



Questings

Sister Judith Smits, A Prophet Amongst Us

Greg Speltz

For over sixty years of my adult life, I've been involved in work for those who are poor. Half that time I was employed by the Catholic Church as a social worker. For sixteen years after retirement, my wife and I were full time volunteers throughout the US South, usually operating facilities for the marginalized.

Perhaps the greatest payoff for those years is that we were in constant contact with a host of spirited people, many professionals, many volunteers, all trying to make the world a better place. Each left a lasting impression on us.

One of those people was Sister Judith Smits, until recently the director of The Quest for Social Justice.

I met Sister Judith at the Catholic Service Center in Mobile about 1996. I was a half-time volunteer there and she was assistant director. The Sisters of St. Agnes, of which she as a member, had over the years built a service program for the poorest of Mobile's poor – providing emergency aid, medical and referral services to primarily an African American clientele.

And the Sister's simple lifestyle rather mirrored that of those they served. Theirs was truly a ministry of accompaniment. That catches one's attention.

I was at the time developing a social action group that met at our apartment. Our issues included the death penalty, School of the Americas Watch and the political agenda of Alabama Arise. Sr. Judith was one of us. She spent her days in direct care of those who were poor, but her heart extended to and dwelt in efforts to change society so that there would be fewer poor.

I remember distinctly one afternoon when an execution at Atmore was scheduled for that evening. I said to Sr. Judy that we should do something. Immediately we decided to gather in front of the Cathedral for a prayer service. And by the time of the closing bell at work, Sr. Judy had marshaled a good number of staff and by five o'clock we were in front of the Cathedral, gathered in a prayer vigil.

It is a vigil, I believe, that has been held at that site on the occasion of every execution since that time. That is typical of Sr. Judy's dedication. She is literally dogged in carrying her vision forward, whatever the challenge.

When I was about to leave Mobile, we decided that if the social justice effort was to continue, we would have to establish a social justice office with a paid director.

That is how The Quest for Social Justice began, originally financed by significant contributions by various religious orders of Catholic nuns. Sister Judith Smits was a member of the original board and eventually became its director.

During her tenure as director, she literally poured her life into advancing the cause of social justice in Mobile, Alabama.

Though I live in Seattle, I normally saw Sr. Judy twice a year. Once on a visit to Mobile and once at Fort Benning, Georgia, where we came to protest the School of the Americas.

It was perhaps three years ago at Fort Benning that Sister Judith, looking rather wan, told me of her inherited respiratory illness, which she said was progressive and for which there was no cure. It was a statement lacking fear or resentment.

And so for several years, despite illness, she continued selflessly working for The Quest and the cause of justice.

I last spoke to her from her hospital room on the day she was leaving Mobile by medivac to return to her convent in Wisconsin. I was amazed and inspired by the brightness of her voice and her spirit.

(continued on page 3)

Shining the Light of Social Justice



Ransom Ministries, Inc.

When we started this column we expected to highlight a church each newsletter, however, God made me re-think and expand my idea of a “church” in the context of this column. We, the members of the Body, are the Church and when I was considering what “church” to highlight, my new friend Matt Armbruster came to mind. God gave him the idea of opening a donation only café and after some time he took a step in faith and left his career field to begin this ministry. During the first year of this ministry, they have served over 12,000 meals and touched the lives of many. I invite you to drop in for a meal; unlike a soup kitchen that only serves the hungry or poor everyone is welcome at The Ransom Café. How wonderful is that, a place where the rich and the poor can gather together for a meal. They are surely shining the light of social justice!



Ransom Café is a place where people can come and find nourishment both physical and spiritual; a donation only Café where people will be able to have one of life’s basic necessities met. This is a Café to build relationships and to love our neighbors in a tangible way.

