

## **Centering Prayer Group Spotlight: Bright Bridge Ministries, Pensacola**

Most of our Centering Prayer groups meet in churches, but some groups practice Centering Prayer in other places, like prisons and shelters. We have two Centering Prayer groups that meet at Bright Bridge Ministries (BBM) in Pensacola. Bright Bridge serves individuals who are experiencing homelessness, addiction, hunger and more. Bright Bridge provides programs and resources that offer community members an opportunity for hope, healing, and life renewal. Approximately 40 men live in the men's shelter (called His Place) and another half dozen men live at Chadwick House, an offsite home where men are supported as they transition to full independent living. (Learn more about Bright Bridge by visiting their website: <https://brightbridgeministry.org/>.)

### **Chadwick House Centering Prayer Group (by Facilitator Virginia Beckham)**

Virginia Beckham has been facilitating a Centering Prayer group at Chadwick House weekly since 2022. Chadwick House is a residence for six men who have completed the recovery program at Bright Bridge Ministries and need a stable place to live as they continue their journey toward independence while maintaining sobriety. These men have each "bottomed out" and worked their way to sobriety and living in community with others. Their commitment to their sobriety and their relationship with God is paramount to each of them. Their fellowship is positive and supportive, an amazing example of small group solidarity in this time of societal dissension and conflict.

The meetings are a constant source of inspiration. Several residents have lost family contact and are attempting to establish healthy relationships. They are grateful for their sobriety and try hard to be faithful to their commitment to a new way of life. They show amazing patience in their jobs, which requires hard work for modest wages, and are grateful for what they do have.

Centering Prayer enables these men to deepen their relationship with God and strengthen their hope for the future through God's sustaining love and presence. And, in sharing Centering Prayer with the residents of Chadwick House, I have received unexpected joy as my heart is softened by the witness of these men.

### **"His Place" Centering Prayer Group (by Facilitator Doug Heatwole)**

Another Centering Prayer group began meeting at Bright Bridge during Holy Week in April 2023, facilitated by Doug Heatwole. This Centering Prayer group is unique compared to most other CP groups in our chapter. While living at the shelter, residents are expected to attend educational, life skill, or recovery group meetings offered at Bright Bridge, a minimum of three per week. Centering Prayer is one of those weekly meetings. In contrast to most Centering Prayer group meetings, some men may come only once or infrequently; few come regularly. Some may attend but not practice Centering Prayer outside of the weekly meeting. All of them have roommates and some live in rooms with 6 or more other men. Finding solitude and silence is difficult, plus they are expected to be working or looking for work to remain at the shelter.

The group usually consists of three to six men each week, and it is unpredictable who or how many will come. Sometimes their jobs interfere, or they have a conflict with another meeting. A few have been stalwarts and have attended nearly every week for months. The shelter is meant to be a place for men to live for a time until they have gained stable work and the financial means to live and thrive independently. So, there is regular turnover and a changing composition of attendees.

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Therefore, someone brand new to Centering Prayer attends nearly every meeting. Thus, the meeting commonly begins with a 5- to 10-minute teaching of the method of Centering Prayer and a brief overview of its origins and scriptural basis. Then after the prayer period, the group discusses any observations, comments, and questions. Almost all newcomers are unfamiliar with contemplative prayer.

However, earlier this year, one young man who attended had learned and practiced Centering Prayer while in prison at Graceville Correctional Facility, a group led by Chandra Hanson, a long-time facilitator in our chapter and now the executive director of Prison Contemplative Fellowship. Although it had been 8 years since this young man had been in that group, he remembered Chandra and had been practicing Centering Prayer since that time.

At first, it was a bit frustrating adapting to the laissez-faire attitude that some men had. Some weeks only one or no one showed up, but this became an opportunity for me to let go of my expectations and judgment. In time, the Spirit changed my heart and I was filled with joy to sit in an empty classroom praying for the men staying at the shelter and gratitude for the opportunity to sit in solitude and silence for 20 minutes of Centering Prayer. It seems like my experience of God's presence is intensified when I sit there by myself waiting on men and waiting on God. Although I tend to lean towards productivity and efficiency, numbers aren't important in this ministry. Sharing the prayer isn't about keeping count.

In the 28 months that I have been facilitating this group, I've had the opportunity to meet more than 60 men and have learned from them the challenges and difficulties of their lives – many things that I have never faced or understood – and simply rested in the assurance that the seeds I plant may one day mature into life-giving fruit to someone who only experienced Centering Prayer one time. I have been blessed by the opportunity to be with these men.