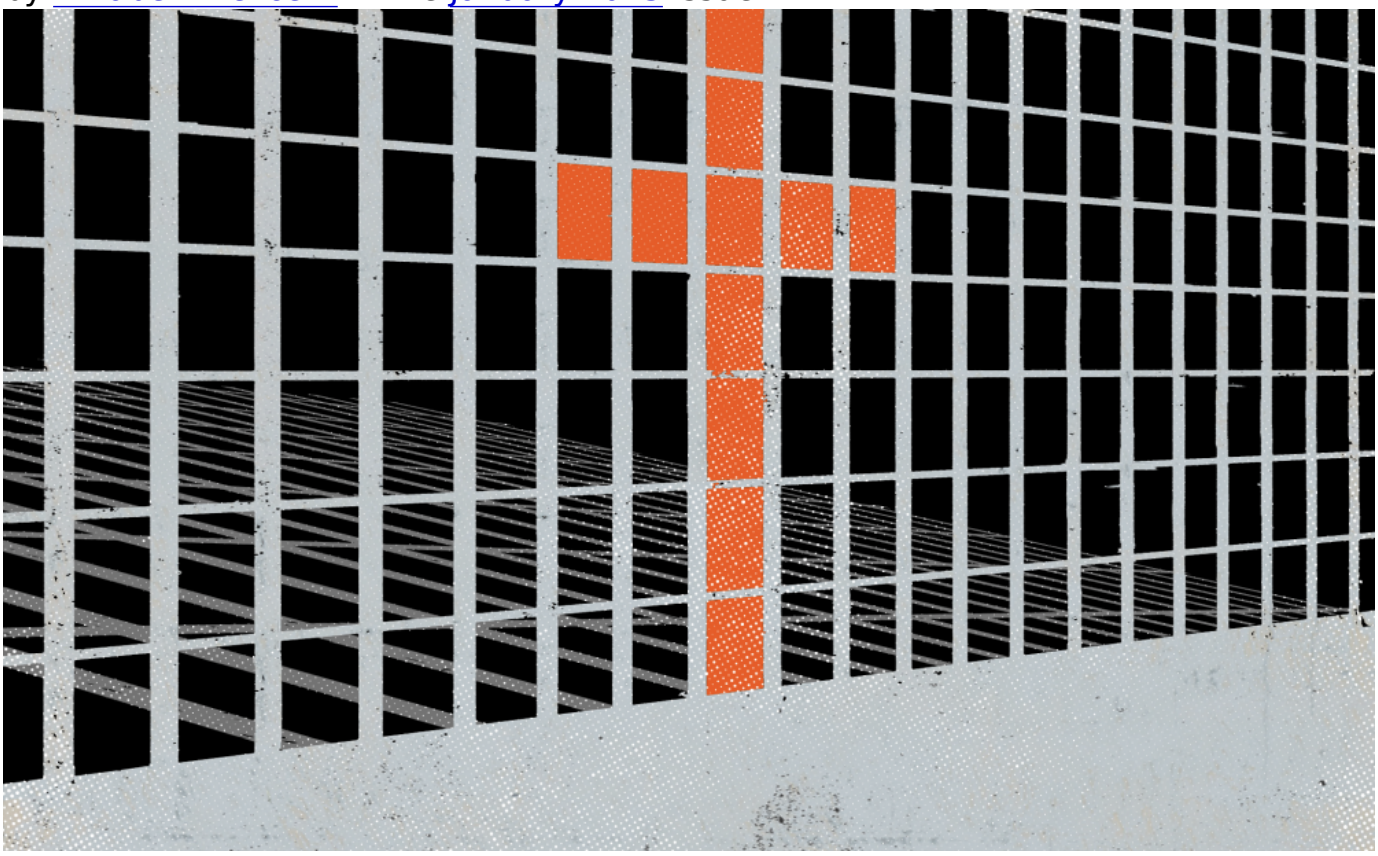
A very long discernment

Luke is in a maximum security prison. He wants to be an Episcopal priest.

by Elizabeth Felicetti in the January 2023 issue



Century illustration

Luke Matthews is the only aspirant to ministry I've met who got his tattoos in prison. Incarcerated for arson and second-degree murder, he has spent much of the last two decades trying to figure out whether and how an inmate can become ordained to the Episcopal priesthood. With good behavior, he still has about eight more years of his sentence to serve. (I've changed both his name and some details about his crimes.)

