

Equal opportunity needed

Ex-offenders form "self-help" groups

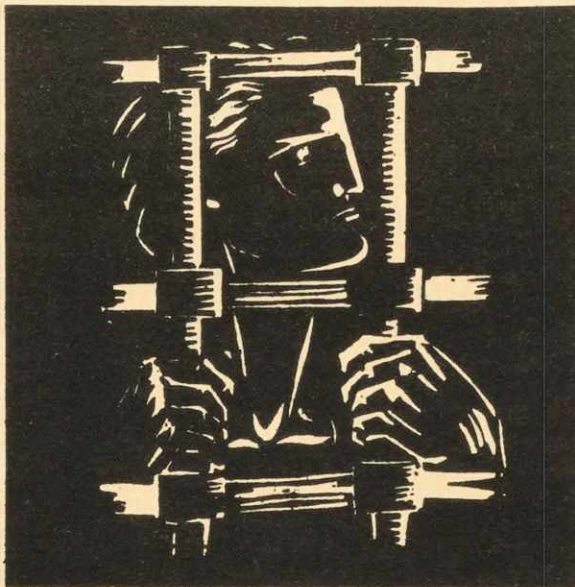
by Marg Bezanson

The road from the prison cell is not necessarily a circuitous one. Although it is often claimed that it is impossible to rehabilitate most criminals, this is being disproven by such groups as: the recently formed Coalition for Supportive Services and A.F.T.E.R. (Association for Total and Effective Rehabilitation) in Halifax.

Both groups are associated with the Coalition for Development which is funded by the Anglican, United, and Roman Catholic Churches and consists of several other organizations such as: Halifax-Dartmouth Council of Churches; a representative from the Human Rights Commission; MOVE; Catholic Social Services Commission; Anglican Diocese of Nova Scotia; Lutheran Churches of Halifax-Dartmouth; Halifax Presbytery United Church of Canada; Tel-Ed Video Services; Upper Hammonds Plains Community Development Association; Halifax-Dartmouth Trades and Labour Council; Halifax Neighbourhood Centre; Nova Scotia Legal Aid; A.F.T.E.R. and a representative of the Halifax Regional Welfare Department.

The Coalition of Supportive Services is funded by an LIP (Local Initiatives Program) grant. Its objective is to employ ex-offenders in such jobs as repairing Church halls and other church properties which have been opened to citizens groups and in assisting elderly pensioners. The group is working at St. Mark's Anglican Church on Gottingen St. and is presently doing repairs and painting on that church.

Also through the use of two outreach persons the group is trying to "animate Church groups into social



learn to open doors for himself again."

The ex-offender has to learn not only to work back into the 8-hour work day but also to take personal initiative to carry out everyday activities. There are also various social problems that the ex-inmate comes in contact with. It is difficult to communicate with a society he has been completely cut off from for a long period of time.

An attempt is made to overcome these problems by holding group therapy sessions regularly. Also the fact that each person is given an opportunity to "get back into the rat-race" at his own rate helps.

These problems are being overcome very effectively by the thirteen men presently working with the CSS Project. "The men use their own initiative to go to work" said David French, co-ordinator for CSS, "If a guy tips off, he is jogged by some of the others but there have been no real problems in this way."

Painting and repair work is being done on St. Mark's Church, furniture is being repaired and clothes and quilts are being made for senior citizens on pensions.

Due to the fact that the group is funded by an LIP grant the number of people hired and the length of employment is limited. However, if the program succeeds, consideration will be given to extension when the grant terminates. "One hundred men could be employed in these types of jobs in this area," commented Rev. Parsons.

The group works in close conjunction with A.F.T.E.R. This group was set up last May by a group of concerned ex-inmates. They are currently waiting for a reply to an application for an LIP grant which was sponsored by Mayor Walter Fitzgerald, the Most Rev. William Davis, Chief Justice Gordon Cowan.

The statement of purpose of A.F.T.E.R. is: "By our association's definition, 're-integration' implies not only a change in an individual, but also a more important reformation of the social institutions in our society which mitigate against 'effective' rehabilitation. To effect change at both levels we have formed an association based on co-operation, self-help and premised on our first-hand experience as ex-

offenders."

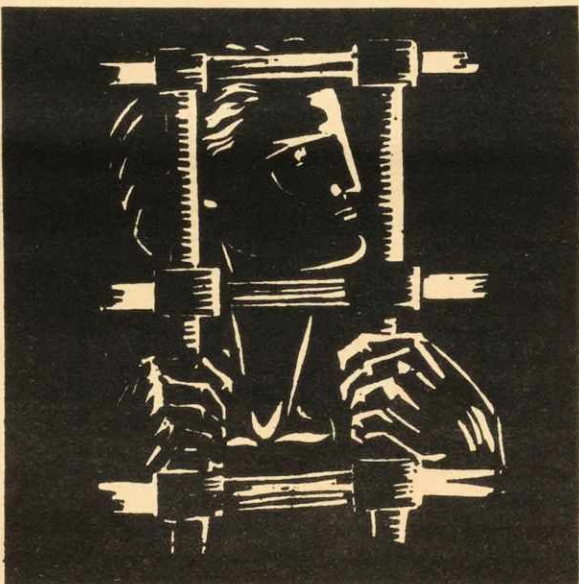
Some areas which A.F.T.E.R. is examining are: (a) co-operative service station or other business; (b) co-operative housing; (c) half-way houses and community release centres; (d) sheltered workshops in upholstery, carpentry, etc.; (e) submission of briefs to government task forces and similar commissions on release and after-care procedures, etc.; (f) to examine and offer criticism on current employment practices including bonding; (g) to push for financial assistance for ex-inmates immediately upon release; (h) to promote the rights of ex-inmates in legal matters and welfare assistance; (i) to provide a position social atmosphere to ex-offenders; (j) to promote prisoners' rights; (k) to develop effective presentation programs within other local communities.

