By Tony DeGol
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Just hours before visiting the Federal Correctional Institution in Loretto earlier this month, Ron Stellabotte and Bonnie Pfeffer knew the reception they would receive.

“When we walk into that chapel, these men – about 15 – they’re going to come up, grab our hands, shake us, and say, ‘thank you for being here,’” predicted Stellabotte. “It’s really from the heart.”

As members of the ARISE Together in Christ diocesan team, Stellabotte and Pfeffer are bringing the spiritual renewal opportunity to prison ministry.

They know that everyone deserves to have an encounter with the Lord, even the people society tends to ignore.

“I think they have something to strive for,” remarked Pfeffer, a member of Saint Mark Parish in Altoona. “They want to turn their life around. They’ve made mistakes and they’re going to find Jesus. He will forgive them. He’ll be the love of their life. They just need to know that we are out there, we care for them, and we want to bring Christ to them.”

The first season of ARISE Together in Christ is up and running in most parishes throughout the diocese. The renewal initiative is also happening in Catholic schools, religious education programs, college campus ministry, and pastoral ministry.

And, yes, prison ministry.

That’s because we seek renewal throughout the entire diocese, emphasized Carmelite Community of the Word Sister Linda LaMagna, diocesan ARISE coordinator.

She said the ARISE prayer invites all of us to ARISE, and reminds that the Lord is doing something new in our lives and in our churches.

“That’s why we don’t want to limit it to people who may embrace it in our parishes, but we want it to spread out to anywhere people are gathering to worship or to experience Christ,” she stressed. “In those places, we want them to experience what is happening in the diocesan Church so we feel a unity and a oneness.”

Stellabotte, a member of Saint Michael the Archangel Parish in Hollidaysburg, has been active in prison ministry for about five years. He believes ARISE can change the faith life of men and women serving time for their crimes.

“What’s so beautiful about ARISE is that we are actually reading the Scriptures and saying ‘this is what it means to me – not anybody else – but to me, how I interpret that,’” he said. “And that is so beautiful because it really gives the people the opportunity to sit down and talk with Christ.”

Prisoners will see what God has to offer, added Pfeffer, who has been engaged in prison ministry for about a year.

“I know they look at us as an example of how we love Christ, and that we’re willing to give our time for them, and they’re willing to share their encounters with us,” she commented.

Stellabotte sees this effort in terms of multi-level marketing.

“One person gets another person, those two get two,” he said. “We’re hoping our 15 get 15. We’ll have 30, then we’ll have 60.”

ARISE is a non-threatening opportunity for those who have been away from their Catholic faith to come home, Stellabotte reflected.

As he and Pfeffer continue their great work, they pray for success and realize that they are at the right place at the right time.

“I think God has chosen us to spread His word,” concluded Pfeffer. “He puts us where He wants us to be. He wants us to bring others to Him.”

*Sister Linda LaMagna, CCW, diocesan coordinator for ARISE Together in Christ, is offering weekly reflections for ARISE throughout the season on Proclaim! The show airs every Sunday at 10:30 a.m. on WATM ABC 23. The reflections are also on the diocesan website and Facebook page.*