

NBA Gathers Prison & Jail Ministry Workers for a Two-Year Peer Group Experience

Rev. Monica Wedlock Kilpatrick, Director of Disciples Care Exchange and Affinity Group Ministries



In April, eight prison and jail ministry practitioners gathered in Louisville, Kentucky, to attend the “Reaching Individuals Behind and Beyond the Bars” conference and to kick off the first NBA Prison and Jail Ministries Peer Group. This select group of prison and jail ministry workers, both clergy and lay, spent time hearing the stories of re-entering citizens and the families of the incarcerated as they shared the challenges of navigating life beyond the bars. The peer group was developed as an extension

of the work of the NBA Prison and Jail Ministries Affinity Group and in conversation with ministry partners, who expressed a need to connect prison and jail ministry leaders in a small, peer-group setting designed to cultivate peer support/encouragement, mutual dialogue, spiritual renewal, and peer-to-peer learning.

Workshops hosted by local leaders and organizations included “Types of Mentoring” and “Families of the Incarcerated.” The keynote speaker, Rev. Lee Schott, UMC pastor of Women at the Well Prison Congregation in Iowa, challenged attendees to look beyond the stigma and stereotypes of those imprisoned and to listen and consider more deeply the stories of those behind the bars.

Motivated by Rev. Schott’s challenge, the new NBA peer group began the process of sharing their own stories, informally over dinner fellowship and formally during a dedicated after-session. Each story sparked the collective imagination and creativity of the group and inspired Rev. Joseph Pusateri to share his own story more broadly. Finally, the group explored three main questions to help give shape to purpose and task of the peer group going forward:

1. How can this group benefit (enhance, improve, influence, etc.) you and your ministry?
2. What do you need from the NBA P&JM peer group?
3. What can you give to the group?

Hernández to Serve as Peer Group Convener

The NBA is contracting with Rev. Héctor J. Hernández to serve as the Prison and Jail Ministries peer group convener through 2018. As part of our strategic plan, the NBA has been exploring how to collaborate to develop a network of support for Disciples engaged in spiritual care and advocacy ministries with those who are incarcerated and their families.

In his role as peer group convener, Hernandez will join the Prison and Jail Ministries team to lead and support the dialogue and work of the peer group; determine if there are

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ways to expand efforts in connecting and supporting prison and jail ministry leaders; and represent the NBA at workshops, panel discussions, general and regional meetings, congregational trainings, and other opportunities as appropriate related to prison and jail ministries.

The members of the 2016-18 Peer Group cohort are:

- **Dietra Wise Baker:** pastor, Liberation Christian Church, and juvenile justice chaplain, St. Louis, MO
- **Dean Bucalos:** mission specialist, NBA Prison & Jail Ministries Affinity Group, and prison congregation pastor, New Life in Christ Christian Church, Louisville, KY
- **Sharon Cosby:** pastor, In The Spirit Christian Church, and president, Oklahoma Family Empowerment Center, Tulsa, OK
- **Tiffany Curtis:** clergy and climate justice community organizer, Mothers Out Front, Somerville, MA
- **Luis Gierbolini:** prison chaplain, Indianapolis, IN
- **Héctor J. Hernández:** peer group convener, NBA Prison & Jail Ministries, and pastor, Iglesia Nueva Creación, Indianapolis, IN
- **Nora Jacob:** restorative justice minister, Urban Mission, Orange, CA
- **Mark Johnson:** board chair, Mission Behind Bars and Beyond, Louisville, KY
- **Joey Pusateri:** pastor, Simpsonville Christian Church, Simpsonville, KY
- **Lee Schott:** prison congregation pastor, Women at the Well United Methodist Church, Mitchellville, IA
- **Monica Wedlock Kilpatrick:** director, NBA Affinity Groups, Decatur, GA