

PRISON
THEOLOGY

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Preface

Chris Barbera

Jesus the Liberator Seminary of Religious Justice is an educational nonprofit organization which provides theological education primarily to people within prison. We are rooted in the development of a moral intellect. We value humility, mercy and forgiveness. We believe in the healing power of the moral imagination which is born out of our work with people incarcerated. We connect with individual inmates and help to build them up with emotional support and intellectual formation. Each person's experience is validated and honored in a spirit of non-judgmental acceptance. Each person's experience forms the basis of our spiritual direction. Because we are simultaneously taught while teaching, we approach education as a communal experience and process of facilitation. Although we do not build up and defend doctrines of faith, we are in the process of developing a prison theology.

"Prison Theology" is an attempt to build a knowledge base that can offer solutions to "crime and punishment." This theology has been developing among multitudes of people imprisoned within the empire of America. People most affected by punishment are assisting in the spiritual liberation of people incarcerated, as well as, the society which incarcerates. These solutions are rooted in experience. We encourage each person to develop a theory of God, a theology, which is born out of their experience. And so we view experiential knowledge as equal to scriptural and academic knowledge. This three-fold knowledge is applied to experiential solutions. The primary experience we encounter is prison. Therefore, we are articulating a "prison theology."

As each student inmate articulates experiences and develops concepts of God, the spirit of prison theology evolves. This theology is then shared with, among others, the historical centers of Western ethical consciousness; the church. These churches are then reborn by hearing the original calling of Christ, who died as a criminal to the Roman state. This working relationship between inmates in prison and congregants in churches is seen as fundamental to addressing crime and punishment in America.

As each person is built up, we grow as a spiritual community that then edifies the church structures of America. These church structures then direct efforts to the support of prison inmates. This is the base ecclesial community articulated in Liberation Theology.

Prison theology is an extension of Liberation Theology. At their core, both express a "preferential option for the poor." Both work to articulate a theology that empowers people disaffected by dominant paradigms of power. Both articulations are born from the struggles of oppressed people.

And so we start from where we are. Our understanding comes from our working with the minds and hearts of people within prison; our praxis. It is a faith and character based education; we address emotional and intellectual natures. We direct a Christian and spiritual language towards a solution for prisons and crime. We tend to be personal and religiously a-historical. We have noticed that both the lethargy of a broken spirit and the inertia of a stale Christianity tend to express

themselves in one of two ways; overly emotional or abstractly intellectual. The former expression of Christianity tends to be fundamental, evangelical and literal while the latter searches for exact historic justifications and clever twists of phrases. We are concerned with generational survival, love and justice, for both the individual and the society.

Within this study, we will look at the mentality that creates imprisonment and the spiritual mentality that creates liberation from this bondage. This sword and plowshare dichotomy can also be articulated as the knowledge which frees us from ignorance; the cause of much of our suffering. The roots of ignorance that have created the suffering of imprisonment will be examined with the intention of using this knowledge to uproot the ignorance.

In essence;

Prison church

Develops

Prison theology

Edifies prison ministry; (Quality of Philemon).

Religion is a method not a goal.

In order to attain the “poverty of spirit,” we needed to become small, to allow the “still small voice within” to flourish within a “chosen few” students. This voice of liberation radiating from within the prison industrial complex has allowed us to fulfill the prophecy which Joseph, a criminal in Egypt, gave by naming his son Ephraim, that is, to be “fruitful in the land of my affliction.”

We have also learned much from visionaries who came from the Indian religious tradition. The Indian saint, Ramanuja, synthesized two manifestations of yoga; bhakti (devotion) with jnana (knowledge). We have found that emotion and intellect, devotion and knowledge are necessary for the spiritual liberation of people. We also devote our knowledge in the service of others. We work to build up a people who serve with knowledge. In this way, we are also taking a cue from Mohandas K. Gandhi, who worked to synthesis bhakti, jnana and karma (service) yoga. The prime example of this vision of satyagraha, this expression of soul force, was Vinoba Bhave. He taught the Bhagavad-Gita and the Koran while in prison. And finally, Bo Lozoff, an American inspired by the teachings of India, created the Prison Ashram project. He was asking inmates to use their time in prison to be used in pursuit of meditational peace, knowledge and awareness. In this way, time in prison could be seen as a time in the house of God, an Ashram. We are similarly asking inmates to use their time in prison as a time of study and devotion by creating “seminaries” within prison. Inmates, free within their mind and soul, will become the Brihaspati, the head of the householders; prison monastics like the desert fathers giving direction for Christians “in the world.”

The following essays have been written by members of the community of Jesus the Liberator. This work, then, is an organic vision which is created by and has created an internal leadership. It is the coalescing of individual voices into a collaborative vision. In this way, we have modeled our work upon the example of early Christian communities.

I have been directing and initiating theology education with numerous inmates by means of a national correspondence program and the establishment of on-site classes at Groveland Correctional Facility in New York State. My written contribution to this effort is a codification of this knowledge based on our history and experience.

Ken Lashway's piece, "From the Inside, Out," emphasizes the quality of personal attention and mentorship. Ken was instrumental in our efforts at Groveland Correctional Facility. He is a shining example of our living vision of fostering and creating an internal leadership and ministerial teachers within prison. He became a commissioned minister while in prison. Within his other writings, he analyzes the letters of Paul from prison, recommends Christian principles necessary for ministry within prison and speaks about prisons as, in his words, "the hidden mission field."

Machelle Gardner completed a course of study with us in 2012. Her idea and experience of reconciliation is a key to building relationships between people both inside and outside of prison. Reconciliation between oneself and God and between victim and offender is also a necessary prerequisite for a mature spiritual and emotional life. This "I and Thou" dialogue is an aspect of restorative justice.

