

Prairie Fire

January
2024



What's up with this giant squash? To find out, see the Religious Exploration article on page 4.

Photo credit: Karen Deaton

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Prairie Contacts

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Please see www.uuprairie.org for other contacts, including board members and committee chairs.

Calendar

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Please see www.uuprairie.org for detailed descriptions & public event links (where applicable)

Saturday 6

- 8:30a Prairie and Reeb volunteers at the River Food Pantry (sign up w/ Pam Gates, Social Action co-chair)
- 10a Women of Wonder (WOW)

Sunday 7

- 10a "Star Trekking Home: Welcoming Ourselves" by Rev. Pamela Rumancik
- 11:30a Potluck Sunday
- 12p OWL Meeting for parents (Annex)

Sunday 14

- 10a Service
- 11:30a PUUPs
- 11:30a Mission and Vision Meeting (Annex)

Tuesday 16

- 6:30p Board Meeting

Wednesday 17

- 5p Spanish Speakers Potluck

Thursday 18

- 7p Guys Group

Sunday 21

- 10a "Love One Another: King James Holy Bible" by Rev. Anthony Wade
- 12p Interweave

Sunday 28

- 10a Service

Office Hours

Administrator Nancy Wunderlin:

Sun-Tue: on site in the Annex
Wed-Fri: working remotely

Pastoral Care, Rev. Ralph Tyksinski

Tues and Wed: on site in the Annex.
Available for in-person meetings upon request.

Director of Religious Exploration Karen

Deaton:

Mon, Wed, Fri, Sunday 9am to 12pm



Editor's note

Please contact the editor at [prairiefire\[at\]uuprairie.org](mailto:prairiefire[at]uuprairie.org) if you would like to submit an article or photograph to the newsletter. Submissions are due by the 21st of each month for the next month's edition.

Words from the President

Kathy Converse, President

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As Prairie Society starts this new year, we can anticipate the enjoyment and insight of activities such as Sunday services, circle dinners, covenant groups, the auction, and retreat. We need to prepare as well for a year of reflection and making decisions. A main underlying task is: how do we search for ministerial support for our society?

Our challenge will be calmly listening to all members and making decisions that best serve the majority of our community.

We can do this!



Rev. Ralph's Reflections

Rev. Ralph Tyksinski, Pastoral Care

Upon reflecting on an opinion piece in the August 21, 2023, edition of *The Washington Post*, I could not keep myself from wondering if Prairie could be a church home for Madison area folks like the article's author Perry Bacon, Jr., and his daughter, Charlotte. In the coming calendar year, 2024, some of the needs expressed by Bacon may be addressed by Prairie's Transition Team and those planning to redefine Prairie's Mission and Vision.

Suggested steps that could be taken by Prairie:

1. Begin a marketing campaign that features Prairie as a welcome place for those looking for a "church for the nones".
2. Design our website so that it highlights our Sunday services that reflects some of Bacon's wishes: "Start the service with songs with positive messages. Have children do a reading to the entire congregation and then go to a separate kids' service. Reserve time when church members can tell the congregation about their highs and lows from the previous week. ... a sermon on tolerance or some other universal value, while briefly touching on whatever issues are in the news that week. A few more songs. The end. An occasional post-church brunch."

We are now doing some of these elements in our Sunday Programs. Could we consider other elements addressing Bacon's aspirations? I would appreciate your thoughts on these suggestions for Prairie to consider as we journey forward into 2024. Email me at revralph@uuprairie.org.

Bacon's article "I left the church - and now long for a 'church for the nones'" begins, "I'm currently a 'none' or, more precisely, a 'nothing in particular.' But I want to be a something.

"'None' is the term social scientists use to describe Americans who say they don't belong to or practice a particular religious faith. This bloc has grown from about 5 percent of Americans in the early 1990s to nearly 30 percent today. Most nones aren't atheists but what researchers call 'nothing in particulars,' people who aren't quite sure what they believe."

Read the entire article at this link:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/08/21/leaving-christianity-religion-church-community/>

What's Going on in Religious Exploration?

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Karen Deaton, Director of Religious Exploration



Coming up in RE (What will we do with our giant squash?)