Ransom operates with an ever changing menu. The menu depends on donations and foods that are able to be purchased at little to no cost. There are no set prices on any of the menu items. Some can pay more and some may not be able to pay as much, but the ones who can will pay for the ones who can’t. If someone can’t pay anything, they can volunteer one hour of labor. This promotes the ideal of a hand-up not a hand-out. There are some special circumstances in which Matt Armbruster the founder of Ransom Ministries works with individuals to try to meet their needs.

Ransom is open for lunch Tuesday thru Friday from 11 am until 2 pm and Friday’s from 5-8 pm for supper. There are many other things that are done through Ransom Café such as Christmas Gift outreaches, Thanksgiving meals, community gardens and community mission’s projects, as well as world mission projects.

It is the desire of Ransom Ministries to be able to give back to the community. To not only provide a basic need, but also offer a mentoring program to help people learn valuable skills in the Hospitality industry and skills they need to obtain and keep employment. Cooking classes are offered for all ages and backgrounds to give people a basic knowledge to help them with their daily life and a sense of community so that they feel a part of something good.

Ransom Café is the starting place in a journey of going into the entire world and loving our neighbors as ourselves. There is always a need for volunteers and contributions.

Visit their web site at www.ransomcafe.com for more information. You can also contact Matt or Tara Armbruster at infor@ransomcafe.com if you are interested in learning more or having someone from Ransom Ministries speak to your church, business or community organization.



Matt Armbruster

Board of Directors

President John Conrad

Licensed Certified Social Worker,
Bayview Associates

Vice President Susan Johnson,

Nephrology Social Worker
Fresenius Medical Care

Secretary Mark Moberg,

Professor, Anthropology, USA

Treasurer John Doll,

Retired USA Business Manager;
Radiology Department

Jenni Currie-Teacher, Vigor High School

Zippy Doll-Director of Ministry to the
Sick, St. Dominic Catholic Church

Myra Evans-Community Volunteer

Jay Higginbotham-Author, Founder of
Mobile Archives (Retired)

Christopher Knight-Assistant Federal
Defender

Phyllis Mason-Nurse Manager,
AltaPointe Health Systems

Jonnie Miller-Admissions Supervisor,
Providence Hospital

Ellen Sims—Pastor, Open Table:
A Community of Faith (UCC)

Judith Smits, C.S.A.-Social Justice
Advocate

Shirley Trainer-Vice President,
Board of Mental Health and
Retardation

Denise Moore

Director, *The Quest for Social Justice*

Contact information:

3263 Demetropolis Road, Ste. 5
Mobile, AL 36693
(251) 643-7734
thequestforsj@bellsouth.net
<http://www.questforjustice.org>

Sr. Judith is a prophet of our times. She has enriched all of our lives and her spirit remains very much at the heart of The Quest for Social Justice.

After arriving in Wisconsin, she sent an email to her friends in Mobile. At the end she commented, "God bless you in all you do for the cause of social justice. I might get to the point where I can still write a few grants." How appropriate it would be if we would take the cue to initiate a fund raising campaign for The Quest in her honor. It would be a bit of a pay back.

Shortly after Sister Judith moved back to Wisconsin we received a VERY generous donation in her honor. The Quest board has discussed some sort of fundraising campaign in her honor and will keep you posted. In the mean time, if you would like to make a donation in honor of her, please make a notation on the check. Thank you for your support.

Immigration Law Update

In mid-December the Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice (ACIJ) hosted a breakfast for community leaders at Hacienda San Miguel Restaurant. Business owners, educators, clergy, concerned citizens and city officials all showed up to express concern over HB56 the Alabama Immigration Law that is proudly proclaimed by its backers to be "tougher than Arizona's law."

Fernando Martinez (ACIJ) and Frank Barragan (concerned citizen) introduced an array of speakers including a young undocumented woman who shared her family's struggle with the law. Her brother, who arrived in the US as a two year old has been arrested and is facing deportation to a country where he has never visited and knows no one. She likened it to placing a penguin in a desert.

Representative Napoleon Bracy, who serves on the Public Safety Committee where the bill began and has fought against it since it's conception spoke passionately for it's repeal. He said it is non-partisan and is an issue of human rights.