Lori Carter completed a course of study with us in 2011. Her raw and honest testimony is reminiscent and emblematic of what Moses or Jesus may have experienced in their respective soul searching in the desert. Prison is indeed a journey through the wilderness desert. Her spirit of survival clarifies and enhances the many scriptural references. Humanity is at the heart of theology.

Thomas Lamora completed a course of study with us in 2010. He was not an inmate. His essay is an expression of our final course in "Incarceration/Restoration." He has given an overview of the prison system and our society. He then offers examples of restorative justice and moves to articulate a "prison theology."

Reverend Fred Jensen is a former board chair of Jesus the Liberator and UCC Minister. His understanding of the personal and social healing responsibility of the Christian is expressed in an interpretation of the parable of the Gerasene Demoniac. The mirror of the soul of society and the inmate reflects a deep unconscious yearning for the healing of the pain and punishment of the "demon."

Reverend Dr. Dorothea Brooks is the current board chair of Jesus the Liberator. She is a UCC minister and former Canisius College professor. Her essay offers a glimpse of the ancient Near Eastern World through the stories of several biblical characters who underwent a type of imprisonment.

Father Thomas Kreuder is a board member of Jesus the Liberator. He is a Catholic priest with many years of experience working as a mental health administrator, an addiction counselor and as director of Friends of the Night People, a drop-in homeless shelter. He has lived the Christian life of liberation. I have attempted to place his insights of traditional Catholic Monastic Christianity and Christian thought within the context of the institution of prison. I have attempted the same with his insights about directions in theology, love and social service. I co-authored this work by commenting upon Thomas's insights. This is an example of our practice of giving attention and service through dialogue and enhance-

ment and support of the vision and experience of “the other.”

In this short work, four of the essays were written by board or staff members of Jesus the Liberator and four essays were written by student/teachers. In this way, we have begun to attain a harmony of voices between the “inside and outside.” This is our attempt to attain “reconciliation” and “restoration” of people, justice and a vision of spirituality. Some of the writing focused upon personal testimonies and others were more objective and scholarly. Some focused upon individual ethical, intellectual development and others upon collective responsibility and justice. We emphasize a diversity and unity of knowledge rather than a hierarchy; the pastor is equal to the prisoner. We have been creating a community united in our spiritual principles and work.

Within our work, we yearn for meaning even within the punishment of suffering in order to overcome our imprisonment. Meaning produces inner joy and an awareness and practice of justice. Christian ethics applied to incarceration is a fulfillment of Christianity. The incarnation of Christ within incarceration liberates us from the bonds of the “judge not lest you are judged” dichotomy of the world; allows us to transcend into the freedom of God. Jesus, by his human nature, is limited in spatial temporal reality and understanding. Jesus is also an incarnated “godhead.” Law is incarnated ethics. This is a necessary precondition for justice within civil society. Religious justice, in its most clarified form is restorative. It is justice rooted in mercy. It builds a society which uses law to heal rather than to control or punish. “Law is made for humanity and not humanity for the law.” Law is born of justice and justice restores. Restoration is most powerful when it is born out of experience. The most powerful experiences are the ones which transform suffering into liberation. Liberation is the highest form of law, that is, the purpose of law is to promote, sustain and guarantee liberation. Liberation, then, is the fulfillment of the law.

A liberated consciousness can make distinctions between right and wrong; judgments. To overturn the moneychangers in the temple is a judgment. To proclaim “woe to the rich!” the 1%, is a judgment. These judgments are made from love, which is the power in existence since the foundation of the world. Those “chosen” to suffer for the world’s “salvation” are born again into this love and “peace beyond all understanding.” Can the criminal on the cross be the incarcerated, executed godhead?

Prison Theology: Jesus the Liberator in and out of Prison

Chris Barbera

In 1995, a man was shot. Within America, this occurs much too often. What made this murder more pertinent was that the man was young and the location was on the steps of a church. Distinguished members of the community soon after came together to ask “what is the church doing to reduce violence?”

It is strange and unfortunate that tragedy is often the catalyst for healing, spiritual growth and social justice. It is equally disconcerting that communities of faith need external forces to be called into service. But the spiritual principle holds true that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” As a response, Jesus the Liberator Seminary of Religious Justice was established in Buffalo, New York, primarily through the efforts of Reverend Hugh Pratt.

This writing is divided into three components. The first section will reflect upon the history and development of our consciousness. This will be followed by excerpts of correspondences to prison inmates, chaplains and administrators, professors, ministers and others in society who helped to develop a methodology and prison pedagogy. The final section will offer suggestions for the development of a “prison theology” based upon observations drawn from our work.

I. A History of Consciousness

Determined to create an educational institution devoted to poor people, we navigated the bureaucratic, legalistic and rational aspects which govern mores in our culture and established ourselves as a 501c3 nonprofit organization. We then received a VESID (Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities) educational grant from New York State. This state education department program referred many of our students. Other people were referred to us by social service agencies, church announcements, word of mouth and other forms of outreach.

A core of ministers and professors were assembled. Educational materials were purchased or donated. Individuals, individual churches and denominations donated money, time and resources. Trinity Episcopal Church provided a space for us to hold classes. We began the first codification and institutionalizing of our efforts.

The intention of the newly established nonprofit was to offer free theological education. This course of study would lead to each student earning a certificate in Religious Justice Ministry. The program was promoted as “education for socially responsible ministry.” The original core of ministers and professors began to share their theological and intellectual gifts (compensated by the state education grant), with people who did not have access to these traditions. Local university professors from Canisius College, Daemen, the University of Buffalo, Niagara University and Colgate Rochester taught alongside of ministers from throughout the city and region. In time, faculty members from Yale, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pacific School of Religion and Riverside Church in New York City, among others, also taught through correspondence. The victims of the empire, the poor, were the first to receive this free education.