- December 31 - New Year's Eve all ages together making party supplies
- January 7 - Cooking day for all ages of children and youth. We will turn our giant squash into food for the potluck.
- January 14 - age group classes resume after several weeks of all-ages holiday activities. Prairie UU Parents' group will meet after the service
- January 21 - age group classes, including OWL for 7 and 8 year olds
- January 28 - age group classes, including OWL for 7 and 8 year olds

Our Whole Lives (OWL) is a respected program offering comprehensive, accurate information about human sexuality for children and adults. After a pandemic hiatus, Prairie will resume this valued program, beginning with a series of workshops for 7 and 8 year olds January 21 through March 10. Casey Steinau, Matt Wise, and I will be facilitators. An information meeting is mandatory for parents or guardians before registration. We have scheduled this information meeting in the Annex at noon on January 7. Interested parents who can't attend that day should contact me to arrange another time.

Get in touch with your inner child...

...and get to know Prairie children (easy volunteer opportunities coming up - you don't need to plan or prepare anything)

- Play games or do crafts with children on December 31 during the service
- Play with a small group of children (i.e., provide child care) during the OWL information meeting on January 7 from noon to 1 pm
- Join families for a pizza party after the service and play with children (i.e., provide child care) during the PUUPs meeting from noon to 1 pm on January 14.
- Contact me at dre@uuprairie.org if you are interested in volunteering for our program in any way!



Several volunteers joined RE for Hanukkah education and celebration. Photo credit: Andrea Keyser Scott.

Lots of Social Action at Prairie Lately

Pam Gates, Social Action Co-Chair

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On December 7, committee members Katie Mulligan, Chris Porter, and Pam Gates attended JustDane's Returning Prisoner Simulation at Christ Presbyterian Church. After an introduction, each of us was assigned

the identity of someone just released from prison and given a list of individualized instructions to follow, based in part on our personal situation, as we navigated our new lives on the outside. We had to secure a job and housing, go to AA or NA meetings, pay child support, renew our driver's license, visit our P.O., etc., etc. Our instructions were broken down into 15-minute segments, each segment representing one week's worth of tasks. In the last hour of the simulation, we heard from two formerly incarcerated people who work with JustDane.

"The simulation gave us the chance to walk in someone else's shoes," Katie said. "In my case, the shoes belonged to Lester Jacoby, a 45-year-old man who had served a 25-year sentence for a second-degree murder conviction. I navigated many obstacles but was finally defeated by the prospect of trying to find housing, given my conviction, my poor job prospects, and the community's lack of affordable housing. Fortunately, JustDane offers many programs that are on target with the needs of people who have been released from prison. Most important among them is having someone who cares and listens."

"The event was exceptionally well organized and informative," Chris said. "I was relieved that I didn't need to be an actor to participate. The tasks we needed to complete each 'week' (for the simulation, each week was 15 minutes long) were realistic and demonstrated the effort and frustration involved in re-entry after incarceration. A delay in one task could domino into more delays. I didn't manage to complete all my tasks in any one week. I highly recommend that you participate in a simulation the next time there is an opportunity."

"I did not do well as a returning prisoner," Pam said. "My only respite was the 'NA meeting' I had to 'attend' weekly. I couldn't get a job; the lines at the 'Job Center' were too long. I lost my (fake) Social Security card and (fake) money because I had no place to carry them. I did renew my driver's license, but mainly, I think, because the woman in charge of that station felt sorry for me. The landlord rep, the P.O., the first 'Job Center' contact, and the 'check cashing office' personnel were masterfully indifferent. The United Way 211 guy was kind but unhelpful; ditto the church rep. The St. Vincent's guy kindly offered USDA surplus food and used clothing vouchers. At one point a 'police officer' told me he was taking me to 'jail,' which he did. I was too afraid to argue, though I'd done nothing, so far as I knew, that merited a trip to jail. (I never did find out why.)

"I very quickly felt lost and completely irrelevant, like I was losing what little autonomy I had left after a two-year prison stint. I have heard of actual returning prisoners asking, or considering asking, to return to prison, because they find life on the outside so difficult. Like Katie, I quickly understood how critical an agency like JustDane is to survival after incarceration. I went home and sent them a nice donation!"