Mayor Sam Jones also spoke and explained how the law gives other states a competitive edge in recruiting foreign companies. This particularly affects Mobile which is marketed as having diversity as an asset. He said, "we would like to see the legislature to work vigorously to turn this around." He ended his speech by saying that appeal is the key.

Sheriff Sam Cochran, who was in attendance, commented that the sheriff's office is not targeting undocumented citizens and since Hispanics make up less than 1% of the Metro Jail inmates his office has not been greatly effected.

You can make a difference by contacting everyone in the house and senate and asking for the law to be repealed. Their emails, home phone, and home phone numbers are made public.

"Get a job, you bums!" This is what you hear occasionally standing on the street with a sign at Occupy Mobile. Of course if everyone could get a job with a living wage we wouldn't be standing there. Why do I do it? I do it because my eyes have been opened to how our economic system works very well for a few and quite well for others but actually works against many.

Recently a poll came out that showed way more people are concerned about big government than big business. I'm thinking this is because we see how the government is impacting our lives and we tend to focus on how this impact is negatively affecting our freedom or our bank account. We are less conscious of how government is protecting those same concerns unless something goes wrong as in the recent financial crisis.

For some time I have been upset about the fact that none of those responsible for the economic meltdown have been brought to justice. Now I find out that most of what they were doing was legal! Some creative people thought up a new way to make a lot of money. After all making money is what business is all about. The addictive thing about money is that we never have enough.

Jesus told a parable about a farmer who was so rich he didn't have enough room for all his grain so he pulled down his old barn and built new ones; but he never got to taste the fruit of his labor. "Don't lay up treasure in this world but seek first the Reign of God and all else will be given", is a message that is largely ignored. After all it goes against the principles of our economic system since "laying up treasure" is what capitalism is all about.

We used to speak about "Godless Communism." Can we claim that capitalism isn't Godless? For one thing it is based on competition which certainly is not a value found in the scriptures. For another, it totally ignores the reality of pride, greed, envy and the rest of those poisons that seem to run in our veins. And finally it ends up taking so much of our time and energy that we have none to "seek the reign of God" which is another name for social justice.

It's the Gospel that impels me to stand on the street in solidarity with Occupy Mobile!



The Quest and Open Table (UCC), in collaboration with Journey of Hope...From Violence to Healing and Justice and Mercy for All (JAM) are hosting an evening discussion on the death penalty at **7 PM on Tuesday, Jan. 31** at St. Luke's Episcopal Church. We are very lucky to have Bill Pelke, founder of Journey of Hope as the main speaker. In 1986 Bill's grandmother was murdered by four teenage girls one of whom was given the death sentence at the age of 15. He was initially in favor of this sentence but eventually changed his heart and fought to have her sentence commuted. As a result, he was compelled to found the organization Journey of Hope...From Violence to Healing. Today he spends much of his energy working against the death penalty through speaking and writing.

This is part of a tour around Alabama that JAM and Journey of Hope are sponsoring. They are visiting a city each Tuesday and Thursday beginning January 5 and ending in Montgomery when the legislature opens in early February. Each city will have a speaker who is either a family member of a victim or a family member of a convicted death row inmate. That speaker is usually someone who was in favor of the death penalty but was convicted with compassion and had a change of heart. We are very fortunate to get Bill Pelke as our speaker. It should be both interesting and informative. There will be a time for discussion after the lectures. Many thanks to St. Luke's Episcopal for allowing us to use their facilities.

A recent Gallup poll shows that 2/3 of all Americans are in favor of the death penalty but I imagine it is even higher in Alabama, the state with the highest number of executions per capital.

It is our hope that both people opposed and those in favor of the death penalty will attend. For more information contact the Quest office.



