



History of Criminal Justice Ministry (CJM)

1104 S Jefferson Ave,

St. Louis, MO 63104

“Seeking a Coordinated Approach”

Although many individuals ministered to persons in the criminal justice system, the Church in the Archdiocese of St. Louis had no coordinated ministry in that area until the late 1970's. Between 1972 and 1974, the Archdiocesan Human rights Office held discussions, looking for a better way to minister in the jails. As one result, Fr. John Vogler II was appointed first as a part-time chaplain at the St. Louis City Jail, a year later as full-time Chaplain at both the City Jail and the St. Louis County Correctional Institution at Gumbo.

With Fr. Vogler working from the Human Rights Office, discussions continued on how to establish a criminal justice ministry that would belong to the whole Church of St. Louis and that would last even when the people who were presently involved had gone. Persons in the Human rights Office, Catholic Charities, and the Society of St. Vincent DePaul tried to determine which office should handle such a ministry.

“Society of St. Vincent DePaul”

The Society of St. Vincent dePaul, an organization of lay volunteers serving the Archdiocese since 1845, agreed to meet this need. In fall of 1979 the Society hired Sr. Mary Pius Fagan, O.P., to start Criminal Justice Ministry, which would coordinate the work of the Archdiocese in the area of Jail Ministry. Fr. Vogler left the Human Rights Office and began working with Sr. Pius who established an office at 4140 Lindell.

Since its beginning in September 1979 as a special program of the Society of St. Vincent DePaul, the work of Criminal Justice Ministry has emphasized “a ministry through person-to-person contact” and “The Vincentian is there to serve, not to judge.” The inspiration for prison ministry comes from St. Vincent dePaul himself who aided men and women in prison and led the cause of prison

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reform in France. The founder of SVDP, Frederick Ozanam, also valued and practiced prison ministry.

“Beyond Visiting to Education and Advocacy”

Although Criminal Justice Ministry began primarily with jail ministry in the St. Louis area, through the years, CJM worked to extend jail ministry across all counties of the Archdiocese, often recruiting and training local volunteers. CJM assisted returning prisoners with direct help, referrals, and personal support. CJM also educated community members about systemic issues related to imprisonment and was a pioneer in promoting Restorative Justice over Retributive Justice. Since its inception, CJM has worked to improve the system through advocacy and collaboration.

“Responding to the Need for Housing”

Missouri reflected the nation-wide movement to “be tough on crime” and to “wage a war on drugs.” As a result, the first 25 years of the Criminal Justice Ministry witnessed a huge growth in the Missouri prison system. Because the state imprisoned more people, they also began to release more ex-prisoners—who faced limited resources and legislated obstacles (e.g., exclusion from food stamps and from housing for the poor). CJM began its first support group for released men, found funding to increase direct service for ex-offenders, and began supportive housing programs. The first housing program, Release to Rent, was begun in 2003 under the third CJM director, Sr. Carleen Reck, SSND, who developed and found funding for a series of programs built on the principles of 1) housing first, 2) scattered housing, and 3) harm reduction. A growing number of staff and volunteers have continued to respond to the growing and changing needs.

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“Separation from SVDP”

In August 2012, the Board of the Society of St. Vincent dePaul approved a reorganization of programs, including the separation of CJM. After a study of possible mergers and consultation, a Task Force recommended that CJM become a separate Missouri non-profit organization. Archbishop Robert Carlson welcomed CJM as a ministry affiliated with the Archdiocese of St. Louis. By April 2013 CJM was incorporated and by May 2013, its Corporate Board had its first meeting.

“New Space, Same Mission”

In September 2017, CJM moved to 1104 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63104. Staff members have come and gone, prisoner needs have grown and changed, volunteers and clients have increased substantially, and the corporate status and location have changed—but the mission has maintained the Vincentian person-to-person contact and the attitude “to serve, not to judge.”