

URBAN CURRENT

Joy to the jail

"As a young man, with a well-earned street name of Satan, James Anderson said he could pull the trigger, drop his victim's body at the edge of town, stop to eat chicken and potato salad on the way home, and never think about it again," writes Mark Brown in the *Chicago Sun Times*.

Anderson is now an associate pastor. He is often called upon to counsel with young men just out of Cook County Jail.

Michael Carter is now pastor of Mighty God Tabernacle. In his younger days he was a stickup man surely destined for a shortened life.

How about former Vice Lords general finishing up his PhD? Benny Lee works as a drug counselor. What about Edward Bey, an original member of the notorious South Side Blackstone Rangers who spoke of putting down his gun after 15 murders? Then there is Herbert Stevens-EL, known as Thunder.

These are a few of the countless converts of Consuella York, affectionately called Mother York.

At 5'2", Mother York, 72, when she passed away in December 1995, was a one-woman-Holy-Ghost-salvation crusade. Seven days a week toiling past midnight, rising at dawn, bedding down three or four nights a week on her office couch, serving with no salary. After the early Sunday jail service she would help lead the four-hour service at her church. "Mother doesn't eat a balanced diet and doesn't get enough rest," son John observed. "She's been going like this for as long as I can remember."

There are 70,000 admissions every year to Cook County Jail, the largest single jail site in the country.

Mother York first visited the teeming facility as an observer. "I've been a jailbird ever since, serving a life sentence for the Lord," she told the *Chicago Sun Times*. She was the first female chaplain. For 40 plus years she conducted services, scolded, rebuked, corrected, preached,

and prayed. She greeted inmates with "Mother York's goodie wagon," a little red wagon full of treats, toothpaste, and shampoo.

One of her thousands of visits was described this way: First stop, Wing J2 in Division 4. As usual, it's slow going. She's constantly stopping to speak to guards, secretaries, administrators, and police officers, all part of her flock.

She greets them with a kiss, calls them by name, jokes, asks about their families, and shares the contents of a white plastic sack that appears to contain an inexhaustible supply of peanut brittle and pound cake.

At her destination, the guard unlocks the door and she's engulfed by young men in tan trousers and matching short-sleeved shirts.

"God bless you, Mother York," an inmate shouts.

"We love you Mother York," says another. This chorus will be repeated all afternoon. She teases, cajoles, banters. She scolds some who have caused problems for the guards. "I know it can be hard doing time, but you've got to obey authority."

The inmates are polite, behaved children seeking approval from a parent. There's no profanity, no off-color comments. She commands an inmate who has lied to make a public apology. He does.

"The Bible says if you will confess your sins, God will show you mercy," she says. "Salvation is free. You weren't arrested. You were rescued. God pulled you out of the street and saved your life bringing you here. Do you want to end up dying in the penitentiary? The Lord didn't make you to be inmates; He made you to be the masters of the universe. Let's pray. On your knees."

Everyone kneels, heads bowed. Mother York lifts an impassioned intercession that surely moves the heart of God.

Dressed in a floor-length black cape, clerical collar, and a black cassock touching her shiny, black, low-heeled shoes, she moves in quiet authority. She is crowned by a black cap

with a white border. A silver cross on a silver chain hangs around her neck. In Roman Catholic Chicago, her garb alone carries weight with the Irish guardians of the penal system. Her dark face makes her sunny smile all the brighter.

"She's the best thing we have here," says Demetrius, charged with armed robbery. "She's a great spiritual leader. She's always advising people to seek God. She's a mother for those who don't have a mother."

"She's the only person who can go anywhere in this building during a riot," says a division superintendent. "She has that much respect and credibility."

"She's a nurturer, a disciplinarian, a friend," says Rasheed, the jail's Muslim chaplain who met her while an inmate. I was addicted to drugs and charged with burglary when she showed me love. She brings special food for Muslim inmates."

While white churches fled Chicago by the hundreds, before anybody knew Chuck Colson, Mother York was cutting a swath for God in one of the most hopeless crevices in the Midwest.

"We never had any money," says her son. "Mother told us the Lord would provide and somehow He always did." At Christmas, she would provide a feast for inmates and jail personnel. One year they served 6,490 meals over seven days.

"When people are hurting," she said, "they're open to God. The Bible says to minister to those who are sick and in prison. These people are sin sick."

Mother York was a fire-and-brimstone Baptist, full of the love of God, the presence of Jesus, and the Spirit's power.

She is a shining testament to the impact of one available life.

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