



Exodus Project

MENTORS OFFER HOPE FOR SUCCESSFUL RE-ENTRY
FOR MEN AND WOMEN AFTER INCARCERATION

BY LYNETTE MAGNINO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CATHY JOYCE

“The first days, weeks and months of re-entry are when people need support – from the diocese, the community, from their neighbors,” emphasizes Rabbi Seth Castleman, program director for Exodus Project Sacramento. He pinpoints this time as a critical juncture, **“more than any other time,”** for those who wish to point their lives in a new direction after incarceration.

Exodus Project aims to help. The new three-year pilot program mentors men and women in the last months of incarceration as they begin to prepare for their impending release, and afterward as they navigate life outside the jail gates.

Seth has experience in program development, proposal writing and spiritually-based “life direction” programs, including efforts in New York and California, consulting and working with inmates, guards and deputies as well as health and education organizations, all in addition to the range of rabbinic responsibilities.

In 2015, his extensive background and knowledge of the community landed him on an ad hoc diocesan task force exploring how the local church might expand its focus and capacity in restorative justice work. Working with Rich Fowler — former director of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Stockton, who was retained by the Diocese of Sacramento to help

organize detention ministries – and John Watkins, director of the Office of Catholic Charities and Social Concerns, their collective work identified a void.

“Locally, we began to realize there was a great need to help those exiting prison,” John says. “This diocese is probably the second largest in terms of the number of people incarcerated.” Seven state prisons and 23 county jails exist within the diocese’s 20 counties. For those nearing release, “there was no treatment and no program to help if they wanted to get their life back in order,” John notes. Instead, released inmates would venture back into society only to find that life outside of a jail cell was much more complicated and support was needed.

“Bishop (Jaime) Soto wanted to do more in Sacramento,” John explains, giving background on the 2011 court order to reduce the state prison population. It brought about prison realignment and amended the Penal Code to allow some felony offense sentences to occur within county jails instead of state prisons. County jails received thousands of “non-serious, non-violent and non-sex related” inmates.

“Jails were traditionally holding facilities for those awaiting their sentences,” John says, but “soon we were seeing people serving their whole sentence there,” which might be anywhere from one to five years.

After discernment and study, they proposed Exodus Project to Bishop Soto and in July 2018, he pledged his support for the project which would exist under the auspices of Society of St. Vincent de Paul Sacramento Council. The Exodus Project advisory board functions as a subcommittee of the larger St. Vincent de Paul board of directors.

■ Seth Castleman, right, and David Gonzalez discuss mentoring efforts on a break from a training workshop for Exodus Project volunteers in June.



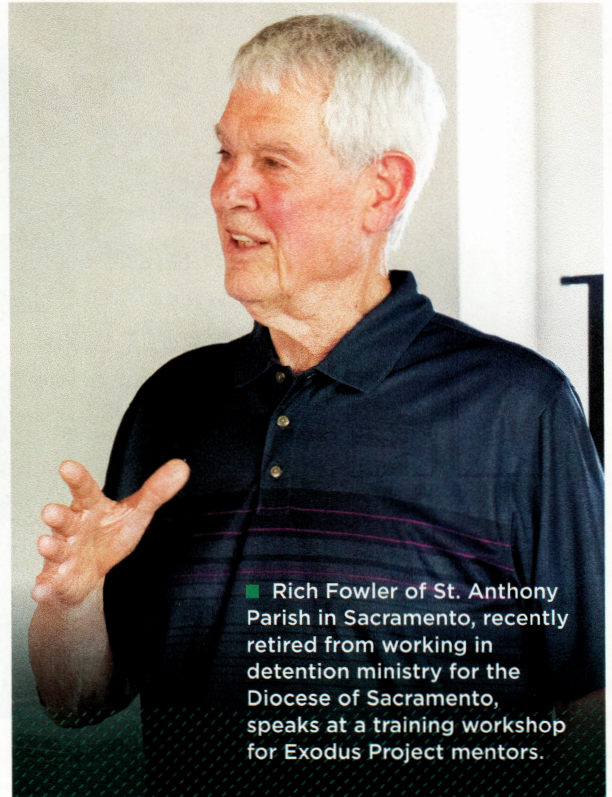
■ Seth Castleman, left, program director of Exodus Project, speaks with mentor David Gonzalez.