Each student was given educational materials and attended classes. Traditional seminary courses such as homiletics, church history, biblical studies, pastoral care and theology were offered alongside of addiction counseling, street corner theology and empowerment and self-esteem courses. Students were given lectures, readings and written assignments. Critical thinking within theological concepts was encouraged. Although we were not accredited, we were taking steps in that direction. We had highly educated instructors and ministers with advanced degrees. The books we used were also being used at mainline seminaries and universities. The Chautauqua institute, which has hosted world famous thinkers and writers, donated over one hundred audio cassettes of lectures.

We were addressing two needs in society. The first was giving a sound academic higher education, free of charge, to people who did not have the resources or traditional access to it. We were simultaneously developing and training a “Para-Clergy.”

The idea of a para-clergy was rooted in liberation from the ground up. Within society, clergy and professors oftentimes come from and perpetuate established beliefs, ideas and economic class divisions. A para-clergy would address this by helping to form and foster people outside of these traditions, by using these traditions, to change these traditions. Jesus broke bread with rich and poor and mediated reconciliation between Pharisees and Samaritans.

Another way of looking at the synthesis is found in the words of Confucius. The 16th chapter of the 6th book of the Analects reads, “When nature exceeds training, you have the rustic. When training exceeds nature, you have the clerk. It is only when nature and training are proportionately blended that you have the higher type of person.” People from various social strata inherit and emphasize different spiritual gifts. This inherited variety is one way to understand Paul’s articulation of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians. In a similar vein, W.E.B. Dubois wrote about different ethnic and racial groups possessing different gifts. And many sociologists have indicated that different parts of society contribute in equally and differing and constructive ways to the good of the whole. The Book of Acts emphasizes a Christian social order rooted in this.

This developing “para-clergy” being “taught and trained” by the Pharisees was simultaneously influencing them. A cohesive whole is created from a synthesis and working together of divergent parts. This new community was initially termed the “Misfit Divinity School.”

Commoditization and branding of an idea or movement is deeply rooted in the culture of the empire. Playing upon this, the original educators embraced the “misfit divinity school.” A misfit is one who is outside the standards of accepted conformity. Jesus was a misfit as were the long line of prophets. Human history is ripe with examples of people who evolved consciousness from outside the accepted social reality. “My kingdom is not of this world,” is a profoundly revolutionary statement. These are the words of a misfit who introduced leaven into the dough.

The “misfit divinity school” took up on this idea. A community was intentionally being formed from the remnants of a broken social order. Clearly, this was an echo of the prophetic power of the words of Isaiah who spoke of the remnant returning to God. Those who were lost, wandering or broken off from the riches

of Babylon were and are indeed the jewel of God. Speaking more directly to the self-reliant healing power of the oppressed, the prophet wrote that “the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will stop relying upon the man who strikes them and will truly rely on Yahweh.” (Is. 10:20)

This insight into the healing power of the oppressed was lived out in the life of Christ. The Sermon on the Mount is Christ’s “pedagogy of the oppressed.” We began to see Christ’s teaching and life as a profound indictment upon the conformity of the social order of the empire. We simultaneously saw the teaching and life of Christ as an empowerment for those outside of the conformity of the social order of the empire. And thus, the innocuously playful and serious phrase “misfit divinity school.”

“The misfit divinity school” was initiated by the Pharisees and Scribes. Writers, ministers, teachers and professors are inheritors of the intellectual and academic traditions of the culture which is the accepted standard of knowledge in the empire. There is much value to this knowledge, but wisdom and truth are the comprehension of multiple forms of knowledge. Additionally, the Pharisees and Scribes have access to time and resources which the poor do not. These are necessary requirements to initiate a program of healing and education and service.

With time, effort, resources and the voluntary willingness of the Pharisees and Scribes to break bread with the poor in terms of knowledge and soul, the “misfit divinity school” began to grow. Regular classes led to several people completing a course of study. Empire State College, an independent study college, accepted transfers from a few of our students, who then continued their higher education.

Cooperative learning and teaching was and is at the heart of what we do. Because we were becoming “co-creators” and using facilitation as a method, our efforts have been at minimum twofold. We wanted to reach out to and educate rich and poor alike. And so we created symposiums and conferences.

One prominent example was our effort to train ministers in a program entitled “Crime, Religion and the Urban Geography of Crime.” At that time, “criminology” and “urban geography” still had some resonance. Educators were searching for solutions to the roots of crime just as ministers wanted to “bring the light” to the poor. Progressive social policy wanted to lift people out of poverty. Poverty and crime were seen as intertwined. Liberation was understood as overcoming these bondages.

And so, by focusing our program and efforts in an area of the city with a high crime rate, ministers of churches in that area would be trained and encouraged to develop successful crime prevention programs. The emphasis of this program was a “Christian Response to Crime.” Certain deficiencies needed to be addressed. Primarily, we intended to build up a base of social scientific knowledge and a systematic theology to address “criminal behavior.” We also addressed the need to create worship services and pastoral counseling that were more in tune with our community. Knowledge and training in these areas would help to reveal patterns and root causes of crime which would give weight to advocacy of sane and progressive humanitarian social policy; in other words, a “Christian response to crime.”

This “Christian response to crime” was rooted in a synthesis between mercy

and social science. Our scientific research revealed the interlocking downward spirals of poverty, racism and classism, which exacerbated such latent feelings as depression, alienation, anger, rejection and envy. These downward spirals fueled drug and alcohol abuse and mental illness which created the violations of civil order that created the crimes of theft and violence. The conditions for criminality were created within the urban geography. Christian mercy and scientific knowledge were offered as a solution. This confirmed and made easy our practice of “judging not” the actions of “criminals.”

The second half of this initiative would involve rooting Christian ministers and churches more deeply into their original charge of “proclaiming release to the captives” and prophetic solidarity with and advocacy for the poor. This would come about by maintaining the working relationships between the “Christian Church” and the “urban criminal.”

