

# The Compass

## Official Newspaper of the Catholic Diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin

### Volunteer helps ex-inmates make successful transition back to society

APPLETON — Lyle Verstegen enjoys casually talking with people about their faith.

"I'm big on asking 'Where do you go to church?'" he said. "I try to get that in the conversation some place."

His interest in the spiritual lives of those he meets serves him well as a volunteer for Community Circles of Support. Circles are groups of volunteers who meet with men and women who were recently incarcerated to assist them in making a successful transition to the community. The program, which originated in Ohio, is supported locally by Goodwill Industries. Circles of Support groups are serving in the Fox Valley, Green Bay and Oshkosh. Verstegen said the program is growing, as circles are being formed in Fond du Lac and there has been interest in Manitowoc and other nearby communities. In Wisconsin, more than 95 percent of current inmates will return to the community, but 50 percent will end up back in prison.

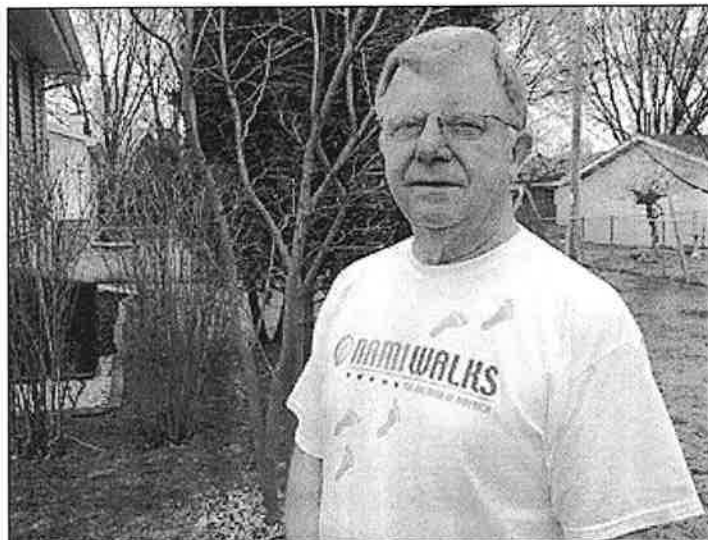
"If somebody hooks up with us and we can cut that in half, we are successful," said Verstegen.

Lyle Verstegen (Jeff Kurowski | For The Compass)

Individuals being released from prison or jail participate in Circles of Support on their own

free will and sign an agreement outlining their responsibilities and what the group offers. The volunteers do not provide financial support.

"We tell them, 'We don't have any resources, but we can connect you once in awhile,'" said Verstegen. "We do a lot of connecting. They may need a place to live. A job is a big deal and right now that's tough. A lot of people are looking for jobs and they have to say that they had a felony, which can be like saying 'please don't hire me.'"



Verstegen, a Kimberly native, moved to Appleton 15 years ago after 30 years in Mason City, Iowa. He was introduced to Circles of Support through his involvement in ESTHER, a faith-based social justice organization in the Fox Valley. Verstegen, who has three sons and is a grandfather, has served as volunteer with the program for three years. He and his wife, Jackie, are active at St. Bernard Parish in Appleton. He is also involved in Cursillo and has made mission trips to Honduras and Mexico, where he assists the faith communities served by Fr. John Reuter.

Community Circles of Support has enhanced his faith, said Verstegen, who is retired.

"I love it," he said. "It's really good. My reward is seeing somebody smile, seeing them get emotional when they talk about their life. It's a blessing."

Circles try to meet once a week, if possible. Verstegen estimates that the regional program has 25 volunteers, but more are needed.

"These guys are showing up so fast," he said. "If you have three or four volunteers and eight or nine participants that's getting up there. More than that and everyone doesn't get to talk. They all need time to talk. They need to get their story out."

The program has been successful in connecting former inmates to resources, but at the heart of Circles is friendship, said Verstegen. He assists with intakes, serves at meetings, talks with one participant regularly by phone, has taken others to medical appointments and, if he finds out they're Catholic, invites them to Mass.

"I have two guys I've taken to church a number of times," he said. "That's kind of my payoff. One of the guys was sitting there in church and all of a sudden he got lost in prayer. Then he pulled out a dollar for the collection. I thought to myself, 'Wow, life is really good.'"

His volunteer experiences with Circles provide some interesting conversations, he added.

"I was taking a guy to the doctor," he said. "We were driving in Menasha, when he said, 'That place over there, I broke in there and took some stuff.' You don't hear that normally. It just popped out."

Some of the Circles of Support participants continue to struggle. A number have stayed at the Fox Valley Warming Shelter. Although the transition can be difficult, Verstegen said he sees a determination to change.

"Many of them tell you, 'I don't want to go back to my friends. I can't go back. I'm too old for that,'" he said. "It's hard to draw that line, but they know that it's the right thing to do."

Verstegen plans to continue to volunteer with Circles of Support as long as possible. The success stories motivate him. He points to a participant from Racine as an example.

"Everybody loved Joel," he said. "He had been locked up since he was like 8 years old. He had a lot of scars. He went to Florida to live with his mom. He met me at church one day. He told me, 'I knew you would be here.' Thankfully I was there that day. We sat together in church. He may have done some bad things in his life, but we all do bad things. We all need to be reconnected with God."

For information about Community Circles of Support, including volunteer opportunities, contact Danel Burchby, program coordinator, at (920) 968-6832 or (920) 731-6601, e-mail: [dburchby\\_gw@gwicc.org](mailto:dburchby_gw@gwicc.org) or visit [www.circles-of-support.org](http://www.circles-of-support.org).

#### **Your Catholic Neighbor**

**Name:** Lyle Verstegen

**Parish:** St. Bernard,  
Appleton

**Age:** 71

**Favorite saint:** Ignatius

**Words to live by:** "When you have an opportunity to help someone, you are blessed."