

# Christ in Corrections

Through its alternative measures program, free legal clinic and courtroom ministry, Swift Current Community Church is transforming lives, one at a time

BY JULIA HOSKING



The Salvation Army Swift Current CC is bringing Christ into the lives of people through the corps' correctional and justice ministries

**H**arvey Lomax conducted an alternative measures mediation session with a man who shoplifted from a liquor store. The offender could have gone through court and—regardless of whether he was fined or sentenced to time behind bars—a criminal record would have been permanently attached to his name. Instead, the man chose to take

the alternative route: face the people he had hurt and make amends.

“In the initial intake interview, I led the offender to Christ,” says Lomax, coordinator of The Salvation Army’s Swift Current Community Church, Sask., alternative measures justice program. “He asked for counselling with his wife’s pastor and when I called the pastor, he said, ‘We’ve been praying for this guy

for 20 years. His wife has been going to church, but he has never gone.’ I saw a man begin a relationship with Christ rather than go to court and receive a criminal record for shoplifting.”

The alternative measures program is one of Swift Current Community Church’s several ministries in the area of correctional and justice services. The corps also runs a free legal clinic and courtroom ministry.

“We don’t hide the fact that these services are Christian ministries,” says Captain Michael Ramsay, corps officer. “We’re open to praying for people and sharing our faith as the Lord leads.”

Alternative measures provide offenders and victims an opportunity to attend a mediation session where each party can share their thoughts on the situation and suggest reconciliatory actions. This dialogue can be a helpful and challenging process for victim and offender alike, with the resolutions—financial or otherwise—also particularly demanding on the offender.

Ray Friesen, a Mennonite pastor, mediator in private practice and contract mediator for Swift Current Community Church, dealt with a case in which three young men who vandalized a farm house—to the point where the house was demolished—paid three times more in financial restitution than if they had gone through court.

“In court, the offenders would have simply been asked to pay for the demolition,” says Friesen. “In mediation, the two people who owned the property talked about what the house meant to them and what was now gone. The young men apologized for their actions and agreed to buy a \$5,000 camper trailer so the owners could again stay on the property in the summer.

“Mediations give victims the opportunity to participate in deciding how matters should be settled,” he continues. “Victims will often find the experience of mediation and what comes out of it more satisfying than if the offender simply goes to court.”

Alternative measures began at Swift Current Community Church 12 years ago as a small program, handling only a dozen adult cases in the first year. It soon grew to include youth offences and now Lomax oversees 130 to 150 files every year from communities across the south-west area of Saskatchewan, on charges such as shoplifting, cyber-bullying and vandalism.



Swift Current CC is intentional about helping people through their crisis points in life. From left, Gord Meadows, co-ordinator, free legal clinic; Sylvia Thorburn, volunteer, courtroom ministry; Cpt Michael Ramsay, CO; Harvey Lomax, co-ordinator, alternative measures



Gord Meadows speaks with a client in the free legal clinic



Harvey Lomax seeks resolutions in mediation meetings with victims and offenders

“Throughout my previous career as an RCMP officer, I felt that prison for minor offences didn’t make a lot of sense,” says Lomax. “I thought there had to be a better way. Although sometimes court is necessary, victims don’t have a voice there. It is huge for the offender to understand how their crime has impacted a victim. Through mediations, they’re made to think about the terror they caused the grandmother to feel when they threw a rock at her window.”

This aspect of the mediations, coupled with the addressing of factors that contribute to an offence, helps reduce the likelihood of a reoccurrence.

“A teenager, troubled by gangs and drugs, participated in some vandalism on a business property,” recalls Lomax. “When we discussed a resolution, the victim’s bottom line was that the teenager graduates from high school.

“We arranged for the young man to do addictions counselling and to send me his report cards so I could forward them to the victim. The youth was in Grade 10 when we did the mediation and his school marks were around 60 percent. When he graduated, they were well over 80 percent and he even received two college scholarships. The young man was heading down a criminal track but after the mediation, he made a 180-degree turn.”

### Free Legal Clinic

In another room of the old school building in which Swift Current Community Church operates, lives are being transformed in a different way through the free legal (pro bono) clinic. Each Wednesday, the clinic offers members of the community hour-long appointments to discuss legal matters with one of five lawyers from three local firms. In particular, the clinic helps those who cannot afford a \$200 per hour lawyer consultation fee yet don’t qualify for legal aid—a single with no dependents cannot earn more than \$785 per month.

“Most of the cases we see deal with family law, such as divorces and custody of children,” says Gord Meadows, co-ordinator. “I remember one woman coming in whose husband had kicked her out of their home. The town’s safe shelter told her to come to us to find out about her rights. After she was finished talking to the lawyer, she felt so confident that things were going to get better because now she knew what rights she had and how to use them.

“The civil law cases are generally disputes over a bank statement or someone seeking advice as to how to handle a matter with their neighbour,” he continues. “Criminal law is often a DUI (driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol) or public disturbance, cases where the RCMP has laid charges.”