Hand in hand with this effort was establishing partnerships between urban and suburban churches. Suburban churches, which were full of resources and leisure time, were encouraged and given an opportunity to send “missionaries” into the inner city. These “missionaries” would work alongside of the inner city congregations to develop a “Christian response to crime.” Meaningful labor and conviction combined with resources and a platform in society was a way in which we understood the marriage of Jesus and the Pharisees, the integration of rich and poor and the subsequent steps towards a just social order.

From these original initiatives, a consciousness began to ferment. The light of Christ would guide social scientists, criminologists, urban geographers and other policy makers. This consciousness was of course an extension of the Social Gospel and Liberation Theology. “There is nothing new under the sun,” but the earth revolves and the light shines at differing times and places. New theories of eternal truths are continually being born again.

This rebirth of consciousness was precipitated by action. The yearning for justice and mercy gave form to an education method. The love and devotion for the “dispossessed of the earth” created an organization which moved to create a community. A community with this consciousness would integrate into “the world” and humanize social policy. Within liberation theology, praxis precipitates theory. Jesus the Liberator is an expression of Liberation Theology. Our doing informs our knowing.

These conferences, symposiums, classes and other educational initiatives involved cooperation and integration of various communities. Knowledge, mercy and a desire for justice remained the core. Humble service to the poor binds all of these cords. This distinguished our efforts from the church, the university and the social service department. One of our intentions was to be the catalyst of a just community. This just and cooperative community would provide the framework for the “beloved community” that Dr. King spoke of.

However, much of this early consciousness was still burdened by concepts such as “Criminology and Christ.” We were Christian within a pluralistic and secular society. We were Christian in a “Post-Christian Western World.” We still debated social learning theory, behaviorism, and the accepted belief that pov-

erty leads to crime. With good intention, addiction counseling and mental health counseling were part of the educational approach. Mental health, addiction and poverty, were being liberated from homelessness, crime and prisons. Individual responsibility was being liberated from and addressed within the social constructs of the empire, which has always favored the rich. We were giving a “preferential option for the poor” as articulated by Gutierrez and Liberation Theology. The consciousness of the poor born out of our “preferential option” was slowly beginning to exist side by side with the intellect of the university.

The need to be more proactive and systematic in “crime reduction” led to initial discussions and movement towards a class to train ministers in “prison ministry.” Seemingly out of the blue, we received poems from an inmate on death row in Illinois. Our first instinct was to connect with the organization New Yorkers against the Death Penalty to contemplate further action. The momentum was and had been moving towards work with inmates and addressing the massive institute of punishment know as the American prison system.

These poems validated the momentum and awareness we had been creating. The years of teaching and organizing teacher trainings naturally morphed into the development of a national prisoner correspondence program. Our thought and resources began to focus upon theological education for inmates. Flyers were sent to chaplains within state institutions across the nation to post in their prison. Inmates then began to contact us.

II. Developing a Method

A. Creating a Framework

Dear Thomas,

I am feeling more positive about the direction we are going. The old Jesus the Liberator Seminary was like King David, the initiator and warrior. The new JLS is like King Solomon, the one who builds in humility and wisdom. Recently, I meditated upon a verse from the book of Divine Consolation, by Meister Eckhart, and realized a model of education based upon the mercy of Rachel weeping for her children - the daughters of Ethiopia and the daughters of Jerusalem. The model requires collaborations between “the church” and “the prison” and the development of an educational approach rooted in restorative justice principles and knowledge based in love with its diamond points in “self reflection” and “prison theology.”

Board recommendations from the Director of Theological Education:

1. In order to become self-sufficient, Jesus the Liberator Seminary must acknowledge its strengths, potential and limits. As in the Book of Acts, we must share all in common even though each has a unique gift. Our common mission is the spiritual liberation of people in prison. One way in which we do this is through Theological Education; one of our charismas is to teach. Liberated knowledge is empowerment, the seed of self determination. Teaching involves the dual role of theologian, to disseminate scriptural insights, as well as, the role of the pastor, to hear the needs and tribulations of our students and offer emotional support and consultation.

2. Once we and our students teach one another, we are in communion. We must then advocate with them or for them if they are unable. Self empowered education will lead towards structural reforms and alternatives to the prison system. “Mercy is greater than judgment.” To advocate is to be a prophetic witness, to deconstruct systems of punishment and reconstruct systems of merciful community.

3. To construct a merciful community requires service to others. Serving others requires extending your love beyond your self-concerns into the concerns of another; in short, to love others as you love yourself.

4. In addition to teaching, advocating and serving, we need people to administer. To be an administrator means to put the house in order. Financial and material stability of the organization is the foundation of our other areas of work. How can we heal the house of the world if our own house is in chaos? Babylon, confusion, will not bring us to Mount Zion.

Board recommendations from the Director of Theological Education:

1. “Many shall be called, few shall be chosen” - we need to focus and fine tune the students we have, develop a spiritual foundation, a base ecclesial community within prison which will serve as our living ethical foundation. Rather than throwing a fishhook into the ocean, we need to nurture that which is right in front of us. Once a strong relationship is built with these students and communities, including a strong relationship with the chaplain, then this community can bridge itself to ecclesiastical structures outside the prison walls. This is a seed for a “covenant relationship” between the prisoner and the parish.

2. We need to open up the board decision-making process by including more active community members. The concerns of the community and principles of theology need to be integrated. A more localized foundation would also allow us more time to visit local prisoners and local churches so as to nurture and facilitate a “liberated community.”

3. The development of an internal leadership. One of our students is a commissioned minister; another student was published in a theological journal. The nurturing of ministers and theologians within prison will empower prisoners with knowledge, which will help to break down the oppression and offer alternatives to the prison system. This healing anointment will then reenergize the original message of faith communities outside of prison to “proclaim release to the captives.”

