

Rachel's Day

Taking action for children
with a storybook project



Open our arms, God, so that we may welcome children whose parents are incarcerated, absent from the home, or struggling with addiction. And help us, together, to provide them with the love, strength, and stability needed to run this race of life.

—from the Litany for
Rachel's Day

A brief history of Rachel's Day

Rachel's Day is usually observed on the first Sunday in May. The day takes its name from Jeremiah 31:15–17, in which the matriarch Rachel grieves for her children. Rachel's Day is a time to mourn the loss of our children and to renounce the forces of violence and fear.

It started in one congregation, Bethel West in Chicago, and spread from there. At the 1996 Women of the ELCA Triennial Convention, delegates passed a memorial on Rachel's Day, brought by the Metropolitan Chicago Synodical Women's Organization, resolving "that ELCA women encourage their congregations to recognize the first Sunday in May each year as Rachel's Day."

We continue to observe Rachel's Day in order to broaden awareness of the violence suffered by children and to encourage taking action to address it.

Celebrating Rachel's Day with a storybook project

"When a mother goes to prison, usually it is her children who suffer most . . . maternal imprisonment affects future generations because children's psychological health and sense of family is severely damaged by the separation from their mothers."

—Companions Journeying Together
(see www.cjtinc.org/auntmary.html)

This resource focuses on a service project idea related to Rachel's Day, which is observed by Women of the ELCA every year on the first Sunday in May, though it can be observed any time of the year that works well for your women's group and congregation. The proposed service project—a storybook project—enables incarcerated mothers and fathers to read to their children by selecting and recording a children's book for their child. The parents choose a book and read it aloud into the tape recorder, and the books and tapes are mailed directly to the children. Carrying out this project requires advance planning, organizing volunteers, collecting the needed supplies, and coordination with the local correctional facility.

A storybook project is a powerful way for your faith community, adults and children alike, to take action for children who are separated from a parent because of violence and incarceration. A storybook project enables incarcerated mothers and fathers to select and record a children's book for their child. Books, blank tapes, and recorders are donated by congregations. Volunteers bring them to the jail, the parents choose a book and read it aloud into the tape recorder, and the books and tapes are mailed directly to the children.

The first storybook project was started in 1993 by Companions Journeying Together, Inc., for the children of women imprisoned at Cook County Jail in Chicago. Similar programs now exist in more than 20 states around the country. Rachel's Day calls on congregations and communities to recommit to children. This Rachel's Day, boldly speak up for and commit to these children!

How can you plan a storybook project?

- Plan a community service project in early spring with a local prison ministry or re-entry service organization and the youth of your congregation.
- Plan a spring adult education hour on parents in prison. Invite a guest speaker—a prison chaplain or other prison ministries volunteer—who has worked with a correctional institution in your city or region.
- On the first Sunday in May, have a special Rachel's Day book fair to collect donated new books, tapes, and tape recorders.
- Organize a group of volunteers to visit your local or county correctional facility to help parents record the stories. Perhaps you can time your visit with Mother's Day or Father's Day. (Every

correctional facility has its own way of working with volunteers; find out local policies before recruiting volunteers.)

After your visit to the correctional facility, ensure that all the books and tapes are mailed directly to the children.

How does a storybook program work?

Volunteers conduct the program.

- Volunteers bring books, cassette tapes, tape recorders, stick pens, and envelopes to the correctional facility. They set up four to ten reading stations and a central library of books for infants, children, and teens.
- Inmates come to the library in small groups to select books, bringing with them their children's mailing addresses. Volunteers explain the procedures and help with book selection, as needed. Inmates with children in two households may select one book for each household. (This policy may differ depending on the number of parents participating and the time available.)
- When an inmate is ready to read, a volunteer and the inmate go to a reading station. The volunteer inserts the tape and sits close enough to read along while the inmate reads the story. If the book is too long to read in ten to fifteen minutes, the inmate reads part of the book or the description on the back cover. If two books have been selected, each is recorded on a separate cassette. The volunteer labels the cassettes and removes the "re-record" tabs.
- The volunteer and inmate return to the library. The inmate addresses the envelope and writes a



note to the child on the inside cover of the book. Volunteers help as needed.

- The envelopes and books are checked and mailed by the volunteers or by the correctional facility's mailroom.

How can you start a storybook program?

Once your program is approved by the correctional facility, ensure the following:

- Review plans with the correctional facility's staff and make whatever changes are requested.
- Work with the correctional facility's staff to establish a schedule of storybook sessions.
- Recruit and train volunteers and be sure they qualify as prison volunteers.
- Provide books, tape recorders, cassette tapes, stick pens, and envelopes.
- Mail the books and tapes to the inmates' children or reimburse the correctional facility for the cost of the postage.

How can the correctional facility support a storybook program?

Ask that the correctional facility:

- designate a contact person to work with your head volunteer on procedures and scheduling;
- keep volunteers informed of facility policies and procedures to be followed;
- provide a designated quiet area for the storybook program with three to six tables, chairs, electrical outlets, and space for inmates to address envelopes; and
- arrange for those inmates who have minor children or grandchildren and wish to take part in the program to do so, in accordance with the facility's policies.

Mothers in Prison

- More than three-quarters of women in prison have children, and two-thirds of these mothers have children under the age of 18.
- Since 1991, the number of children whose mother is in prison has more than doubled, up 131%.
- More than 4 in every 10 mothers in state prisons reported that they had been physically or sexually abused at least once before their current incarceration.

—from *Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children* (2008 Bureau of Justice Special Report)

More than 75% of women in prison are mothers and more than 40% reported abuse before their incarceration. Do the math. We can barely imagine the number of children exposed to abuse and violence.

Litany for Rachel's Day

Open our eyes, God,

so that we may see the value of all God's children and so that we may together plan for their safety and protection.

Open our ears, God,

so that we may hear the cries of youth suffering from hunger and malnutrition and so that we may together plan for their feeding and sustenance.

Open our hearts, God,

so that we may feel the powerlessness of teens struggling to succeed in homes plagued with apathy, division, anger, and hopelessness, and so that we may help provide words of comfort, paths of power, and courage for their successful journey to adulthood.

Open our lips, God,

so that we may boldly confront racism and sexism and may together bring about the unity in diversity necessary for our babies' growth and wholeness.



Open our minds, God,

and purge away individualism, negative pride, and superior attitudes. And help us to understand that each and every child of God is given bountiful gifts regardless of color, gender, or race.

Open our arms, God,

so that we may welcome children whose parents are incarcerated, absent from the home, or struggling with addiction. And help us, together, to provide them with the love, strength, and stability needed to run this race of life.

Open us, God, so that we may feel the breath of your spirit;

Open us, God, so that we may feel the power of your majesty;

Open us, God, so that together we may be strengthened to bring about human liberation and wholeness for our children.

Other helpful resources

Rachel's Day: Justice for Children and Youth
www.womenoftheelca.org

Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children
(Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report)
United States Department of Justice
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf

If you would like more information or assistance with starting a storybook project, contact Gail Beard of Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (Gail.Beard@lssi.org).

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