a century running from, running from the emotional stress and pain I have never been able to deal with.”

Nick is a member of Circles of Support and Accountability, an organization that links sex offenders who have done time with four or five volunteer community members to encourage reintegration into society and prevent future crimes.

But it’s not only ex-convicts who benefit from the program.

Lynn, who has volunteered with COSA for the last 10 years with her husband Joe, said reaching out to sex offenders has completely changed her perspective.

“As a mother and grandmother, I believe that anything that can keep our communities safer is a good thing, but it’s much more than that,” Lynn said.

Lynn used to be afraid to pass large huddles of homeless people as she walked down East Cordova Street. Her views changed after joining COSA a decade ago and she started going to Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous meetings with the ex-offender in her group and learning about the homeless, drug-addicted, and formerly incarcerated people in the area.

“Volunteering with COSA put a face on people I only read about in the newspaper

or saw on TV," she said.

"In the past 10 years, I've learned to be more patient and definitely more compassionate. I've learned to step outside my comfort zone, which is not an easy thing for me."

Fiona, a new volunteer, has also found the outreach to ex-convicts changes her perspective.

"I liked the idea of the community being involved in integration, and I liked the idea of accountability, but the thing that really got my attention was when they said: 'How would you like to be known for the worst thing you had ever done?'"

The program was founded by a small Mennonite congregation in Ontario in 1994 and has enjoyed the support of many Christians and Christian groups, including the Archdiocese of Vancouver. Archbishop J. Michael Miller, CSB, a strong supporter, said its Christian roots make it truly life-changing.

"The mission of COSA is grounded, perhaps not for everyone but certainly for a large number of people, in the teaching and example of Jesus. He taught us that when we encounter those who are marginalized," including widows, orphans, the homeless, and the imprisoned, "we encounter Christ."

As Catholics observe Lent and reflect on Jesus' sacrifice, Archbishop Miller said, they should remember the healing power of these words.

"As the Scriptures say, it is by his wounds that we have been healed ... We cannot forget that in anything we do, we are being healed when we touch wounds."

He praised the ex-offenders who signed up for COSA in the hopes of turning their lives around.

"It rises in me admiration for those who do this, for having both humility and courage to recognize that they have a need for support in the often-painful process of re-integration into the community. Despite the time it will take, they have a willingness to learn new skills."

Hip*, a former sex offender, told the crowd COSA has taught him many things, including dealing with his past and coping with small issues before they become big ones.

"The support that I have gotten has helped me in many ways," he said. "One of my biggest goals was to buy my own place and have a place I can call home."

With tears in his eyes, Hip said: "I took possession on the first of November."

COSA has been running in the Archdiocese of Vancouver since 2005 and has so far reached about 160 offenders.

*Names changed upon request