4. Assist our students, the internal leadership, with parole, reintegration, and the host of challenges that await them. Connect them to the communities that nurture them. Once the seed is planted, we must water until the roots are firmly planted and self sustaining. Once a tree matures, it begins to plant new seeds, within the shade of its own immensity.

Academic recommendations to the board:

A personalized and facilitated educational approach which would require deep listening, discernment and consultation with the board in order to create a course of study that speaks to the individual while staying within the parameters of religious, restorative justice.

The curriculum would consist of 6 core areas:

A Spiritual Autobiography to discern a direction of study for each student.
Human Spirituality
Old Testament
New Testament
Liberation Theology
Incarceration/Restoration

Dear Dr. Carmona,

Peace and blessings. These are some thoughts upon cross referencing courses. You have said that Groveland Correctional Facility offers courses at 12 week cycles. The ones I remember being named are Comparative Religion, Intro to Biblical Studies, Christian Ethics, Ministerial Formation, Leadership, Apologetics, Contemporary Theology and Intro to Theology.

We offer courses in Old and New Testament (Biblical Studies), Human Spirituality and Liberation Theology. In addition, we require an autobiography and a culminating paper on “Prison Theology.”

In the interests of offering certificates to more inmates at Groveland, we can synchronize these two approaches. We believe it would be good for you to continue to offer all these courses as you see fit. The courses, however, that perhaps best could be cross referenced are Intro to Biblical Studies with Old and New Testament, Comparative Religion with Human Spirituality and Contemporary Theology with Liberation Theology/Religious Justice. If you were to offer these courses as a sequence, with the addition of a paper each on “Spiritual Autobiography” and “Prison Theology,” then we could give more inmates the opportunity of completion by granting a certificate of Religious Justice.

Dear Ken,

Thank you for the letter and evaluations. We have evaluations for two courses, Christian Contemporary Theology and Christian Ethics. If you or Rev. Carmona could send a copy of the other evaluations, that would be helpful for us, particularly in codifying documents and assessments.

Dear Dr. Carmona,

It was a great pleasure to work with you at the graduation ceremony on October 14. Thank you for the insights and your ongoing work. Enclosed are books to add to the Groveland library.

Please thank Ken for his work and let him know that we read an excerpt from his paper entitled “Prison: the Forgotten Mission Field.” I believe that by showing the moral depth and intelligence of “prisoners,” we may have further humanized the ecclesiastical community in their original calling to “proclaim release to the captives.” This humanizing process will lead others to provide material resources—remember Zachias.

Thank you for encouraging the students to voluntarily donate. It is a blessing, and like the old woman in the synagogue who gave a penny, will return ten or one hundred fold.

We have also made contact with Loretta Horton, who works within the national Lutheran Social Justice Committee in Chicago. She has invited us to a

ministry conference and would like to use this book as a model.

Dear Loretta,

We received your message and enclosed is an invoice for 50 books for the upcoming conference. Your assistance greatly helps our organization.

Your work with gangs is admirable and consistent with the efforts of many to transform suffering into peace. In our work, a key to this has been Acts 16.

Dear Superintendent Dawson Brown,

Greetings in peace. Jesus the Liberator Seminary of Religious Justice is a 501c3 nonprofit organization that provides theological education for people in prison. We helped to establish an on-site theology class at Groveland Correctional Facility in 2005 under the direction of retired chaplain Dr. Juan Carmona. Dr. Gloria Askew, the director of Ministerial Services for the Department of Correctional Services, supported our program and attended the commissioning of Ken Lashway as an inmate minister, now released. This theology program ran successfully until the autumn of 2009 when Dr. Carmona retired. At that time, members of our organization registered as volunteers in order to maintain consistency and to ensure the continuance of the courses. This was the course of action suggested by former Deputy Superintendent of Programs, Karen Crawford. However, when we registered, we were told to wait until a full time chaplain was hired. When Dr. Lucas was hired, we tried again to restart classes but were told to wait until a new Deputy Superintendent of Programs was hired, since Karen Crawford was retiring. Now that she has retired, we are once again offering to start classes.

This educational program does not cost the state anything. We know that the men inside greatly appreciate and derive benefits from this service. As you will see from the enclosed papers, the curriculum of past courses was collaboratively taught and designed by inmates, the chaplain and our organization. We know and believe that education is the greatest tool for the rehabilitation of inmates. It is an even greater tool when the inmates themselves are engaged in their own education.

Studies have shown that the greater access to education that people have, the less likely they are to commit crimes. Reduction of crime reduces violence, protects the innocent and saves taxpayers money. Taxes outlined for crime prevention can then be redirected towards programs of social uplift and advancement.

Dr. Carmona informed us that you worked at Sing-Sing and that you witnessed and supported the theological efforts made there. We hope that you can support our efforts as well.

Dear Board Members,

Groveland is a living example of Liberation Theology, of a base ecclesial community, where knowledge and discernment is done in community from the ground up. This community, this church, is our community. We will continue to maintain a national presence with our inmate students and communities scattered like seeds in the wind. At Groveland, the seed is bearing fruit. We have the opportunity to build upon what we established. Established and recognized, we can open doors to other facilities. This growth of the spirit has been a labor of love,

without grant money, status or reward. Please help to pick this fruit.

Dear Hugh,

Michael, a student who is out of prison, called us looking for money to start a church. It seems that he misunderstood our support of projects, initiatives and individuals. We encourage people to take possession of their life and help to facilitate their own liberation. This expression of love distinguishes us from charities and social service agencies. The religious education we offer is designed to help liberate people from subservience. The “church” is the feeling of liberation, the redemption through education.

Dear Kristine,

Thank you for your donation to our ministry. St. Stephens United Church of Christ has been a great support for a number of years. We continue to offer free theological education and emotional support for people in prison in part because of free will donations from individuals and faith communities like yours.

