

## The Road So Far

BY THE REV. QUINN WILHELM

**D**ecember 22, 2015, was a red-letter day in my life. It was the day that my life, which had been the picture of predictability in the unpredictable world of a street cop, took a sudden and scary turn.

Lying in the emergency room of St. Anthony's Hospital as a patient was profoundly uncomfortable and unnerving for me. I had spent literally hundreds of hours over my 35-year police career at St. Anthony's, but always for someone else's tragedy. Now I was here for one of my own. I could not feel my entire right side, I could not stand, and I could only communicate with great effort. Now a doctor who looked about 12 years old was giving me a frightful diagnosis. I'd had a stroke in my brain stem, in what he called "the most expensive real estate in the human body."

Terry McGugan, my rector from Christ Church Denver, arrived before I was even out of the ER. Members of my men's fellowship group arrived as well, and together they prayed, asking God to come and help me. My cop friends came and went throughout the night.

As I began the long journey of recovery, it was clear that my days of chasing people over fences at three in the morning were over. The department where I was employed agreed and set a date for my pending "medical separation," which meant being fired. I had one daughter starting college and a second getting ready for her wedding. It was not the time to be unemployed. What was I qualified to do? My college degree was in Theology. As a young man I had considered being an Episcopal priest, following in the footsteps of my best friend's dad, Bishop Bill Frey. What good was that now?

Then, on a trip where my wife and I attended my daughter's freshman orientation at college, a new direction all but slapped me in the face. This new direction in life would result in a ministry I could never have dreamed of. It happened after my wife and daughter decided they wanted to stay in my daughter's new town for a couple of days for some quality time. My daughter suggested I catch a ride back to Denver with her boyfriend's dad. As he and I drove to Denver, I began to share about my situation.

He was employed in a neighboring sheriff's department, and I felt comfortable talking to him about my predicament.

I mentioned my degree in theology, and he said, "You know, it dawns on me that we are hiring a new chaplain for the jail. A guy with your background in theology and your law-enforcement experience would be a great fit." As we drove and discussed the position, I grew excited at the possibility. This was an opportunity to live into my lifelong calling to guide others in religious experience. After many formative conversations, I was encouraged to begin the discernment process to be ordained as a deacon. In November of that year I resigned from the police department after 35 years and was sworn in as the chaplain at the Jefferson County Detention Center that same day.

Jail and prison are two very different places. In prison, the inmates have been found guilty by a court of law and sentenced to serve a specified amount of time—usually a period of many years. In jail, not everyone has been convicted. Many people are in jail waiting for their day in court because they are not able to afford bail. The average length of time people are in the Jefferson County Jail is about 28 days. Many have long and tragic criminal histories and have been in and out of jails and prisons for much of their lives. Others are there for the first time. But whatever their reasons for being in jail, the vast majority have some component of their lives where they have simply lost control. Perhaps an addiction issue, or an unhealthy emotional life that leaves them ill equipped to cope without

resorting to violent outbreaks and harming others. Whatever the issue is, many have hit bottom and are vulnerable and open to help finding a new direction.

After engaging in the discernment process and completing the requirements, I was ordained to the diaconate in June 2018 and assigned to Christ Church Denver, my home parish of nearly 40 years. My wife is fond of saying that I've been engaged in diaconal work for 35 years and someone finally decided to put a collar on me. After my previous career, I am learning how to embody a very new type of authority: one of being a clergyman. It's not as different as you might think. Both wear a uniform

and listen to confessions, work in crisis routinely, and wear many different hats. But there is one difference that is taking a bit of getting used to. I am not used to being considered the "good guy." Nobody ever wants to have the cops come talk to them. The inmates, most of whom know nothing of my prior life, welcome my presence and ask to speak with me often. My prior life, however, gives me the ability to know how to listen to what inmates are saying and what questions to ask. I speak the language.

The Jefferson County Jail has about 1,400 inmates on any given day, so I am very busy. My primary role is as a religious programming facilitator, which means I get to do what I love: solve problems. I get to build and design a program schedule that considers the needs of the inmates and meets them with programs and resources in a constantly moving environment. We conduct about 200 religious programs a month, including Bible studies, worship services of many kinds, and specific programs such as Alpha, Celebrate Recovery, and Endow, a Catholic ministry to help women who have been abused see themselves as God sees them: valued. I also coordinate a volunteer staff of more than a hundred individuals.

Using an electronic system, inmates send "kites" to the chaplain for specific requests. These include Bibles, Qurans, or whatever their primary faith text is, a specific religious dietary need, or a request to speak with me about a personal matter, etc.

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I manage about 1,600 of these requests a month with the assistance of our volunteers. Like I said, it's a busy job, but very seldom does a day go by that I don't find myself thanking God from the depths of my heart for saving my life in December of 2015 and for plotting out a new direction for me, one for which I am uniquely qualified but could not have imagined on my own.

Many months ago, I was praying one early morning and reading the scripture, as has been my habit for many years. I read Psalm 116:12 where it asks, "How shall I repay the Lord for all his kindness to me?" As I read these words, I began to cry, knowing that God had indeed spared my life after my stroke and several times since as I have struggled with health issues. As I cried I had a vision of a man in an orange jail uniform flash into my mind. That was God's message to me. I could show these inmates the

same kindness God had shown me. This is the gift God has given me: the opportunity to serve those whom many in our society consider "the least of these." I can genuinely say that I am deeply honored that God has given me the task of ministering to these men and women, many of whom are at a crossroads and need help making decisions on where they are going and what direction they are going to take. In 2018 alone, 57 inmates have been baptized into the body of Christ, with several more to join in the days and weeks ahead. I know how faith in Christ has changed my life. I hope and pray that it changes theirs too. ■

**THE REV. QUINN WILHELM** serves as the deacon at Christ Church Denver and as the chaplain to the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office Detention Services.

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## THE DIACONATE

- Deacons are ordained clergy and, as such, go through a discernment and formation process prior to ordination.
- Deacons have a special ministry of servanthood that they demonstrate in both liturgy and the world. This is their call and vocation.
- Deacons serve as a bridge between the world and the Church. They interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. As such, they are often bi-vocational.
- Through their lives and teaching, deacons show Christ's people that in serving the helpless, they are serving Christ himself.

If you're interested in learning more about the diaconate, contact your parish deacon or The Rev. Deacon Linda Brown at [deacon@stlukesdenver.org](mailto:deacon@stlukesdenver.org).

The Rev. Quinn Wilhelm at his ordination with Bishop O'Neill.  
Photo courtesy The Rev. Quinn Wilhelm