Gerry Ayotte, who has just retired after a decade as Regional Chaplain for Federal Correctional Institutions, says he has been privileged to witness the positive impact of efforts made by prison chaplains and volunteer visitors to bring God’s love to the incarcerated.

“Chaplains and volunteers can and, in fact, do, change lives behind bars in the most miraculous ways,” Ayotte told The B.C. Catholic.

During his tenure with Canadian Federal Correctional Services and also with Vancouver Archdiocesan Catholic Charities Justice Services, Ayotte was grateful for “always receiving far more kindness and encouragement from virtually everyone I’ve worked with than I could ever have deserved ... parole officers, administrative staff, our trades people, psychologists, nurses, managers, social workers.... Parole Board members and staff have demonstrated for me the truth that relationships must be grounded in mutual respect and recognition of the inherent dignity of every person.”

Ayotte was honoured by his Corrections Canada colleagues and fellow chaplains at a retirement celebration in Abbotsford on April 22.

Monsignor Mark Hagemoen, Episcopal Vicar for Pastoral Services and Archbishop Raymond Roussin’s representative to Correctional Institutions, brought greetings from the archbishop while Anne Kelly, Deputy Commissioner for Correctional Institutions Pacific Region, thanked Ayotte for his years of service.

“When it comes to working with others, both as a chaplain and as a counsellor,” said Kelly, “Gerry showed an abundance of personal and professional gifts. He is an excellent listener, a compassionate adviser, and a dedicated advocate; someone who walks his talk. Because of his influence both inside and outside, CSC is a better organization.”

Working with chaplains of every tradition along with native elders, Ayotte said, helped make his decade of service memorable, and he was grateful to be blessed by colleagues who demonstrated “the gift of a view of the sacred, of the divine, and of this beautiful, created world in which we share life.”
The words of Pope John XXIII, “Let us be concerned with seeking that which unites rather than that which divides us,” said Ayotte, remained a significant cornerstone and source of strength in prison work.

“My Catholic bishops, three of them over the years, gave me unconditional support and pastoral care. Now I will be looking to Archbishop Raymond Roussin for where I might be called to serve on the condition that I won’t be required to attend meetings or do budgets!” he told his audience with a grin.

Born in 1948 in Swan River, Man., Ayotte moved to Winnipeg, where he attended St. Ignatius of Loyola Elementary School. He continued studying under the Jesuits at St. Paul’s Secondary and went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree from St. Paul’s College at the University of Manitoba and an MA in Counselling Psychology at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash. He was granted a Master of Theological Studies degree from the University of Seattle.

Ayotte began working for the Vancouver Archdiocese in 1986, when the late Archbishop James Carney asked him and fellow counsellor John Zanatta to carry out the vision for the newly-established Catholic Charities Justice Services.

Zanatta and Ayotte worked under contractual agreements with Correctional Services of Canada for a decade before he was appointed Catholic chaplain at Kent Maximum Security Institution in Agassiz. He left after five years to become Regional Chaplain, and has now been succeeded in that position by Dwight Cuff.

Justice Services, which began under Archbishop Carney, has evolved into chaplaincies in eight of the nine federal institutions in the archdiocese. Father Maximos Basha, OSBC, is the chaplain at the Surrey Pre-Trial Services Centre, which is under provincial jurisdiction.

The priests, religious, and laity who work as chaplains, said Ayotte, benefit from a wonderful new source of compassionate strength provided by the growing prison volunteer force under Archdiocesan Catholic Charities Justice Services co-ordinator Maureen Donegan and volunteer co-ordinator Blair Pera.

Donegan, who joined CCJS in 2002 after two years with Covenant House Faith Communities in Vancouver, began visiting parishes four years ago to speak about the rewards associated with prison volunteering. This outreach, said Ayotte, is now bearing fruit.

Volunteers, Donegan told The B.C. Catholic, attend an information evening and go through an intake interview. If accepted, they take part in the Correctional Services of Canada prison volunteer training.

CCJS has introduced Catholic Charity Community Groups, a program carried out by Catholic volunteers for prisoners at high risk to re-offend.
Another volunteer program, Circle of Support and Accountability (COSA), said Ayotte, works with high-risk inmates through contracts with the chaplaincy program of Correctional Services.

“The COSA program, because it holds parolees accountable, also keeps our communities safer,” he explained.

“Prisoners not eligible for parole or a conditional release who are detained right to the end of their sentence usually find after parole that their neighbours have been notified of their presence. They feel targetted and frustrated, and some intentionally ‘disappear’ from the scene. However, if a parolee is already linked to a COSA volunteer, they have a friend to call on.”

In this way, Ayotte explained, COSA keeps parolees visible and accountable, which greatly reduces their chances of re-offending.

Prisoners sign a covenant with their COSA volunteer, promising to be honest about how they are feeling about what is happening in their life.

“Maureen and her volunteers build healthy relationships with prisoners before and after they are released,” said Ayotte. “Many parolees have publicly acknowledged that, if it weren’t for their Circle of Support, they would definitely have re-offended.”

Restorative Justice, said Ayotte, is another recent concept which is making a big difference in the Canadian prison system. The goal of building relationships between people, he said, “changes lives.

“It’s now in the Correctional Services mission statement, and when it has lived out as a guiding vision, has had very positive results,” said Ayotte.

“The Correctional Services Community Justice Initiatives program helps with healing through offender-victim mediation carried out in a very structured, purposeful way. If offenders express remorse and grief at what they have done, it can be effective even decades after a crime has been committed. Individuals and families can be restored to emotional and physical health. There is great freedom in forgiving someone and in being forgiven. Many perpetrators never offend again.”

Ayotte would like to see much more help for the mentally ill within the prison system and in society.

“The tremendous reduction in resources for this population is heart-breaking for them, their families, and the victims they target.”
It doesn’t take very long to realize, said Ayotte, that many, if not most, people who commit crimes come from backgrounds filled with violence and poverty.

While holding them accountable for their choices and actions, he added, “We also realize there are usually societal and systemic reasons behind many dysfunctional behaviours.”

It is natural to recoil from horrific crime stories, said Ayotte, “but, as Christians, we know that revenge can never be the solution. ‘G.K. Chesterton wrote, ‘Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair.’ Love is a word which we might hesitate to use in the workplace, especially within the prison system, but it’s the essence of what it means to be fully human and fully alive.”

Jesus was very clear in Matthew 25:36: “I was in prison and you visited Me,” said Ayotte, that “He expected Christians to befriend those in prison.

“I am grateful to God for allowing me to spend so many years of my working life closely associated with Correctional Institutions chaplaincies.”