Good evening everyone. I am Reverend Mary Smith and I thank God for the opportunity to be before you. Our topic tonight is homelessness and unmasking. To face the issues that caused one to be who they are and to show one's true self, can be referred to as unmasking. What caused me to fall and experience homelessness?

I started out as a 20 year-old young woman, doing well in life; I worked for The Travelers Insurance Company for eight years, but one might say I was naive to living life on life's terms. I was inexperienced in handling emotions, disappointments, miscarriages, a broken marriage, loneliness, despair and even sadness.

Because of these overwhelming emotions, I asked some friends for advice and support. They introduced me to happy hour . . . hmmm happy hour. . . . I was looking for happiness; needless to say, I found alcoholism. I was introduced to a substance that I had abused while self-medicating. The road was hard and long, I found myself ashamed, lost, at a dead end, all by myself, and incarcerated for four months. I had one thing on my side, I have always been an overcomer and I knew that there had to be a better way.

I have always been able to advocate for myself. They offered me ten years, I said are you kidding me? I just have a problem finding my way. Quickly I began talking, it was there that I became the first mother in The Connection's Elm City Woman's & Children's Center.
The Connection became a part of the foundation I stood on, as I struggled to get back up again. It was there I began to see myself; the staff listened endlessly while I learned to cope with my issues that had started small, but had become so great that my judgement was impaired. There was a woman who was about 68 years old, every day she would ask me the same question: what are you going to do about it?

From there I progressed to become the first client in the PILOTS program called The Connection's Supportive Housing. Because of The Connection, I found inner strength; I met Ms. Marlene Clark, she held my hand and she never let it go. I met Holly Seymour who ran interference—protected me from the unwanted attention and/or criticism due to my past—she aided me and assisted me in getting back up again. For that I say to The Connection, thank you.

Unmasking. . . Why would I allow myself to be so transparent? Well I believe that all experiences in life, good or bad are a testimony. I am standing before you with new strength, a zeal for living, a change of heart, and a transformed spirit.

Today, I am able to stand steadfast; and now I can extend myself and reach out to others, I can empower them and be a beacon of light. I knew that I needed to clean up where I had messed up, and I had messed up. Going back was not an option, so I attempted to move forward. In 2010 I was called into the ministry -I had been praying to God as I believe, for a job- and in my spirit I was heard.

[Mary tells the story of how she met Richard Caron, Sr., Executive Director of the Connecticut Pardon Team.]

That is how I became a volunteer for The Connecticut Pardon Team, Inc. a non-profit agency in Norwich, CT. I volunteered for five months until I became the first employee, and now I have been there for seven years.

I've always had determination, regardless of the situation. In 2016, I received a pardon and I no longer have a record. Now I have the ability and the desire to be supportive to others, the past seven years allowed me to touch numerous lives.

Today I am positive, not just for myself, but to encourage everyone I meet from diverse cultures and backgrounds, who have fallen and need a hand to get back up.

Because I was able to unmask myself with The Connection and received their support, I have found my way and was ordained in 2016. I am now Reverend Mary Smith. I have one more year of ministry studies before I'm an Elder. I am strong, I have peace, I can live in today as troubling as it is and I stand firm.

I am grateful today that I have the Victory!!!!!

To The Connection, I thank you, may you continue to be that extended hand to others, who need someone to help them get back up again. I support The Connection because they support the lives of others. Through Ministry, I've learned that it is not just about me, it is about caring for humanity. Psalms 34:4 says: I sought the Lord, and he heard me and delivered me from all my fears.

Thank you all for allowing me to share my story, I am Reverend Mary Smith, striving and moving forward.

I'd like to thank especially, Holly Seymour, Marlene Clark, and David Pascua.

Thank you.