

**TIME
WELL
SPENT**

**A NEW THOUGHT
ABOUT PRISON
MINISTRY**

Rev. Dr. Anna Price, Ph.D.

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*“Remember those who are in prison,
as though you were in prison with them...”*

— Hebrews 13:3

FOREWORD

After fifteen years working in prison ministry through my church, the opportunity to work as an employed Florida Department of Corrections prison Chaplain presented itself. I eagerly pursued and accepted the position when it was offered. One of the first things my supervising Chaplain told me during my training was “it is different working on the inside looking out, than on the outside looking in.” In other words, employed Chaplains have a different perspective from those who conduct volunteer church services on a weekly or monthly basis.

Of the many lessons that I learned during the 18 months I served in this capacity, two made a lasting impression in my mind and greatly influenced my thinking. First, many churches (primarily Christian) have answered the “call” to prison ministry and are sincere in their efforts to help people in prison stay out after they are released. Second, it is crucial for prison Chaplains to be open and provide an opportunity for religious traditions

other than their own to be a part of the spiritual development of inmates and other aspects of re-entry programming.

Generally, the model of prison ministries involves conducting a religious service on a scheduled (weekly/monthly) basis. The schedule is developed and monitored by the Chaplain at the facility. The message is basically the same with Christian churches: accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. The primary objective of these ministries is stated in the mission of the Prison Fellowship Ministry 2005 – 2006 Annual Report.

To seek:

- The transformation of prisoners and their reconciliation to God, family, and community through the power and truth of Jesus Christ; and
- The transformation of believers as they apply biblical thinking to all of life, enabling them to transform their communities through the grace and truth of Jesus Christ.

Based on a review of attendance records at four facilities, those men and women who attend these services attend the services that are conducted by groups with which they identify themselves. Also, only about 20% of those who identify with a denomination attend services offered by that denomination. (South Florida Reception Center/

three Work Release Centers in Miami and Broward Counties.)

According to a 2008 report by the Pew Center, “The United States incarcerates more people than any country in the world, including the far more populous nation of China.” This same report states that 2,319,258 are in prison or jail: 1,596,127 in state and federal prison custody and 723,131 in local jails. It concludes that this is a result of steady expansion that has characterized the U.S. penal system for more than 50 years.¹

The philosophy that supported the establishment and funding of a prison system of incarcerating people who violate laws has a threefold purpose:

1. Protect the broader community.
2. Punish the violators.
3. Rehabilitate people: to change them so that they can live in harmony with others.

The first two purposes are fulfilled by the very nature of incarceration. The third purpose was initially sought through giving people religious education. As the separation of church and state has become clearly defined, public funding for institutionalized programs designed to achieve this purpose has decreased significantly and in some cases eliminated (especially those related to religion).

Traditional churches – primarily Christian –

¹ The Pew Center on the States, Public Performance Project, 2008, Pew Foundation, pg.5.

still have a significant presence in prisons and jails, primarily through the volunteer efforts of prison ministries sponsored by individual churches.

Attendance at religious services has been shown to positively affect the adjustment of men and women to the prison experience. A follow-up of a chaplaincy study conducted by the Florida Department of Corrections also shows an inverse relationship to participation in chaplaincy programs and the incidence of disciplinary reports. Still, more than 50% of released offenders are back in prison within three years.² The increase in the number of people in prison in the United States is occurring at the same time that prison ministries are proliferating and efforts are intensifying. Yet, there is still no evidence that participation in religious services effects recidivism – the rate at which people return to prison after being released.

If the recidivism rate is an indication of success, participation in chaplaincy programs is not sufficient to keep men/women from returning to prison. Presented in this book is the proposition that there needs to be an expanded viewpoint about prison ministry leading to an expansion of what prison ministries offer. This is based on the premise that it is possible for people to be empowered to transform their lives by the renewing of their minds, and maintain that renewal through the provision of support systems outside prisons.

² The Pew Center on the States, Public Performance Project, 2008, Pew Foundation.

I now recognize that my prison Chaplain experience was not to have a new career, but to gain experience and perspective that can enhance the efforts of the religious community to rehabilitate those souls that cry out for help from the prisons. The incarceration experience can be “Time Well Spent” for men and women if they use it to change and not return to prison. My time inside will be “Time Well Spent” if this book serves to broaden the perspective of churches regarding their ministries in prisons and develop an inclusive collaborative approach to lift up and empower people with skills to assist them in living healthy, happy and productive lives.