Sister Caryl Hartjes

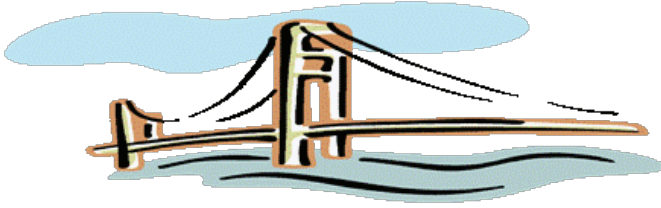
What a wonderful experience we had at the annual SOAW gathering before the gates of the Fort Benning military base in Georgia – home of the School of the Americas! The large number of youth in attendance, and, more importantly, in leadership of the events, seemed like a breath of fresh air to those of us who've attended over the years. There was still plenty of white hair, though, and part of the fun was in catching up on the news with friends from earlier years. Many clever signs were sported by participants – some, linking our gathering with the Occupy Wall Street gatherings. One sign carried a particularly current message:

“We used to have Steve Jobs, Bob Hope, and Johnny Cash. Now, we have no jobs, no hope and no cash!”

As usual, the speakers and musicians highlighted the continuing atrocities committed by Latin American graduates of the School, some as recent as 2010, and urged us to contact our legislators to support HR 3368 - the current bill calling for the release of graduates' names so that the list can be compared with lists of known human rights violators. Perhaps you'll recall that a few years ago a certain University of Wisconsin graduate conducted a personal research project comparing names of Latin American human rights violators with the names of SOA enrollees and documented that the longer a person attended classes there the more prone he/she was to such violations. Pretty serious stuff! Yet, the time was not completely serious. Laughter, puppetry and dancing in the street each had its place in Saturday's event. Sunday, of course, was the solemn funeral procession with the calling out of names of those murdered – each name followed by a reverberating drumbeat and the proclamation, PRESENTE! resoundingly echoed by the crowd.

An interesting sideline, yet intimately connected, was a trip to Lumpkin, GA, to join a regularly scheduled demonstration against the Stewart Detention Center a short distance away. Stewart is a privately owned prison, built to house civil law violators, but, after it had stood empty for several years authorities began assigning detained undocumented immigrants there. Nearby Lumpkin has neither motel nor restaurant to serve families of the incarcerated who come from long distances to visit, so El Refugio, a hostel of sorts was opened in a small home near the prison where visitors are offered meals and sleeping arrangements on weekends. Several family members of the incarcerated were present at the demonstration and told stories of the harsh treatment received in the prison and a former staff person spoke of a lack of oversight, the fudging of audit reports, etc. One former inmate who'd spent 19 months at Stewart was present with his now pregnant wife and young son. He confirmed the stories and added his own. Yet, he felt lucky as 99% of those incarcerated at Stewart are eventually deported. It is estimated that the federal government, your tax dollars, paid the private corporation running Stewart (and other prisons as well) \$60,000 to house this one gentleman for 19 months. Isn't it this sort of collusion between corporations and our government that is spurring the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations across the US?

Seems similar to the collusion between (continued on page 7)



Bridges Interracial Dinner Dialogue

Central Presbyterian Church

Tuesday, January 17

6:00—8:30

Continuing with this year's topic of justice we will explore the reality that there are innocent people in prison who have been falsely accused and convicted.

***there have been 281 post-conviction exonerations in the US**

***17 of the 281 exonerees served on death row**

***the average length of time served by exonerees is 13 years**

***about 29% of the exonerees are Caucasian**

***a recent Gallup poll revealed that 34% of Americans feel that killing innocent people is a "natural cost of an important punishment."**

The evening will consist of a shared meal and facilitated conversation.

Sponsored by

The Bay Area Women

The Quest for Social Justice

Online registration is available at

questforjustice.org

Brian McLaren

Many thanks to those who attended our workshop on *The Church As Transformative Community* led by Brian McLaren and his Christus lecture that evening. The workshop was very informative and the feedback we received was good.