In addition to the empowerment of our brothers and sisters outcast into the prison system, we also feel the necessity to make bridges with churches and faith communities. We believe that it is in line with liberation to “proclaim release to the captive.” With your donation, your church is helping to develop these “covenant” relationships.

Material support such as money, books and resources are greatly appreciated.

We are also asking for prayers and for the establishment of social justice groups within churches to advocate on behalf of the incarcerated. These base communities can begin to develop a vision for the redemption of our punishment oriented justice system. When the church extends itself to others, it fulfills its original calling to serve.

Dear Dave,

Peace in Christ. Thank you for your letter. Perhaps the best work you could do for Jesus the Liberator Seminary would be to start a study group within your prison. This would help in many ways. First, you could apply the knowledge you learned. A teacher is perpetually a student. In light of this, you will make a good teacher. Your work with us was of a very high quality. Intellectually and spiritually, you have much to offer to others. This needs to be shared with others. By initiating a study group, you could give structure to this.

Speak with the chaplain and offer your peace. Once an understanding is reached between you and the chaplain, then relations with the prison administration will be smoother. Approval with administration is necessary. Once the chaplain and administration are at peace and the bible study is formed, then local churches on the outside could be approached. If a community is formed within prison, then local churches can have something and someone to connect with. These churches can then work with you.

Dear Daniel,

Once, when you responded to a reading from Bonhoeffer, you wrote that “the minister is called to a position of responsibility rather than privilege.” This is true. You can now share this knowledge from a foundation of love and liberation with

those around you. Your commitment to building a spiritual community while in prison is beautiful and will go a long way to the redemption of society as well as each individual who is incarcerated. We would like to encourage you to develop this relationship.

Dear Robert,

I have read your paper entitled “Lifers and Long-Termers Annual Conference: A Community - Prison Dialogue.” It is very good. Uniting the communities is very important. Liberated education is a key. From a theological perspective, we have the model of Acts 16 which speaks of Paul and Silas singing the song of God and releasing others from their captivity. The book of Philemon also speaks of the interconnection of communities inside and outside the walls. In this vein, we are building up and supporting educational communities within the prison. This helps in the redemptive process, the parole hearing and the reintegration into the community.

Perhaps you could develop your concept of prison community dialogue. How can we as a primarily theological community assist in this dialogue? How may we involve faith communities more directly in the struggles of prisoners?

Dear Karima,

One of my dilemmas, and it relates to the situation in prison, is how to be communally interconnected on a human ethical level within a system that encourages separation or privatization. Within prison, like within a monastery, there is plenty of time for thought in solitude (outside of the obvious differences). When I respond to prisoners it is also done in the solitude of thought. Too much of this is trying to the soul. A little of it is beneficial.

Thank you for the e-mails. Inmates write papers and letters, activists write e-mails. I seem to be in between two worlds. In this and in many other ways, distinction or reconciliation of separate realities seems to be a viable pathway.

How may we encourage a genuine nonviolent community within the violence of prison?

Dear Rima,

Peace. It was a joy meeting you recently. You have helped me to refocus some of the work we are doing here with prisoners. You have a solid connection between humility and intelligence. Your work in restoration and restorative justice is clear and well needed. The restoration of the prodigal son and/or daughter is also stipulated within the laws of Leviticus. The restoration of the soul does indeed go hand in hand with the restoration of rights within civil society. Theology and social justice movements need to be integrated. There is a correct way to bridge “faith” and “politics.” Perhaps this is why you teach sociology of religion.

B. Creating a Pedagogy

Dear Ken,

The first noble truth of the Buddha is that all life is suffering. So how can we live without some scars? Perhaps the point is to live through them. Victor Frankl survived the concentration camps and claimed that to be free of that memory or

experience, it is important to immerse the self in the heart of it rather than avoiding it or forgetting it or “correcting it.” “Healer heal thyself” requires courage and commitment.

Dear Rahima,

Peace and blessings. Enclosed are two sets of items; three articles about our work and two academic perspectives. In terms of possible assistance, this is what we need -

1. People with a concern for the human rights and spiritual growth of inmates. We focus upon Jnana yoga, the path of knowledge. Our knowledge base is an intellect rooted in mercy and humility. We are attempting to develop centers of prayer and study, base ecclesial communities within prison which would then reenergize and recommit the churches to their original calling. And so the foundation is the spiritual liberation of inmates. Any person with theological knowledge who wants to assist in teaching and corresponding with inmates may contact us.

Furthermore, we encourage the development of emotional connections to enhance a sense of community and belonging. Many inmates feel abandoned and become embittered. Many need to find a release and a way to articulate. Some blame themselves, some blame society. We suspend our judgment and simultaneously address both individual and social “sins.”

2. Spiritual resources—books, articles, pamphlets etc. We have found that inmates who devote themselves to the Lord are very passionate and hungry for knowledge. With so much time on their hands, instructions in prayer and meditation sink deep into their souls. Their intellect becomes finely tuned.

We have a sufficient resource of Judeo-Christian texts. Moslem and Buddhist scriptures, therefore, would be more helpful, as would any Eastern texts. Resources and knowledge about the connection between mind and body would help many inmates who have had problems with addictions as would any studies in medicine and theology.

Teachings in “detachment” can address the need to free the mind and break the bondage of dependency. Also, we could use teachings of social justice which address the crime of systemic poverty. These social, historical spiritual movements address the prison of the soul or society. And finally, any modes of discourse which may enhance the love of the soul would help.

Dear Rahima,

Thank you for the wonderful donation to our seminary. The selection you offered is great. May God bless the Sufi Relief Society.

Within the letter that came with the donation, you wrote “Please let me know if this selection is helpful and any suggestions.” I will respond to this thoughtful and sincere concern:

The books you sent will be very helpful. The Bhagavad-Gita is an example of source text and scripture. Scriptures, particularly “eastern” or “indigenous”, are foundational.