INTRODUCTION

Religion, primarily Christianity, has had a presence in prisons since the early 18th century. Even so, the problems of crime and justice continue to be the focus of this nation. Fundamentalist Christian churches are, and have been, addressing this social problem in the United States for years and have established ministries in prisons throughout the nation.³

Most of the prison programs are evangelical. They meet the needs of guilt. They say, 'Jesus can save me.' Evangelical faiths offer unconditional acceptance.⁴ The message espoused by this group is that the only requirement for redemption is accepting Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior in order to go to heaven when they die. The measure that these churches use to determine the number of people who have accepted this message is the number of people who answer the altar call

3 Craig, R.L. & Rausch, D.A. (1994), *A Historical, Philosophical, and Pragmatic Approach to Penology*. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press.

4 Clear, et. Al. pg. 59, *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, Vol. 16 No. 1, February 2000 53-74.

at their services and are baptized. The effect of this acceptance on the reduction of the rate that they return to prison is not measured. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, it is estimated that two-thirds of felony prisoners reoffend within with three years of release.⁵

This book acknowledges the need for prison ministries to support the spiritual development of inmates. However, it advocates a secondary emphasis that focuses on the development of employability skills and transitional support that will help them to provide for themselves and their families. Empowerment through the transformation of character and the provision of support services is what reduces the recidivism rate of inmates. This book is divided into sections and uses case studies to support the need for “A New Thought About Prison Ministry.”

- Chapter 1: A Brief Review of the Historical Involvement of Religion in Prisons
- Chapter 2: The Purposes of Incarceration; Focusing on Rehabilitation
- Chapter 3: Two model programs Designed to Reduce Recidivism: Transcendental Meditation and Prison Fellowship
- Chapter 4: Two Model Programs
- Chapter 5: New Approaches
- Chapter 6: What Prison Ministries Can Offer
- Chapter 7: Conclusion

5 Smarto, Don (1993), *Setting the Captives Free*, Michigan, Baker Book House.

CHAPTER ONE

RELIGION AND PRISONS

In a 1777 report titled “The State of the Prisons in England and Wales, with Preliminary Observations, and an Account of some Prisons,”⁶ John Howard described the conditions of prisons during his time as: Places where prisoners 1) lacked water, air, sewage disposal; 2) places of torture; and 3) crowded with wives and children of debtors.

He did not consider these conditions to be conducive to his view of the purpose of the penitentiary. Described by Craig as a “man of deep Christian piety,” Howard viewed the penitentiary as an institution to separate prisoners from society in order that they have an opportunity to reflect on what they had done, repent and be reformed.

Included in his recommendations to the magistrates of the British Parliament was that they select a Chaplain to be assigned to each jail.

⁶ Craig, R.L. & Rausch, D.A. (1994), *A Historical, Philosophical, and Pragmatic Approach to Penology*. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press.

Specifically regarding the Chaplain, Howard recommended that the Chaplain be a Christian who will counsel the prisoners as well as officiate services.

“In colonial America, biblical precepts provided the justification for punishment and, at times, a guideline for its severity. Hence, in Massachusetts, the maximum number of whippings was set at 40, as indicated by Old Testament scripture. Religion’s influence in punishment remained apparent in the 19th century with the development of the penitentiary.⁷ Time spent in labor and reflection was to equip the offender with a spiritual coat or armor, capable of deflecting the most virulent of moral diseases.”⁸

Influenced by the Howard report, religious groups in the United States became a part of the evolution of prisons in the United States from that characterized above to more humane institutions. Most notable among these groups were the Quakers.⁹ The pioneer institution in the United States that would fit the category of a “correctional institution” is the Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia established by the Quakers in 1787 (Church of Christ Prison Ministry). A preacher named William Rogers began teaching the Bible there in that year. This component of the prison was believed to be the best way to correct the inmates of their erring ways. Prisons in

7 Ignatieff, Machael, 1978, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850*, New York, Pantheo.

8 Clear, et. Al. pg. 59, *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, Vol. 16 No. 1, February 2000, pg. 54.

9 Craig, R.L. & Rausch, D.A. (1994), *A Historical, Philosophical, and Pragmatic Approach to Penology*. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press., pg. 55.

the United States are a part of what is called the “correctional system.” The philosophy that supports a system of incarcerating people who violate laws is threefold. First, it is designed to protect the broader community. Second, it punishes the violators. Third, it is designed to rehabilitate people: reshape their characters enabling them to live in harmony with others. The first two purposes are fulfilled by the very nature of incarceration. The third purpose is to transform – change form – or reshape the character of those who have violated the civil laws of the land. Historically, transformation of character, changing behavior, is associated with a religious conversion – even in prison. The separation of violators of the law from others ultimately has as its purpose to prepare them to function in society without repeating these violations.

The prison’s founders called their invention a ‘penitentiary,’ a label that embodied their optimism that this carefully planned social institution had the power to reform the most wicked spirit¹⁰ Even the term “penitentiary” is reflective of the philosophy that places of incarceration are intended for people to repent and be reformed to the extent that they would not repeat their offences. Ultimately, this reformation is one of reshaping character.

