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# Ministry with “the Poor” Right Next Door

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## Rev. Lee A. Schott



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## About This Blog

Read and comment on a range of personal reflections and perspectives about poverty and Ministry with the Poor. Our goal is to attract diverse voices and points of view from United Methodists and friends, including people and communities living in conditions of poverty, other experts, religious leaders, community organizers, advocates, policy makers, volunteers, and all engaged in Ministry with the Poor.

## Tags

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"Right Next Door: Beyond the Walls of Church and Neighbor," in October, 2015. *Shari Miller Photography, 2015*

I used to hear “the poor” and picture some run-down streets in some inner city areas, far from the small town where I live in central Iowa. I’d think of the homeless camps that the city wants to empty out and tear down, and I’d remember the trailer park on that one street on the way out of town. “The poor” were nameless, faceless and distant. People for whom we’d leave food, at the local food pantry. I was pretty OK with that.

Then I went to prison.

In 2011 I was appointed pastor of Women at the Well, a now nearly ten-year-old United Methodist congregation inside the women’s prison at Mitchellville, Iowa. I spend hours every week in conversation with women who live there. They share their challenges with me, and we pray together. We talk about leadership and direction. We explore the challenges that await them in reentering society. We share as we gather for choir practice. We join in discussions to prepare for services of baptism and reaffirmation of faith.

Along the way, I’ve realized something. Not just that these women are deeply beautiful, with an inspiring faith and resilience. I figured that out right away.

Beyond that, though, I’ve learned something that goes beyond me and this church inside the prison: These women haven’t actually been distant and separated from my own experience. They’ve been *right next door*, down the block, across the street.

**dignity**  
**Mutuality**  
**marginalize us and them**  
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Lori\* got in trouble doing meth in Marshalltown with her mom. Cari and Keisha and Muriel were getting beaten up, and watched their moms and siblings get beat up, in towns like Muscatine, Iowa Falls and Oskaloosa. Lisle was raped in Fort Dodge, and Tara in Davenport. Marcie was dealing with debilitating mental illness even as she walked the grounds of the retreat center I visit. These sisters always were—still are—*right there*.

Yet in a lot of years in a number of churches outside, I haven't met these women. It took being sent to do ministry in a church specially planted for that purpose within a prison before I would meet them, and know them, and love them. In most of our churches, these women—and not just women with these experiences, but men as well—are absent. Or if they are there, their experiences are hidden, unwelcome. Unspeakable. Where members of the community have survived abuse, or sexual assault, or even addiction, those experiences rarely become a resource within the church to be in ministry with others.

This realization is re-shaping the ministry of Women at the Well. We are answering a call to invite churches outside to do the kind of ministry in their communities that we were sent to do inside the prison. That means connecting with persons right there in the community who are struggling with the kinds of challenges we see inside the prison: Poverty. The effects (on whole families) of incarceration. Mental illness. Addiction. Sexual assault. Domestic violence.

Women at the Well led a conference, "Right Next Door: Beyond the Walls of Church and Neighbor," on these issues in October 2015. It evidently struck a nerve; more than 200 people attended, from sixteen states. It was a rich time of imagining what is possible as we dare to connect with one another. Our keynote speaker, Sister Helen Prejean, set the tone with her story of becoming a spiritual companion to persons on death row. She shared about the precious souls she discovered there, and a connection that drew her into advocacy on behalf of these brothers and sisters.

Our conference invited participants into workshops which sought to connect the church with the neighbors we might not have noticed. Could we form supportive teams that will work with persons seeking to reenter our communities after prison? How can the church be a resource for families consumed with a diagnosis of mental illness? What kinds of boundaries do we need to set when welcoming an ex-offender, or someone who's on a sex offender registry? Are there preferred ways to be supportive of those who are surviving sexual violence, or human trafficking? How can we advocate for sisters and brothers facing these questions?

Throughout the conference, we were surrounded by foamboard figures intended to signify the "hidden" neighbors that might not always have found a place in our churches. As a reminder that we probably all know some of these people, those dealing with the challenges we were talking about, folks were invited to place name tags on these figures, helping us all to remember the delicate interconnections among us.

*Connection*, after all, is at the heart of our work—at our Right Next Door conference and after, inside the prison walls and beyond. We are not interested in helping churches do more ministry to or for people they hope will not sit down next to them in church. We believe, though, that lives will be transformed and vital ministry will emerge when people actually learn each other's names, hear the other's stories, come to know and value one another, break bread together, and do ministry *with* each other.

It took prison for me to figure that out. I hope our experiences there will open that way for others as well.

*For a glimpse of what was addressed at the Right Next Door conference, check out this video of Rev. Lee Schott's plenary presentation:*

50:18



[Why We're Here](#) from [Iowa Annual Conference](#) on [Vimeo](#).

\*Not their real names (throughout)

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