Spiritual autobiographical writers such as Elie Wiesel, Alan Lew, Malcolm Muggeridge, Paramahansa Yogananda and Kathleen Norris will help our students

articulate their own spiritual autobiography, which we are requiring for certification.

Practical and applied spiritual practices such as *The Peace Book*, *Jewish Meditation*, *The Dalai Lama's Healing Anger and Compassion in Action* by Ram Das and Mirabai Bush are examples of applied theology and practical spiritual disciplines. Many inmates use their time to develop spiritual disciplines such as meditation.

These three sets of examples—source text scripture, spiritual autobiography and applied or practical spiritual disciplines—are very useful.

Any information on social, restorative, religious justice would be very helpful as would books on spiritual solutions to addictions and deeper insights into mercy and the science of discipline.

With the soul of a convict, we thank you for the donations offered in love.

Dear Faruq,

We encourage you to put your emotions and thoughts upon paper. This is a constructive method of releasing negativities. However, we want you to go a little further. Try to use your reasoning and rational skills in analyzing and addressing solutions to racism and oppression. How can the teachings of Jesus help?

The book we sent you, *Black Theology of Liberation* by James Cone, is very good. The method we use is threefold—readings from scripture, readings from theology books and personal experience and insight. You have given good insight into the overarching problem of racism and have given fine examples of some strong black leaders who put a spiritual language on to the struggle for freedom. Try now to enhance your understanding by incorporating scriptural and theological readings into your response. Remember the words of the prophet who wrote that “my people die for lack of vision.”

You mentioned the comforting words of Job and your grandmother. How can these words give insight into compassion and the restoration of a person? Can they heal an entire people? How can compassion be an alternative to crime and prisons? How are counseling, love and compassion more effective than punishment? Does anyone have the right to judge another?

Enclosed is a form which you may use as a guide in responding to this book. Also enclosed is a copy of “Letter from a Birmingham jail.” If the Cone book does not suite you, then try to analyze this letter and give a response with examples from scripture. How does a Christian in America use the teachings of Jesus to overcome racism? These are challenging questions but we want to challenge you. Your effort will be respected and honored according to the sincerity of your efforts. Please feel free to contact us with any concerns.

Dear Richard,

Peace and blessings. Thank you for your letter. I will attempt a response. First, we pray that all is well with you and your relations. Research and knowledge of the criminal justice system, specifically for you within the Ohio system, is perhaps as useful as theological knowledge. The laws of scripture and the laws of the state do not often equate. The book of Romans is a meditation upon this. Also,

Dr. King, quoting either Aquinas or Augustine, claimed that the moral law needs to square with the social law. Jewish rabbis speak of Halakhah and Aggadah as branches of the law and discussions and commentaries on the law. By “sharpening stones” of the mind through study, prayer, reflection, dialogue and practice, some have achieved a more enlightened and peaceful sense of being and a clarification of reality and the laws which govern nature. Your insights and understandings are very deep and well studied. Your words require a deep meditation. Can you apply your knowledge to the situation at hand? Reason should not be seen as a power which dominates, but rather as a force which frees our mind.

The prophet is the one who clarifies and explains the law. The law connects God to humanity. And so the law makes us free. “Abominations” seem to be transgressions of the law. “Forgive us our transgressions, as we forgive those who transgress against us.” All have transgressed the law. Forgiveness and mercy have the power to restore us to the law. And so we speak of merciful restoration, which heals the individual and community. Eschatology is the burning off of abominations.

We would like to send you some materials, specifically Greek and Hebrew dictionaries. You have a gift for analysis and organization of data. I would suggest you put that into a context and application. At the end of your letter, you write about the disciples and teachers informing others of sins, so that they can be put aside. Perhaps you can meditate on specific sins from your experience, sins of the state or of the criminal justice system. This may give you a focus and a way to apply your insights.

Dear Charles,

Peace and blessings. Try not to dwell upon the lost paper. Remember, Jesus claimed that “Anxiety does not add a cubit to your life.” Psychologically, it probably decreases our life. Stress weakens our immune system making us more susceptible to sickness. And so, Jesus said that “I give you life, that you may have it more abundantly.”

I too wish that I had applied principles of truth to my life at an early age. Many feel this way, no one is perfect, and all of us make mistakes. It is important to forgive yourself and others. Don’t get stuck in the past or imperfections or in the stress caused from unrealistic expectations of perfection.

Don’t doubt yourself. Moses and Jeremiah lacked confidence, but the spirit which moved within them overcame their emotional insecurities. Creative ministry can draw this out of a person. The temple of Christ purifies this body and soul as well as the communal gathering place. Love overcomes all emotional bondages. Love is whole whereas thinking can produce double thoughts and two minds. Thought comes out of love, like theory from praxis.

Contemplation is a conscious activity. It clarifies our thought patterns which allow for clear decision making, actions and ministry. Competition can degenerate into violence whereas challenging the intellect honors and uplifts and refines. Real communication involves listening and feeling the freedom to speak your inner truths without fear.

The inner spirit of Christ, of truth and love, is greater than the external forces

of negation. The inner spirit is self-actualizing. The inner spirit transcends the “unilateral competition” you speak of and actually offers the gift of spirit to others. Regardless of what others do, you have the inner spirit of truth.

To be a pastor is to heed the words of Christ—“healer heal thyself.” The pastor provides ministry for the people, using creativity, dialogue, evocation and empowerment. The prophet addresses the implementation of God’s law into society. The law is the “covenant” which washes alienation. The pastor heals the rift between alienation, competition and other forms of sorrow and oppression with the force of the spiritual health within the soul of Christ, the soul of life. Allow our love to flow as we allow the love of others to flow. The minister of our soul is the minister of the people. The law “binds” us. How may we creatively express this, even within our incarceration?

