



The Rev. Tommie Johnson

Second Chances, One Move at a Time

FAITH, CHESS, AND COMMUNITY HELPS PEOPLE
REBUILD THEIR LIVES

THE REVEREND Tommie Johnson runs a ministry in places where most angels would fear to tread. He works with incarcerated juveniles and adults who need positive and productive engagement. His ministry is also a missing link for post-prison populations who desperately need guidance, mental health services, and resources—critical services in short supply.

Rev. Johnson believes that those who served their time deserve a second chance in life to become productive citizens. People in prison lose their freedom while paying their debt. Many are also abandoned by their families. They struggle to get past that one question about convictions when seeking employment. Rev. Johnson acknowledges that some of those in prison are not fit to return to society. But for those who made a mistake and paid their debt, this minister is a one-man army who fights for their shot at success.

NURSERY RHYME WISDOM

Ordained 24 years ago at St. Matthew Baptist Church in East St. Louis, Illinois, Rev. Johnson worked for a not-for-profit organization that provides health recovery management services for individuals with substance use and mental health disorders. This helped with the formation in 2003 of his “Outside The Walls Ministries” in Chicago.

Rev. Johnson recalls an English nursery rhyme as an allegory for people he serves. “There is hope for Humpty Dumpty, someone who made the bad decision to sit up on a wall knowing that a fall could ruin his life,” Johnson said. “You must ask yourself why someone would put his or her family, and themselves, through that. As the rhyme goes, all the king’s horses and all

the king’s men—meaning the people you align with—cannot put you back together. It’s up to you to find the right support.”

HOPE COMES FIRST

Prisons do not offer enough, if any, mental health or sand recovery services to address the root issues of those they house. Once someone leaves prison, “they must have hope before they will accept help” for issues such as drug addiction and gang affiliations. His ministry also helps with housing, transportation, mentoring, and hosts five social events each year that are successful in building community.

Members of Trinity UMC (Wilmette) the Barrington community have provided support for years. Salem and Barrington UMC members provide supplies and funds. Barrington chess families donate chess textbooks and game supplies. “We raised funds to start a chess club at St. Leonard’s Place donating chess textbooks, chess sets, and paying for snacks and a chess coach,” chess club advocate Dr. Kiran Frey said. “Rev. Johnson related his struggles to us and said that programs such as a chess club would help him achieve some of his goals of keeping the population he serves engaged and out of trouble.” A pilot research study is being conducted at this chess club to assess if it can help reduce recidivism.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

For a ministry built on a framework of walls, Rev. Johnson moves mountains without the help of any walls of his own. His wish list includes part-time paid staff; website help; building/office space for meetings, administration, parking, and storage; a large vehicle for transportation; and funding for everything from CTA bus passes to paying for food at ministry events. Rev. Johnson can be reached at bblest2@yahoo.com or call 773-454-1545. 

Dr. Kiran Frey



Photo: Linda M. Barrett

“I met Rev. Tommie Johnson 15 years ago with a group of other Barrington volunteers. We began hosting the Christmas lunch for ex-prisoners he serves. We were stunned by the glowing testimonials. He is magnetic, empathic, and uniquely combines charisma with action. I saw an opportunity for the youth social entrepreneurs I help to get involved and every year many of us have continued to stay engaged. This has been a great learning environment for all.” Visit: peterwulffcenter.org/initiatives/continuing-creative-endeavors-through-service-learning.