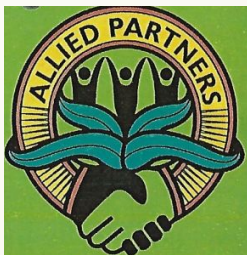


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Social Action at Prairie cont'd.

Pam Gates, Social Action Co-Chair

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In connection with our membership in Allied Partners, Molly Plunkett has been collecting personal care items for the Allied Food Pantry. Prairie has been very generous, filling a nice-sized box as well as Molly's basket on December 10, for example. Thank you, everyone! We are considering whether to continue this as an ongoing project after the holidays. The need will certainly continue.

Prairie and Reeb have been working together making lunches at The River, Madison's largest food pantry, for two hours every first Saturday. On December 2, Margit Moses, Ruth Ellen Saul, Chris Porter, and Pam Gates joined four Reeb members at The River. Thank you to everyone who has participated, this month and every month during the past year! The committee voted to continue our commitment in 2024; our next time to volunteer will be January 6.



On November 12, Prairie members gathered to write encouraging notes on Christmas cards to people held in the Dane County Jail over the holidays. Special thanks to Rosemary Dorney, who wrote about 30 on her own! I am told that the people who receive these cards really treasure them.



On a MOSES note, Barb Park, Casey Steinau, and Pam Gates attended the annual Gala on December 9, held as a festive get-together to honor three individuals for their work on the human side of the criminal-legal system. Catoya Roberts, Dee Star, and Heleema Berg were this year's honorees. The huge room was packed in their honor, thanks to the efforts of

MOSES community organizer James Morgan, whom Prairie members met March 26 when he spoke at our service.

"It was a great event," Barb said. "I appreciated hearing about the folks who were honored, where they started from and their struggles to get to be the assets to their communities that they have become. I really enjoyed all of my fellow attendees. I believe you could sit yourself down at any of the tables and find interesting people who are contributing."

MOSES has been active recently in helping organize protests against and otherwise drawing attention to the lockdown conditions in several of our state prisons. The protests have met with some success, but not all the problems have been adequately corrected. As one protest sign reminded us, "Prisoners are people, too!" (For a quick, perceptive look at the problems of America's criminal-legal system, I recommend "What's Prison For?" by Bill Keller, a Pulitzer Prize winner and founding editor of the Marshall Project, a nonprofit news organization that covers criminal justice in the U.S. A review of this book begins on the next page of this newsletter).



Book Review:

What's Prison For? Punishment and Rehabilitation in the Age of Mass Incarceration by Bill Keller

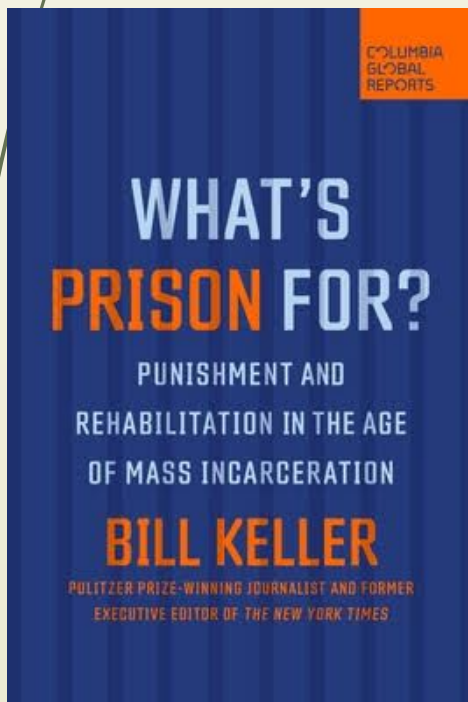
Pam Gates, Social Action Co-chair

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Everyone should read this book. And I do mean everyone, at least, every American. It's short (159 pages, including footnotes); it's concise; it tells in a nutshell what the purpose of prison should be, and most American prisons fall far short, Keller says. We in MOSES agree with him, I'm sure, but if we could get everyone to read this book, maybe America could make real progress on the problems we have created or exacerbated by locking up so many, and especially for so long – which includes the often lengthy post-prison monitoring, where people are “locked up on the outside.”

