

STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION



YOUTH WITH A HOPEFUL FUTURE

"We're different," says Renee Splichal Larson, pastor of Heart River Lutheran Church in Mandan, N.D. "Half of us are incarcerated," she says. "When half of the people at church can leave and the rest are locked up, it makes the struggles of life very real."

Heart River, a congregation of the ELCA Western North Dakota Synod, is housed on the campus of the North Dakota Youth Correctional Center. From its unique location, Heart River serves both the community and youth in the correctional center.

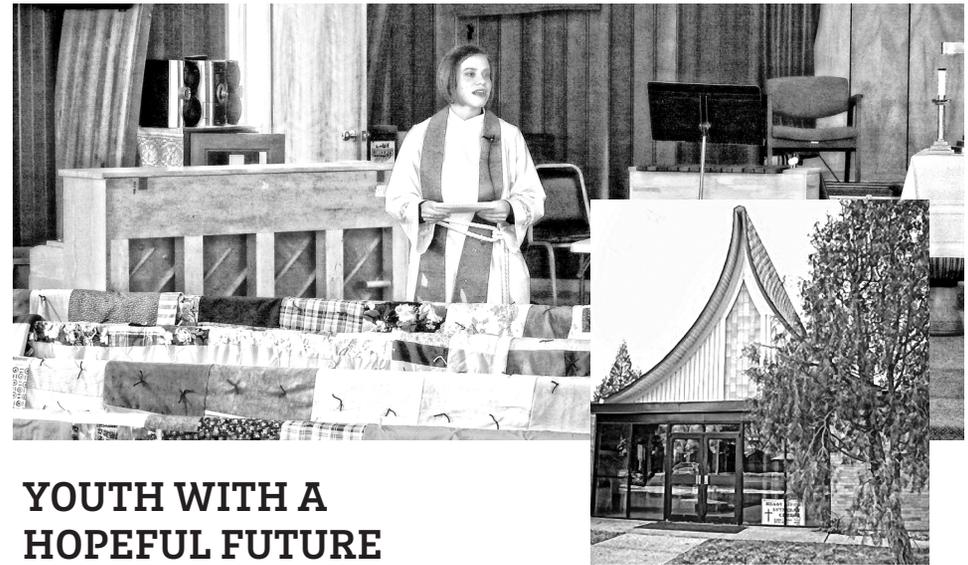
Taylor, 19, was incarcerated for using and selling drugs. When she was released, she came to Heart River. "It was at a time when I was really vulnerable," she said. The congregation "helped me find myself."

But Heart River is not just about reaching out to troubled kids. These young people fully participate in the life of the congregation. "We as a congregation feel it's not a ministry to, it's a ministry with," Renee says. "They are all very gifted and have a lot to offer to the life of the congregation."

When Taylor was released, members of the congregation surrounded her with the gift of a quilt and spoke a benediction — a tradition they do with every young person who leaves the center. "The quilt is still in my room," she says. "For me, it symbolizes a new beginning."

Through the ELCA social statement, "The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries," congregations are called to renewed ministry on behalf of those whom the system affects: victims of crime and their families, the incarcerated and their families, affected communities, those who work in the system and many others.

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