

Board report from the Director of Ministries for CLF Prisoner-Members (March 2010)

I'm pleased to report that 2009 was a good, solid year for the spiritual support programs we offer by-mail to our CLF prisoner-members: our *Book Project* and other UU publications, *correspondence courses*, and our *Letter Writing Ministry*.

With no access to the internet or email, prisoners can only learn about Unitarian Universalism by reading materials they're sent through the mail. All our pris'members are sent CLF's monthly worship publication *Quest*, and quarterly issues of the *UUWorld* magazine, and many report that these liberal publications are "lifelines" for them. In addition, our *Book Project* allows our pris'members to request free monthly "reading packets" - each of which contains a few chapters from the UU book of their choice. Because our "reading packets" are printed on regular loose sheets of paper, they go through prison mailrooms like a letter rather than like a book - so even prisoners who are not permitted to receive books can still read UU 'books' via our *Book Project's* reading packets! We currently have 16 titles available on request and will add several more titles in 2010. I start each month by mailing out reading packets to several dozen pris'members who've already sent me their monthly requests, and will send more packets with correspondence course lessons throughout the month. By patiently and persistently requesting these free reading packets, many of our pris'members have finished several 'books' and are becoming quite well-read in UU topics!

Our four *correspondence courses* - *New UU*, *Spirit of Life*, *World Religions*, and *UU History* - continue to be popular. New pris'members must complete our 3-lesson *New UU* course before they can take other correspondence courses or apply to our Letter Writing Ministry, and many of them then go on to take *Spirit of Life* (9 lessons) - so by the time they're matched with a UU penpal through our *Letter Writing Ministry*, many have already spent several months reflecting on and writing about their spiritual beliefs, practices, and journeys. There was a time in the fall of 2009 when we were offering *ten* concurrent 'classes' of our correspondence courses! as various groups of 10-20 students were beginning, in the middle of, or completing our four courses - so a priority for 2010 and future years will be developing / adapting more topics for more courses.

Our *Letter Writing Ministry* has been holding fairly steady at about 140-180 'penpal' matches at any given time, but our waitlist of prisoners waiting for a UU penpal has now dwindled to almost zero - so I'm anticipating that we'll soon be able to offer some of our pris'members more than one penpal in order to meet 'free-world' UUs' interest in this program! I also think the 'quality' of our penpal exchanges has improved over time, as prisoners have learned more about UUism before they start writing to a penpal, and as word has gotten out to prisoners in general that our program is *not* a way to get money/gifts, a girlfriend/boyfriend, or a free lawyer. This may also be a factor in why our pris'membership has remained between 350-400 members for the last couple years: we're continuing to serve more prisoners, but we also regularly 'trim' our membership as prisoners are released or if they fall out of contact and don't respond to a note asking if they still want to get our publications. With well over two million prisoners in the U.S., many, many more prisoners could benefit from our programs, but we would not be able to serve many more than 400 pris' members given our current staffing and funding. One goal for the coming years will be to help more UU congregations start offering *in-person* UU spiritual support to interested prisoners in their local facilities, and developing their own "friendly letters" programs for isolated prisoners, so the CLF can concentrate on offering spiritual support by-mail to those (fewer) prisoners who have no local UU congregation near them. Meanwhile, I remain grateful to the CLF for offering vital spiritual support to prisoners, and offering me the chance to serve in this important ministry.

~ Rev. Patty Franz ("Chaplain Pat")