

## **Remarks at CoSA Appreciation Banquet**

Guildford Golf & Country Club

20 February 2018

Ladies and Gentlemen:

### ***Introduction***

It is a real pleasure – and an honour – for me to be with you this evening as appreciation and thanks are reciprocally expressed by the core members and volunteers of the Vancouver and Fraser Valley Circles of Support and Accountability Programme. This ecumenical, faith-based ministry – and it truly is that – is sponsored by the Mennonite Central Committee BC and by the Archdiocese of Vancouver through Catholic Charities Justice Services.

### ***Integral to Commitment to Justice***

For my part, and I'm certain that my Mennonite colleagues, who first started this ministry in 1994 in Ontario, would say the same for their community, CoSA is integral to the Church's mission of serving the cause of justice in the wider community of the Lower Mainland.

Absolutely essential to carrying out this mission is the work of CCJS under the very capable direction of our much beloved coordinator Maureen Donegan. Among her other responsibilities, for 13 years now, Maureen has overseen CoSA, a labour of love for her and a great grace for the core members and volunteers who work alongside her in this blessed ministry.

Help for released sex offenders through community support groups which foster meaningful accountability in exchange for living safely belongs to our commitment to restorative justice. Speaking to incarcerated women in Santiago, Chile, last month Pope Francis said to them in no uncertain terms: “Society has an obligation – an obligation – to provide for your reintegration, for all of you.”<sup>1</sup>

### ***Grounded in Jesus Christ***

The mission of CoSA is grounded in the teaching and example of Jesus. In the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, he cited the Prophet Isaiah to state that his mission was “to bring good news to the poor, . . . proclaim release to the captives, . . .and let the oppressed go free” (Lk 4:18). Moreover, he taught us to encounter him in the corporal works of mercy, not least of which is that of caring for those who are imprisoned. And, I would expand a little, for those who have been released but still need ongoing support, advocacy and help in ensuring their authentic accountability.

Let’s never forget that in our interactions with those who are in any way marginalized we are privileged to touch the flesh of Christ in

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Francis, Address at Women’s Penitentiary, Santiago de Chile (16 January 2018)

them. Indeed, as the season of Lent brings forcefully to mind, we are touching the very wounds of Jesus, those wounds by which we ourselves are healed (cf. 1 Pt 2:24). And are there any other words we would rather hear when we arrive at the pearly gates than these?

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40).

### ***Admiration for Core Members***

Tonight I really would like to express my admiration and gratitude to the core members who are determined to strike out on a new path after serving their sentence. Thank you for having the humility and courage to recognize your need for support in the often painful process of reintegration into the community. Despite the time it may take, your willingness to learn new relational and often job-related skills is an inspiration.

### ***Gratitude for Volunteers***

This evening, too, we honour you, the volunteers who have been trained to put into practice in your ministry the principles of restorative justice: for example, the importance of tools such as collaboration, dialogue, reparation, rehabilitation, respect, reciprocity, responsibility, empathy, consensus-building, healing, empowerment, transformation and hope. Your efforts unleash the power of the circles to change the

lives of high-risk offenders in a positive direction and ensure, as well, the safety of the wider community.

Also, as a result of your participation in a circle, most of the core members get jobs; many themselves begin to do volunteer work, and all learn positive relational skills.

CoSA forges new relationships between core members and members. The core members recognize that a circle is a safe place where they are not judged or condemned for past actions; it is a place where trust can be built on both sides, which leads to the freedom to take risks and to be truly honest and open. And the volunteers tell me that by being in a circle they have had to leave behind a simplistic way of thinking that divides reality into good and bad. Rather, they learn to see the world also from the perspective of those who have been wounded by the harm they have done.

### ***Pope Francis and Hope***

I would like to conclude, if I may, with a quote from Pope Francis. It's from a homily he delivered at a Mass for Prisoners during the Jubilee Year of Mercy in 2016:

Hope is a gift of God. We must ask for it. It is placed deep within each human heart in order to shed light on this life, so often troubled and clouded by so many situations that bring sadness and pain. We need to nourish the roots of our hope so that they can bear fruit; primarily, the certainty of God's closeness and compassion, despite whatever evil we have done. There is no corner of our heart that cannot be touched by God's love. . . . God does not rest until he finds the sheep that was lost (Lk 15:5). So if God hopes, then no one should lose hope. For hope is the strength to keep moving forward. It is the power to press on towards the future and a changed life. It is the incentive to look to tomorrow.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Francis, Homily, Jubilee for Prisoners (6 November 2016).

May the good Lord bless all of us gathered here in celebration this evening!

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB

Archbishop of Vancouver