Accompaniment and support

“One of the most compelling parts of the program is that we start in the last couple of months inside and continue six months post-release,” says Seth, distinguishing how the unique pre-and post-release contact underscores the mission of “walking with them and accompanying them.” He describes the inner, psychological or spiritual levels of mentoring complemented by the outer, practical and day-to-day support.

“From day one, a mentor may pick them up at the gate, take them to the doctor, assist with housing, employment or family reunification,” Seth says, commending the delicate balance of a mentor’s work to also include encouragement, spiritual support and guidance in boundary-holding. Throughout the entire mentoring relationship, Exodus Project goals’ focus on “waking them up to resources already there” and being a much-needed friend.

Mentor training is key. During the summer months, the first cohort of 15 volunteer mentors experienced an 18-hour training event. They make a one-year commitment of about eight hours a month and may



■ Rich Fowler of St. Anthony Parish in Sacramento, recently retired from working in detention ministry for the Diocese of Sacramento, speaks at a training workshop for Exodus Project mentors.

participate in two cycles in a year. Men and women from all walks of life and many faith traditions step up, compelled to serve. Seth sees compassion in their hearts fostered by their own stories and affiliations. Many are parishioners, or Vincentians, the lay members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Their curriculum includes an array of trainers from various agencies covering a range of topics. They hear from Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), addiction specialists, boundary-setting experts, and professionals who speak on faith and spirituality. Mentors also practice through role playing while receiving valuable insights from formerly-incarcerated individuals who share their own experiences. Mentors continue to meet monthly for more training, debriefing and sharing.

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■ Seth Casteman leads part of the 18-hour training for 15 volunteer mentors of Exodus Project.

Ways to help Exodus Project

1. Consider serving as a mentor – the next training program will occur in October 2019, and every four months thereafter.
2. Volunteer – various administrative projects present opportunities to make calls, locate resources and more.
3. Donate – Monetary donations help sustain the work.
4. Consider offering employment to Exodus Project participants – hire a participant and change a person's life.

Newly-trained mentor David Gonzalez praises Exodus Project and affirms “they put a great program together.” He commends the value of hearing from fellow mentors who had been imprisoned. “It was so helpful to hear their insights on what they’ve gone through, the services they need and the practical perspective.”

David, a parishioner at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in Sacramento, became aware of the program as a Vincentian. “I thought it was an incredible idea,” he extols, confident in the approach to “express Christ’s love and our faith to people extremely less fortunate.”

The pilot program focuses on Rio Cosumnes Correctional Center (RCCC) of Sacramento County (located south of Elk Grove), where most realigned felony cases are sent. Exodus Project carefully matches mentors with screened applicants. With the help of county corrections and probation staff, Seth works in conjunction with case management efforts and reaches out to prospective participants in several ways. He visits and presents program information and leaves a brochure and an application. Upon receipt of completed applications, Seth interviews the men and women and talks with their case managers, seeking recommendations and insight on whether the applicants are a good fit.

“It is important to me that they really feel they can turn their life in another direction,” Seth says, conveying how he wants to see that the applicant is “really motivated to use this mentoring relationship as a support for the goals they already have in place.” Prospects must also be clear of any violent activity in the past year to be accepted.

Upon news of his mentor/mentee pairing, David conveyed the undeniable value of Exodus Project. “It’s pretty ground-breaking,” he notes, referring

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Seth Castleman



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to how the program proactively addresses a longstanding and growing social problem. “It’s a problem that’s been largely ignored and Exodus Project tackles it head-on.”

Beyond the pilot program

“We’re starting small and manageable and hoping to grow,” Seth says of the future of Exodus Project. Already other counties have expressed interest in replicating the program, although Seth indicates that funding drives the program’s bandwidth. Current funding is from the diocese, private donations, other Catholic funds and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

During the pilot, data collection and study document the success of Exodus Project and show its promise for possible expansion.

“We look at rates of recidivism, employment, housing, family reunification and sobriety,” Seth says, listing some of many data points. On a more subjective basis, they track participants for six to 12 months after graduation to gauge how they may be

doing with successful community re-entry, church or spiritual involvement, and overall quality of life.

The program targets those serving their felony conviction sentence in county jail and Seth emphasizes, “there’s a lot of need at RCCC and there will be for some time.”

“The hope is that Exodus Project will succeed after this three-year pilot program and go beyond,” he says, trusting that he will see an increase in mentors, participants and jails served, changing lives forever, for good. †