The executive officers of AFTER are Gerry Smith (President), Bob Moran (Vice-President) and Irvine Kamsvaag (Secretary).

Rev. Parsons and Marty Martel (who works with AFTER in conjunction with Coalition for Development) both emphasized the tremendous support received from the Halifax City Council. General approval was given to the suggestion to donate Brunswick House on Brunswick Street to the group at a recent Council meeting. "Questions for information were asked but there was not a single negative vote," said Rev. Parsons.

The house is to be used for work shops as well as accommodation for those who have no homes to go to.

Public response has also been extremely favourable according to Martel. Much help has come from such



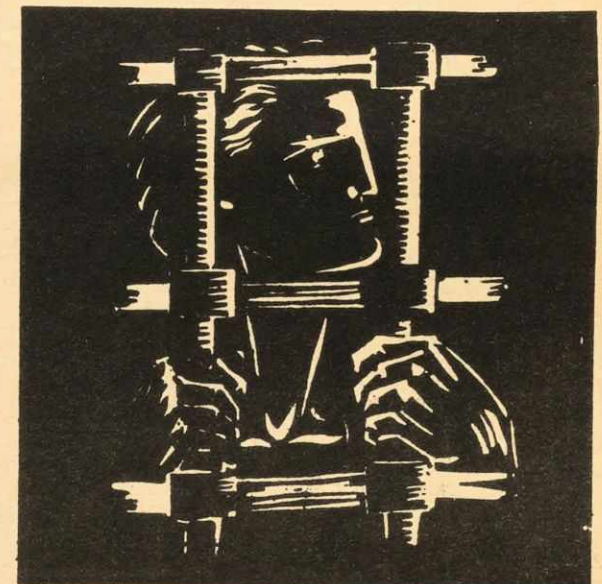
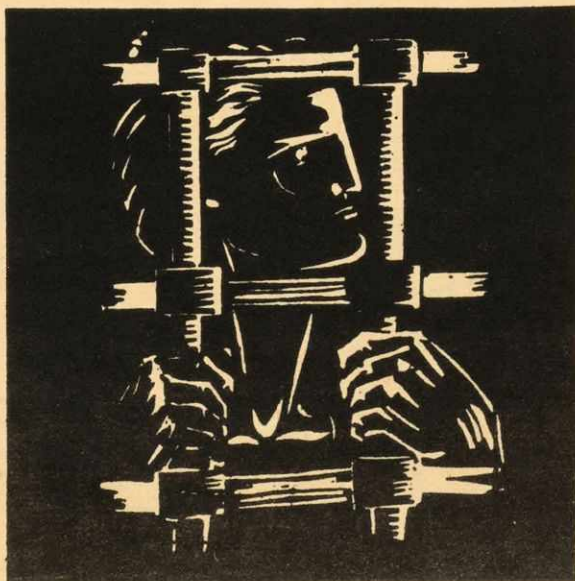
involvement" by the use of audio-visual documentation and brochures. These persons also assist in seeking permanent employment for ex-offenders. Two paralegal persons work with the ex-offenders to train them in a general law degree. They also assist the audio-visual personnel in making documentaries to inform and educate the public, encouraging positive attitudes toward penal reform.

There is a great need for such an organization as the recidivist rate (percentage of men who return to prison) is extremely high under the usual circumstances. Rev. James G. Jones who established the first half-way house in North America in Chicago in 1954, found that the recidivist rate of the ex-offenders who passed through his house dropped from 79 percent to 25 percent.

Similar results have been found due to half-way houses in Canada. The project was initiated in Canada by an Anglican priest, the Rev. T.N. Libby, in 1962. These houses, which are known as St. Leonard Houses, have spread to many cities across Canada including Halifax.

The Coalition for Supportive Services and A.F.T.E.R. differ somewhat from the St. Leonard Society. They are operated by ex-offenders themselves. The participants are under no outside supervision and must use their own initiative to work.

Ron Parsons, who is the co-ordinator for Coalition for Development and is working unofficially with the Coalition for Supportive Services (CSS) said the main problem faced by the ex-offender when entering society is that "he no longer has a keeper. He must



organizations as the Social Planning Department, the City Real Estate Department, and the Dalhousie and Nova Scotia Legal Aid, as well as countless others. The Board of Trade has shown considerable interest in giving interim and permanent employment to ex-offenders.

Similar groups exist in other parts of Canada. For example ex-offenders in Vancouver run a line of gas stations co-operatively.

The chance of success for these groups looks very good if one can judge from the past success of similar groups and the fact the present organization of CSS and AFTER seems superior to past groups. The argument that the average criminal is impossible to rehabilitate is difficult to substantiate when one looks at the results of such groups' effort. However, groups such as AFTER and CSS will give ex-offenders a proper chance to prove or disprove all fears of this nature.

St. Mark's is exceptional in its program of community oriented organizations. Besides opening its doors to ex-offenders for their projects, the church is used by two youth groups, a day-care centre, and a Community Centre is situated in the Church Hall.

However, Rev. Parsons said, "We are just scratching the surface." There is much that could be done with the immense amount of church space that exists in this city. Being tax-free, the churches are ideal locations for non-profit community groups.

Hopefully the example of St. Mark's will embarrass other churches into using their valuable space in a similar worthwhile manner.