I first heard of Luke because he wrote a Lenten devotional popular among nonincarcerated Episcopalians. Helping him with his ordination process, I believed,

would help me reach more people in prison than I ever could by myself. I can preach to my congregation about how Moses committed murder, but for the incarcerated, that sermon would never have the same power coming from me as it would from someone who had actually committed murder.

I'd never been to a maximum-security men's prison before I met Luke. I knew that his nickname was "Bear" and expected him to be towering, glowering, and bespectacled. After journeying past razor wire and seven slow buzzing gates, I mistook the smiling, bearded thirty-something man who greeted me with a handshake for an inmate entrusted to walk me to the frightening offender.

"The issue for me is always what a proper greeting is," he later wrote. "Being in a men's prison I am particularly sensitive to how women must feel. Shaking hands feels odd, but safe."

I couldn't see Luke's tattoos under his loose-fitting blue uniform, but he told me they are all about his brother Andrew, whom he murdered, and his faith, what he believes. He stopped giving and receiving tattoos when he began seeking ordination, because tattooing in prison is against the rules. "It doesn't suit my ministry to be known to flout the rules," he says. "I can't lead and preach when my own life isn't above reproach. My ministry was more important than my hobbies, so I stopped."

At the time, Luke's low-paying prison job was in the chaplain's office, and he organized other ministries as a volunteer. For holidays like Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter, for example, he organized large meals for more than 80 inmates, a dozen of whom cooked or cleaned while others donated food from the commissary.

Luke also created a food pantry he calls his "soup ministry" by donating and encouraging donations of instant ramen–type soups. "Anyone, for any reason, no questions asked, can come and get a soup, each day, from our soup bag," he explained. "It's not much, but prison food sucks and nobody should go to bed hungry." Similarly, he is in charge of what he and others call a "benevolence bag" with hygiene supplies for those in need.

"Things in here grow wonderfully sometimes," he said. "They just need a seed to get started. That's my role: not to carry the burden for everyone, just to be the seed that evokes our best selves."

In that first visit, we decided that Luke would transfer his membership to St. David's, the suburban church where I serve as rector, as the first step in the ordination discernment process is to be a member of a local church. Our bishop decreed that Luke needed to undergo the same process as any other ministry hopeful, which entails significant work at the parish level before formal postulancy application. "Make sure you put skeptical people on his parish committee," my bishop further directed. "Not just 'listen listen love love' people."

Normally the process to apply for postulancy takes about six months, but it took two full years for Luke to jump through all of the hoops. After we finally applied, the diocese said they needed a couple more years to form a committee to study how to handle "nontraditional" aspirants like Luke. They eventually sent a small delegation of three priests and one psychologist to interview him.

"Every interaction with me requires some heavy lifting," Luke admitted. "It isn't easy to write, email, or talk on the phone. The work so many have done to visit . . . is nothing less than a very concrete expression of love—and a belief that forgiveness and redemption are, at least, a possibility. These brothers and sisters, clergy and lay, give me great hope."

The small group that went to see Luke was impressed by his work, but they had concerns after reading about his crimes. How he had planned to burn the family home and use the insurance money for college tuition. How he killed his brother before he set the fire.

Luke was 18 at the time but wasn't arrested for almost three years. His surviving victims, his parents, now support Luke's desire to become ordained.

Six months after the small group visited, the diocesan commission on ministry stopped his discernment process. He could apply again after being released, they said. Their stated reasons: the Department of Corrections would not acknowledge his ordination as long as he was incarcerated; they didn't know what he would be like when he got out; and they could not offer him the support that they would for any other aspirant, such as mentors, spiritual directors, and clergy colleagues.