Websites he recommended:

Networks of churches working towards shalom

www.Lareddelcamino.org

www.ccda.org

Commentary on every passage of the Bible from a perspective of peace and non-violence

www.girardianlectionary.net



Books he recommended:

Spirit Level by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett

Parables as Subversive Speech by William R. Herzog,



"When a poor person dies of hunger, it has not happened because God did not take care of him or her. It has happened because neither you nor I wanted to give that person what he or she needed." ~Mother Teresa

One Vote Versus \$Millions

Mary McGinnis

In the past the most often heard excuse for not voting in an election was “my one little vote won’t make a difference.” Yet history is full of instances proving the enormous power of one single vote. In some cases, the course of nations has been changed because one individual ballot was cast—or not cast.

Texas, California, and Oregon were each admitted to the union by a margin of just one vote. The Alaska Purchase was ratified by just one vote. In 1645, one vote gave Oliver Cromwell control of England. History is filled with examples of how very important one vote can be.

However, before a vote can be counted, it must be cast. Today, the problem is not so much that people feel their vote won’t make a difference, or that ineligible people are voting, or that restrictions limit citizens’ access to the polls. According to the League of Women Voters of the U.S., “The problem is getting eligible people to show up at the polls at all. For example, only 55 percent of registered voters cast ballots in the November 2010 election. The problem is not that people are abusing the system. It’s that they are opting out altogether.”

Why are they opting out? “My one little vote” may count as much as the billionaire’s vote, but what can compete with the corrupting power of unlimited campaign contributions? The League of Women Voters of the U.S. says, “This is the real fallout of the Supreme Court’s decision to loosen the campaign finance laws.”

On August 26, Rachel Maddow showed how wealthy interests in Texas were able to manipulate the system for their own gain against the interests of Texas residents. Maddow questioned how the influence of unlimited campaign donations could be kept from creating a government that only represents the moneyed interests. Where is the justice here?

To achieve justice is not easy. To achieve justice means that every eligible voter must vote and must vote an informed vote. For a democracy to exist no voter can opt out. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, and the ignorance of one voter impairs the security of all. The coming year 2012 will be a big election year. March 13 will be the Primary Election and November 6 will be the General Election. Besides casting a vote for who will be the next President of the United States, we will have the opportunity to vote for many other elected offices and issues that in some ways are equally as important for they will impact our lives here in Mobile, Alabama—Mobile County Commissioners, School Board Commissioners, as well as many others and amendments to the state constitution.

Judges will also be up for election, and in our search for justice, we must ponder whether electing judges is the best method. Some states believe appointing judges through a merit process is a more fair and judicial way to select our judiciary—to avoid the appearance that judges may feel beholden to their donors.

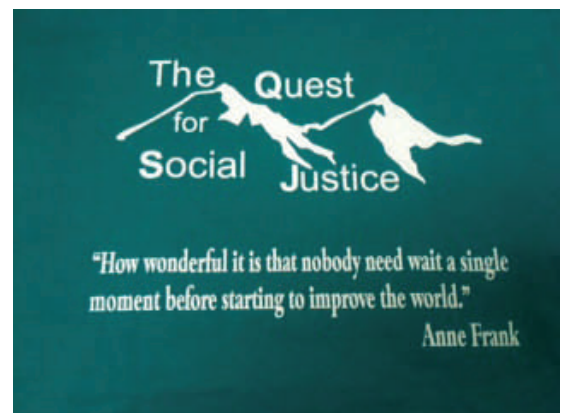
Finding sources of trusted and balanced information is challenging. Closer to the election there will be candidate information on Vote411.org, a website sponsored by the League of Women Voters.



Quest T Shirts for Sale

\$15

Look on FaceBook for pictures of our shirts being worn around the country. Upload a picture of where you wore our shirt. So far our shirts have been spotted at the SOA demonstration, at Occupy Mobile demonstrations, at the Pecan Festival and even at the SPAM museum!



Reflections (continued)

our legislators, international corporations, and our Department of Defense that keeps the School of the Americas functioning, and keeps us coming every November to the gates of Fort Benning to protest.