Bill Keller is a Pulitzer Prize winner and founding editor-in-chief of the Marshall Project, a nonprofit news organization that covers U.S. criminal-legal systems. (Systems, plural, because there are hundreds in this country. “If you've seen one prison, you've seen one prison,” Keller says.) But almost all of these systems are reflected in this quotation from two French observers of the American penitentiary system, Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont, in 1833 – almost two centuries ago: “While society in the United States gives the example of the most extended liberty, the prisons of the same country offer the spectacle of the most complete despotism.” Keller introduces this book with that observation.

Keller himself starts out with some pretty damning statistics. Per 100,000 population, he writes in his introduction, “our incarceration rate is roughly twice Russia's and Iran's, four times that of Mexico's, five times England's, six times Canada's, nine times Germany's, and seventeen times Japan's.” His premise: The “American way of incarceration is a shameful waste of lives and money, feeding a pathological cycle of poverty, community dysfunction, poverty, and hopelessness.” He believes that we can change this, and with the rest of the book shows us why and how.



We could start by imitating Norway, or Germany. Those countries treat prison residents with respect; they consider loss of freedom the only punishment necessary and otherwise work to prepare residents for the freedom they will one day regain. There is a reasonable proportion of guards to residents, way different from the average U.S. ratio of roughly 21 prison residents per guard. Guards are treated with respect in other ways. Interaction between residents and guards is encouraged; playing cards, etc., with each other is encouraged. The whole arrangement is light years away from how it is in American prisons. (In fact, Keller's last chapter is titled “The Other Prisoners,” namely, those who work as guards.) The head of the North Dakota prison system undertook in 2015 to imitate the European model just touched on. It took some adjusting, but it worked! Guards were doubtful at first, but most slowly adjusted to being a respected part of a team with the positive goal of helping those imprisoned regain a place in society.

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Book Review cont'd.

Pam Gates, Social Action Co-chair

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“In the U.S.,” Keller writes, “prison work ranks near the bottom of law enforcement. The stress of the job leaves a wake of divorce, alcoholism, PTSD, and suicide. Recruitment and retention are constant problems.” But in Germany, he writes, corrections jobs are in great demand, and only about 10% of applicants make it into the training program, which is an intensive two years, in contrast with the American average of a few weeks.

Cost is another dismal aspect of our system. There are, of course, the brick-and-mortar costs, plus the costs of feeding, housing, and otherwise maintaining prisoners. And there are social costs. In 2016, a team at Washington University, in St. Louis, attempted to put a monetary figure on the “social costs” of incarceration. They estimated lost wages, costs of visitation, higher mortality rates, child welfare payments, eviction and relocation costs, divorces, lowered property values, and the increased criminality of children of incarcerated parents. Their results? \$1 *trillion* per year, \$450,000 per incarcerated person!

Other chapters in this book address race and the prison system, life after prison, women in prison, college in prison, preparing prisoners for a return to normal life, the science of crime and punishment, and how being in an American prison is like being in an “upside down kingdom” (that chapter’s title). Each chapter is short, concise, and written in an interesting, lively fashion.

Our culture of fear pushes prosecutors to send people to prison, and it is that fear, perhaps, that needs addressing more than anything else. It’s used by politicians and the media to mistreat a portion of our population and dehumanize them, encouraging a culture of “them” and “us.” A personal observation: my niece, who grew up out West in a largely white society, found this book at my house, read it, and got busy trying out Keller’s ideas on random people she encountered in her daily life. She got very positive responses. It appears that there is hope!

A statement by U.S. Sen. Cory Booker appears at the beginning of this book and sums up its value well: “America’s unjust system of mass incarceration tears families apart, costs taxpayers billions of dollars each year, and doesn’t make our communities any safer. Bill Keller ... powerfully argues that America can and must do better. **To do nothing or say nothing only reinforces the current nightmare.** I hope you read this book, learn, and in some way, join the growing bipartisan efforts to bring about urgently needed change.”

Amen.