We had known all of this before starting discernment, of course. I'm convinced Luke was turned away because he is marked by his crimes as clearly as he is marked by his tattoos. We can't see them when we visit him, but we know they are there.

After we met, Luke began a new prison job in the dog training program. Under the guidance of a prison therapist, inmate handlers prepare pets of staff members to become therapy dogs. I accompanied Luke and the other dog handlers to the prison hospital once. On the way we passed marigolds planted by other prisoners, which brought beauty to the bleak landscape. The dogs and their handlers had a similar effect on the open hospital room, which smelled of feces.

“Handling dogs offered me the chance to go almost anywhere in the institution on a regular basis, including the hospital and mental health units,” Luke told me. “Around the dogs, we treated each other more humanely, and on a more equal footing. A lot of conversations started about the dogs and then could cover any topic. I talked religion, science, politics, etc., all while helping someone pet a dog.”

The dog program helped him personally as well: “Kimber was . . . the ultimate stress reliever and guard dog. When we would relax between visits I used to sit in the grass and close my eyes. He would lie down beside me and rest his head on my leg. That was the closest I’ve come over these years to truly relaxing. The minute something happened I needed to pay attention to I would feel him perk up and start paying attention. But until then, when he was relaxed, I was relaxed. In prison you’re always a little stressed, always paying a little too much attention to everything going on around you. Even in your cell you know at any minute the doors could open and anything could happen.”

The dog program ended around the same time the diocese stopped Luke’s ordination process. He now works in the prison library. The pandemic interrupted his job and most activities in the prison, including church, so his presence has been especially important to other prisoners during this time, when the chaplain has not always been able to be there for the inmates in the way she was in the past. Luke still leads Bible studies and worship, but the pandemic has at times limited the scope of what he is able to do.

“What I can do is listen and occasionally talk,” he says. “I hug a lot. I pay attention. I pray with them and for them. Sometimes they need help writing a form or letter, sometimes they just need someone to tell them it’s going to be all right.”

Luke has not given up on ordination. I’ve asked Luke more than once why he wants to be ordained at all. The commission on ministry affirmed the work he is doing now, and our bishop licensed him as a lay preacher. So why the priesthood? The Book of

Common Prayer catechism says the ministry of a priest is to “represent Christ and his Church, particularly as pastor to the people; to share with the bishop in the overseeing of the Church; to proclaim the Gospel; to administer the sacraments; and to bless and declare pardon in the name of God.” Does ordination matter, given all that Luke is already doing?

Luke says it matters a lot. “I am convinced ordained ministry, in the Episcopal Church, is God’s calling upon my life,” he says. “To that end, I dedicate my life. Others have suggested pursuing ordination outside the Episcopal Church, and I can’t even imagine that. This is my family and my home.”

But equally important to him is the legitimacy that ordination adds to his ministry in a community where legitimacy matters. “With residents it matters, and with guards and staff it matters a million times more,” he says. Ordination wouldn’t change anything about his status as fellow prisoner, but it would change when he can work and be present to others. He believes that as an ordained priest, his words would carry more weight and perhaps be better received: “My situation in prison wouldn’t change one whit; but there is a spiritual power and authority that flows from God through God’s ordained ministers in a special way. That would matter to me in how I minister and love this community, and I believe it would matter to them.

“The real end goal of my life is simply to do good,” Luke concludes. “I’ve done evil and brought so much pain. Weighed in the balance, the totality of my life will always be negative. I only get into heaven by God’s grace and the skin of my fingernails . . . I live the best way I can, give back all I can, follow God with all I can. I grow into who I think I was always meant to be when I was ‘marked as one of Christ’s own forever.’ And then, at night in the dark, I sometimes wonder if it all matters.”

In the meantime, he doesn’t know what to do. So he does time.

* * * * * *

Jon Mathieu, the *Century*'s community engagement editor, engages Elizabeth Felicetti in conversation about her article.