Although some people raise concerns that The Salvation Army is offering legal assistance to those charged with criminal offences, Meadows asserts that until an individual goes to court and is proven guilty, they are innocent.

“We’ve got to give individuals a chance to come in, state their case and get advice,” he says. “The Salvation Army is not involved with any legal matters. Our lawyers do not go to court and represent people; they are there to give advice. That might include helping people fill out forms, telling someone to plead guilty to a charge or referring them to another lawyer to fight the accusation in court.”

Lindsay Gates, volunteer lawyer and third-year associate at the Kanuka Thuringer Law Office in Swift Current, was a driving force behind the creation of the clinic and currently serves on the board of directors for Pro Bono Law Saskatchewan.

“Recently, I saw a woman who was being denied seeing her grandchild after she had assisted raising him for the first five years of his life,” recalls Gates. “I helped her get together an application so she had some specified access with her grandson. She was incredibly grateful.

“The legal clinic takes about three to four hours of my time a month and I really get to help people. Sometimes when you get into a practice, you can get stuck in the grind of things. It’s nice to step outside of that and see what you can do for the community and help make a difference.”

### Courtroom Ministry

Since receiving a request to sit with a congregation member the first day he arrived at his previous appointment, Captain Ramsay has had a heart for courtroom ministry.

“As the man’s trial continued, I would see people at the courts who I knew from our food bank or other social service ministries,” he recalls. “My involvement in courtroom ministry simply grew from there.”

The courtroom ministry is now a valuable component of Swift Current Community Church’s correctional and justice services. Captain Ramsay and several volunteers from the corps regularly offer their support to victims, accused and witnesses attending court dates or lawyer meetings whenever a need is identified; most frequently, that is during a free legal clinic or food bank



appointment.

“People are afraid of the court system because of what they see on TV,” says Sylvia Thorburn, volunteer. “There is fear and anxiety of the unknown, but we can give the client information ahead of time to let them know what might happen.”

“We pray with people and point them toward the strength and comfort that comes from the Lord,” adds Captain Ramsay. “And we can give people confidence when talking to lawyers to admit if they don’t understand what they’ve been told.”

Thorburn’s first experience in the courtroom not only encouraged her to continue in the ministry, but she has witnessed the long-lasting impact of her presence.

“The women I was with were upset and afraid,” she recalls. “I prayed for them and it was comforting for them to have me there. When I see them around town today, I think they know that God was working in their lives. It’s incredible to see the peace they have.”

Even when Captain Ramsay has not been specifically asked to attend court with someone, if he has a spare moment, he will occasionally sit in the courtroom, offering the ministry of presence and

often meeting an acquaintance in need of a friend.

“I can’t think of too many days when I’ve gone to the courthouse and not seen somebody that I know from the food bank or other ministry,” he says. “The more that you are there, the more opportunities you will have to pray with somebody or offer a comforting hand in a time of stress and need.”

It is through these actions that Captain Ramsay, Thorburn and other volunteers are able to see God at work in—and out of—the courtroom.


“There was one fellow who I was going with to his court appearances and sitting with while he was meeting with his lawyer,” recalls Captain Ramsay. “Before, he wasn’t involved in a church or in a relationship with the Lord, but after having gone through the court process and serving his term, he is involved with a church and has given his life to Christ.”

#### New Beginnings

The most recent program to be added to Swift Current’s work in the correctional and justice field is a transition program that supports people as they leave prison.

“I would see Christ transform people’s lives in prison,” recalls Captain Ramsay

of his experiences visiting the Stony Mountain Penitentiary in Winnipeg many years ago. “But often those same guys who were keeping out of trouble, once out of prison, would go back to the same social crowd and pressures that sent them to prison in the first place. As a result, they’d wind up back in the penitentiary. It breaks my heart to see that.”

The corps is developing a formal transition program that will help prisoners upon release find a place to live, secure employment and integrate them into a more positive environment than the one that perhaps led them into the correctional facility. All of this is being done with the hope that recidivism is reduced. “One of the wonderful things about this program, the courtroom ministry, food bank or any crisis level ministry, is that when any of us are at the crisis point in our lives, it is when we are most open to seeing what the Lord is doing. We realize we can’t do things in our own strength anymore,” concludes Captain Ramsay. “That’s when we’re most willing to say ‘OK, I can’t handle it’ and give it to the Lord. And once we do that, we see the miracles of God take place.” 



The poster features a central circular emblem with a gold bell and red ribbon, containing the text "Christmas with The Salvation Army". The background is green with white snowflakes and a red holly border. Text at the bottom lists special guests, the date and time (Saturday, December 8, 2012 - 7:30 pm), the location (Roy Thomson Hall, 60 Simcoe St, Toronto), ticket prices (\$15 to \$25), and a QR code. The Salvation Army logo and "Giving Hope Today" are in the bottom left, and "Presented by Ontario Central East Division" is at the bottom center.

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**Roy Thomson Hall, 60 Simcoe St, Toronto**  
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