

Right Next Door conference focuses on 'breaking down the walls'



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“Right Next Door: Beyond the Walls of Church and Neighbor,” a conference aimed at helping people discover how to connect to those who live on the margins was held on October 16 and 17, 2015 at Ankeny First United Methodist Church. Some 200 people participated in the event, which included worship, several workshops, and a keynote address from Sister Helen Prejean, a noted anti-death penalty activist.

“Right Next Door” was the brainchild of Rev. Lee Schott, pastor of the Women at the Well United Methodist Church, a congregation inside the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women in Mitchellville. The idea really crystalized for her last year when she visited the Chillicothe Correctional facility as a part of a General Board of Church & Society trip. “We spent two and a half days meeting with men who were part of a program that was sort of a faith-based rehabilitation program, and talking about how the church needed to be for real for them. And really I came away from that meeting feeling like we needed to do something.”

The General Board of Church & Society, Prison Congregations of America, and Ankeny First UMC were all instrumental in making the conference happen. “We have partner churches like Ankeny First that made this possible. Ankeny had an experience doing a conference a few years ago, and so we were able to draw on a lot of expertise that came from them,” explains Rev. Schott, also citing the importance of the relationships that the Women at the Well congregation has built through its ministry.

In her own presentation at the conference, Rev. Schott told stories of her prison ministry and about the walls that she has observed between people in prison and the people sitting in church. "Too often there is a wall between us, and we don't have some of those folks represented, or at least not openly represented. They may be there, but the experiences that they've had – like incarceration, mental illness, domestic violence, addiction – aren't openly talked about."

Click here to see (<https://vimeo.com/142896901>) Rev. Schott's plenary address

"So they don't become resources for ministry," she continues, "and those people really hold back from sharing the fullness of who they are. So when other people come with those things, they don't even know that that's welcomed in the church or can even be talked about in the church. We're trying to think about how to break down those walls."

The workshops offered at the conference fell into four tracks: prison ministry, community, specific issues (mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, etc.), and advocacy. In reference to the last one, Rev. Schott asks, "When we've recognized that there are injustices, like Sister Helen talked about, how do we become advocates to fight against those and enter into a public discussion of those issues?"

Rev. Schott had thought of Sister Helen early on and was pleased that she could be a part of the conference. She was certainly a draw, but more importantly she understands what "Right Next Door" is all about. "She gets the humanity behind the crime, the thing that's so public. There's still a person with eyes and hands and a story. And we think that's part of the message that we're trying to talk about."

Of Sister Helen's address, Rev. Schott adds, "She gave a lovely talk about her journey, entering into this flow of what needs to happen around the death penalty. Both in one-on-one relationship, and then in advocacy, which is a great model for the kinds of things that we're talking about as well."

Click here to see (<https://vimeo.com/142892195>) Sr. Helen's keynote address

Both Sister Helen, and another speaker at the event, Judith Roberts, touched on the idea that even those of us who are technically free – who are not incarcerated – are not truly free until we are ALL free. "It's a truth, I think, that we don't talk about very often out in the world," says Rev. Schott. "We are surrounded by people, people right next door to us are living in addiction and abuse. I've known people who've lived for years in such constraints, not free at all, even though they're not in prison. And then some of those people become free when they go to prison," she points out.

"What we're talking about here is how can we be communities of faith and communities in the world where people are able to be more free."