According to a 2008 report by the Pew Center, “The United States incarcerates more people than any country in the world, including the far more populous

10 Rothman, 1971, cited in Goodstein, L. & MacKenzie (eds)(1989), *The American Prison, Issues in Research and Policy*, New York: Plenum Press..

nation of China.” This same report states that 2,319,258 are in prison or jail: 1,596,127 in state and federal prison custody and 723,131 in local jails.

It concludes that this is a result of a steady expansion that has characterized the U.S. penal system for more than 50 years.¹¹ Although other religions are currently authorized to have ministries in the prison, Christian churches make up the vast majority of religions represented and make up the entirety of members in the “International Network of Prison Ministries.”¹² This is understandable, as working in prisons is believed to be a part of their fulfillment of the “Great Commission” of Jesus to his disciples cited in Matthew 28:19-20 and specifically the admonition of the Apostle Paul in Hebrews 13:3. As written in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible these scriptures read as follows:

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and of
the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them
to obey everything that I have commanded you.
And remember, I am with you always, to the end
of the age.*

—Matthew 28:19-20

11 The Pew Center on the States, Public Performance Project, 2008, pg. 5.

12 International Prison Ministry (July 2000), Church prison ministries members of international network of prison ministries, Retrieved October 2, 2000 from <http://prisonministry.net/directory/categories/epminist/index.htm>.

Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

—Hebrews 13:3

A Reflection - Case H

H was an inmate who was serving his second term in prison. His crime was aggravated battery coupled with aggravated battery on an elderly person. H was an alcoholic, and when he drank he fought. According to H, he had been committing crimes since he was a kid stealing from stores. H liked to talk to me but he didn't attend any religious services. When I got an Alcoholics Anonymous program to conduct a weekly meeting in the facility, I encouraged H to attend. His response to my initiative was, "Every time I go to an AA meeting it makes me want to drink."

A significant number of men at the facility where H resided fit the profile — as defined by the Department of Corrections — of "one who needed substance abuse counseling." However, no funded program was provided. Few if any of the men went to the AA meetings conducted by volunteers.

H had limited reading skills and no high school diploma. However, he characterized himself as a general handyman. His mother lived in Arizona and he was in regular contact with her. However, his family support system was minimal and his primary concern was where he was going to live when he was released. H never attended religious services offered

at the facility and had great disdain for many of the men who did because their actions outside of the service was anything but religious. I helped H get into the transitional facility of his choice. However, when official acceptance came he would have been required to stay two weeks after his release date. He couldn't wait and went to a facility that he called "a government sponsored crack house."

After his release he contacted me on two occasions. He wrote me a letter and called me later. During the phone call I asked he how he was doing. He told me that he had fallen off the wagon (had a drink) a few times but that he was okay. He told me that one of the residents at his placement stole and sold his tools and that he beat him up. The man called the Department of Corrections and reported the incident. I asked him if he was going to turn himself in. H responded, "No, let them catch me."

H attended a Better Living Class, "As a Man Thinketh" four or five times. He understood the concept of changing his thinking in order to change his experience. I believe that he really wanted to change. I know he did not want to go back to prison. However, he had no place to go that would support his transitioning.

"Each person must discover the method by which he is drawn into this union with the perfect. It is interesting to note that he who comes to it through what might be called a nonreligious train of thought usually progresses through this to a very acceptable

spiritual concept. He is led to God through a sequence of thought that fits his particular type of mind, education, and background. Many roads lead to the City of God. The particular road is not important, the destination is all."¹³ ".....it is not what life does to us, but the way we react, that matters."¹⁴

Transformation of character happens on the inside of a person when the thinking has changed from being a victim of all outside conditions to be an over-comer; persevering when everything seems like it is going against them. This comes when a person has attained a new attitude – a new mental position – that allows him/her to perceive experiences differently which results in new responses. The question is, "Can this –does this–transformation happen in prison?"

13 Bailes, Frederick (1971), *Your Mind Can Heal You*, California: DeVorss & Co., Inc., pg. 40.

14 Bailes, Frederick (1971), *Your Mind Can Heal You*, California: DeVorss & Co., Inc., pg. 47.

CHAPTER TWO

RECIDIVISM

“ALMOST NINETY PERCENT OF THE PEOPLE NOW IN FLORIDA’S PRISON WILL ONE DAY BE RELEASED. Within three years of release, over a quarter of those people will go back to prison for a new crime. This rate of recidivism is unacceptably high and unacceptably expensive. For each new crime, there is a new victim, and new costs to Florida communities. This trend must be reversed.”

—Final Report to the Governor’s Ex-Offender Task Force, November 2006

The recidivism rate of prisoners is the rate at which they return to prison after they have been released. The Bureau of Justice measures recidivism by the number of criminal acts that resulted in the rearrest, reconviction, or return to prison, with or without a new sentence during a three-year period following