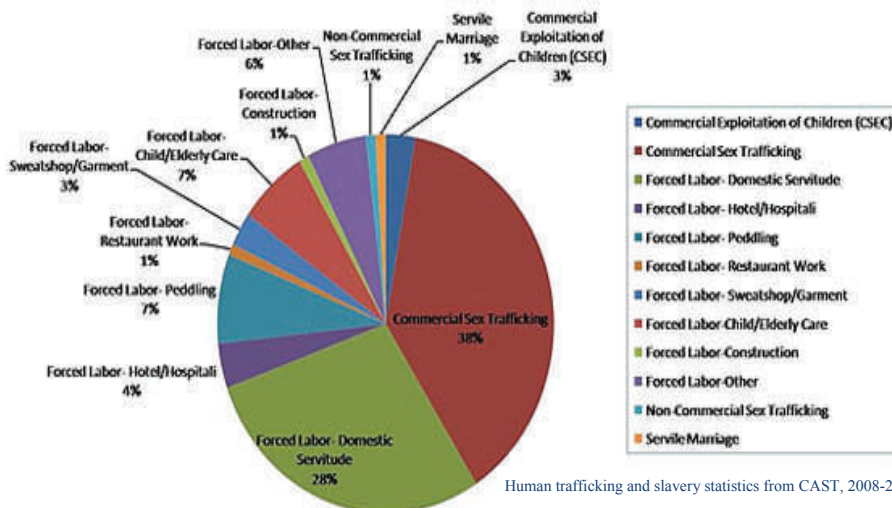


Sister Caryl tells a little of her story in this excerpt from an email sent to Sister Judith: Judy, I was arrested in Nov. 2002, and served 3 months (first offense sentence; 6 months is for second or more offenses unless there are attending circum-

stances), and I served in Danbury Connecticut. The law is that federal detainees serve their time within 100-200 mi. of their residence, so ordinarily I'd have served in Ill, the nearest federal women's prison. However, I'd never filled out some forms given to us the Saturday night before the Sunday demonstration, and I was struggling so with God's invitation to cross the line that I never took time to fill them out. It was the form that listed our birth place, parents, schools attended, previous residences, etc, etc. Since I never filled it out the probation officers had no way of checking my record (they say) so I was considered a security risk, spent 4 days in maximum security, two months in Medium, and finally 25 days in minimum where I'd expected to spend the entire 90. Looking back, though, I'm glad I had the opportunity to experience all three levels of security, because it gave me a good eye-opener of life inside a federal prison. Some experience! Caryl

BUY RESPONSIBLY

An estimated 12.3 million people, worldwide, are believed to be forced/exploited laborers



Calculate your slavery footprint at <http://slaveryfootprint.org>

Use this website to make better choices: <http://goodguide.com>

Upcoming Events

January 17, 2012 6:00-8:30 PM
Bridges Inter-Racial Dinner Dialogue

January 26, 2012 7:00 - 9:00 PM
Triologue Inter-Faith Dialogue

January 31, 2012 7:00 PM
Death Penalty Discussion

April 12, 2012 7:00 - 9:00 PM
Triologue Inter-Faith Dialogue

Quest Supporters

October, November, December

Heide Lomangino
Mission And Ministry
Mary Jane Pennington
Phyllis Mason
Michael Moore
Judith Smits
Mary Helen McCreary
Jenni Curry
Kathy Jorgensen
Ellen Sims
Myra Evans
Greg Speltz
and an anonymous donor

We encourage you to check out our Facebook page. "Like" us and you will get updates on activities. (We promise not to post too many times a day.)

Share articles and activities of interest on our page for our fans/supporters to benefit from the information.





The Quest, Inc

3263 Demetropolis Rd., Ste. 5
Mobile, AL 36693

NON-PROFIT

US Postage

Mobile, AL

Permit No. 131

Return Service Requested