

New Cleveland Catholic Diocese ministry reaches out to those who have loved ones who are incarcerated



This photo appears on some literature for the Cleveland Catholic Diocese's new LEAF ministry that supports people who have incarcerated loved ones. LEAF is an acronym for Listening, Encouraging and Assisting Families. *(Photo provided by Cleveland Catholic Diocese)*



By [Roxanne Washington, The Plain Dealer](#)

on March 26, 2015 at 9:00 AM, updated March 26, 2015 at 4:40 PM

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- On a recent Thursday evening, a small group of men and women gathered around a table at Holy Angels Parish in Chagrin Falls, commiserating about a devastating situation they share.

They all have loved ones who are serving time in prison.

Jacqui has a 32-year-old son serving 18 years.

Mark and his wife Sharon have a son who was put away for five years. The couple's other son is locked up for life.

John and his wife Leonita have a 33-year-old son who will be behind bars for 15 years.

"After the judge sentenced him, and he was led away in handcuffs, I cried for five days," said John who, like the others, refused to share his last name. "Only doctors and medication have gotten me through this. It has taken years off of our lives."

The group has come together under a new Cleveland Catholic Diocese ministry that reaches out to families and friends of the incarcerated. The program called LEAF is an acronym for Listening, Encouraging and Assisting Families. Attendees aren't required to share why their loved one is incarcerated if they don't feel comfortable doing so.

LEAF was launched in August, 2014 at Holy Angels. Shortly thereafter, another LEAF group was assembled at St. Ladislav Parish (bilingual) in Westlake and Sacred Heart Chapel in Lorain. The latest group meets at St. Agnes of Fatima Parish on the east side of Cleveland.

Two new groups will begin soon: At St. Mary Church in Hudson, and Mary Queen of Peace Parish in Cleveland. For meeting times and other information, go to leafministry.org. Or call 800-869-6525, ext. 3500.



Sister Rita Mary HarwoodRoxanne Washington / The Plain Dealer

"We are going to start more groups as needed," said Sister Rita Mary Harwood, Diocese of Cleveland secretary for Parish Life and Development.

Sister Harwood said the main purpose of the LEAF meetings is "for people who want to share their concerns, embarrassment, guilt or whatever they are feeling in an environment where they won't feel uncomfortable."

When a loved one is incarcerated, "I've heard the saying, 'When a loved one goes to prison the whole family goes,'" she said.

LEAF builds on a prison ministry that the Diocese started in 1997. At the time, leaders of the Diocese asked Sister Harwood to explore how the church could minister to people caught up in the legal system, whether in prison or jail or on parole, in the Diocese's eight-county area. Back then, there was nothing for the families of prisoners.

"The ministry to the incarcerated of the Diocese of Cleveland was a collaborative response to the Gospel: Matthew 25, 'When I was in prison you visited me,'" she said.

Once the ministry to people in prison, jail and on parole was established, years went by. Then two years ago, Sister Harwood was speaking to a woman whose husband was incarcerated, and who also was looking for some kind of support for her children.

"I was able to connect her to some Catholic Charities programs and some things going on in parishes," the Sister said. "But her last question was, 'Is there anything for me?' I thought, 'Oh, this is something that I did not finish. I'm going to have to get this started.'"

After a time Sister Harwood was invited to Holy Angels to talk about the Diocese prison ministry and how it might expand. From that, she worked with Father Dan Schlegel, the pastor; Donna Angelotti, director of social concerns at Holy Angels; and Bernie Nagle, a parishioner, to start the first LEAF chapter.

Nagle facilitates the meetings at Holy Angels. He is also uncle to Jackie's son.

"I had been going to the 7 a.m. mass for quite a while and praying out loud for my nephew," said Nagle. "One day Father Dan asked me if I would be interested in being involved in a ministry for families who have loved ones in prison. My immediate reaction was, 'Absolutely.' It was good for me because I know how our family has suffered and how it was affecting Jackie."

LEAF meetings require no fee, and they are open to people of all faiths. The meetings open with a prayer. After that the group "checks in" to share what's happening in their lives or how they are feeling.

Nagle sometimes invites guests from the prison system, parole officers, defense experts and more to talk to the group.

"Everybody gets to ask questions because one of the biggest challenges people have is how to deal with the system," said Nagle.

As a facilitator, Nagle also keeps the conversation flowing.

"It's really important to feel the sense of the group," he said. "You have to feel when people are wanting to say something, and also when to change the conversation. A lot of anger comes out, and pain. So sometimes it's important to steer the conversation so that it's helpful, not hurtful."

After meetings, a closing prayer is offered for those who want to participate.

To publicize it, LEAF has been announced in not just Catholic church bulletins but at other churches, and on posters in prisons and jails.

"One of our challenges is getting the word out," said Sister Harwood. "A lot of it happens from person-to-person."

At the Holy Angels meeting, Mark and Sharon talked about how hard their sons' incarceration has been on their daughter.

"She's told a few friends, but she mostly doesn't talk about it," said Sharon.

Jacqui said LEAF has meant a lot to her.

"When this happened to my son I didn't have anybody to talk to and not that many people knew about it," she said. "When you're going through this you don't know whom to trust. But once the trial began, it was splashed all over the papers. Once it was out, my co-workers either gave me a hug or they didn't talk to me.

"This place (LEAF meeting) has been a blessing," she said. "Inmates are people and a lot of them have people who love them, not matter what they did."