Dear Charles,

Thomas will finish your evaluation soon. We look forward to the second half of your paper. Enclosed are copies the letters you requested—one by Polycarp and one written to Polycarp. We hope you find insights within them. Also enclosed is a book on early Christian worship. Perhaps this can give an added depth to your insights upon the early writers. Try to incorporate ideas about worship, community, life and meditation into your understandings of early Christianity.

When you announce and bring forth the ancient teachings, you are clarifying for the reader their inner morality. How can the dynamic truth from the 1st century Middle Eastern desert apply to our 21st century American prison system? How do scriptures explain or relate to how you feel, what you think and the conditions and circumstances of your life? Does this knowledge translate into love and peace of mind and how does tranquility and sublime union translate into the power of transformation? Does the external structure of spiritual law relate and give life to your inner freedom?

You mentioned the following in your last letter; the beatitudes, teaching method, life inside the walls, the hidden meaning of scripture and “assurance of things hoped for, conviction of things not seen.” (Heb 11:1)

Within the beatitudes, the 7th chapter of Matthew begins with the holy man warning us to “judge not lest you be judged.” (Mt. 7:1) Could you explore the hidden and self evident meaning of this as it relates to circumstances in prison? Is incarceration a form of judgment and do people inside still hold onto judgment? How can one judge another? Are you judging non-Christians, atheists and cults? What is the Christian way to correct hurtful practices without condemnation, judgment and punishment? Can you apply a Christian teaching method to “crime and punishment” which is free of judgment but still addresses wrongdoing?

Matthew 25:35-40 explains correct actions, that is, orthopraxis. Matthew 5 explains the spirit and vision, that is, orthodoxy, one should have when working within Matthew 25:35-40. Therefore, show how the beatitudes, and early Christian teachings, that is, pedagogy, can be applied to the uplift of disenfranchised people awaiting judgment within prison.

Isaac, like many in prison, must have felt the “fear and trembling” as he lay bound upon the altar? Soren Kierkegaard analyzed this story, exploring ideas such

as the sacred bond and the covenant of God and humanity as the reality which lifts us from despair. These sacred bonds are the hope which liberates humanity from incarceration.

Let your faith be your strength and solace and protection from the violence and ignorance around you. Energetic minds struggle everywhere with judgment. You happen to find yourself in prison; blossom and witness where you are.

Dear John,

Thank you for your autobiography. We believe that honesty is a part of the healing process. Understanding of ourselves and our conditions allows us to be free of the bondages of the past. When we feel forgiven, we have reconciliation. With reconciliation comes wisdom. It seems that you have wrestled with lust and lack of focus. You write that you are in prison because of “sin and living a care-free lifestyle.” The upside of desire is devotion. When desire is a selfish pursuit, it degenerates into lust. When desire is focused, it becomes a sharpened arrowhead which leads us to truth and reconciliation. Christ had desire. This led him to live a life of compassion and knowledge.

Do you forgive yourself? It must be hard to think of your wife and son and not be able to speak with them. We all have an opportunity to begin again. Perhaps you can mend the broken relationship with them, and this may take time or perhaps your sister is correct, but moving on does not necessarily mean that you forget about others or the past. Jesus exclaimed “go forth and sin no more!” We can begin again and we can also love the people we have hurt or who have hurt us. This is hard for all of us. Because you are confined, your options are limited, but your mind is limitless. You can be forgiven and be clear within your thoughts. Scripture and theology can help to free the mind. A mind which is free and clean can bring love and healing, genuine knowledge, into the world, even within confinement.

Honest reflection will help in the process of healing emotional scars. Scriptures offer us a mirror. It holds up for us the psychic depths that all humans feel and experience. We get a glimpse of possible solutions and keys to unlocking our inner God given healing potentials. The mind clarified and the conscience which is clean can more fully grasp the inner depths of experience. Let the scriptures guide you, but don’t let them bind you.

Dear Anthony,

The experience of overcoming suffering, the solitude of prison, is itself a blessing unto others. To be redeemed by trial and tribulation is a powerful testimony of the human capacity to endure and of the fulfillment of the grace of the spirit. Your words ring clearly and passionately. We thank you for this and ask that you share that healing and redemptive spirit with those around you, lift up the broken hearted, proclaim release to the captives.

Dear Robert,

God’s blessing upon you for your strength and spiritual survival! Your letter has steeled our resolve. Your Christian witness is helping us to help others. It is making us better servants of humanity. Still, we pray for your persecution to stop.

When Christ was on the cross, he cried out a psalm of lamentation, Psalm 22 —“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The suffering of Christ heals the world. This mystery of redemptive suffering is expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, which has spoken to you in your time of persecution.

Your willingness to fast for your oppressors is an expression of great spiritual power. It becomes easier with time and practice. Jesus wrestled with this great power in Gethsemane. Jesus was in solitary confinement at that point and from there he was arrested and went to prison. Paul wrote his letter to Philippians “in chains.” While in chains, Paul prayed and kept himself pure and continued to instruct others in faith. This faith born of persecution gave life to the early Christian communities. Your witness, Robert, is within this great spiritual tradition. Still, we pray for your persecution to stop.

Keep on struggling to keep your spirit alive! Keep thinking and writing! Work through your trials and tribulations with faith and knowledge. Transcend! Peace! Be still and calm the storm around you.

Dear Robert,

During this time in prison, you are serving God. This is the essence of your search for meaning. This is what Dr. Frankl termed a “case for tragic optimism.” This is the meaning of Dostoyevsky’s desire to “be worthy of my suffering.” This cross of life is the first noble truth of the Buddha; that suffering exists in the world. His analysis concluded that ignorance is the cause of suffering. Your analysis within the conclusion of your paper is also accurate, if suffering is to be equated with sin.

Understanding suffering frees us from nihilism. The author of the book of Ecclesiastes sees meaninglessness in life but encourages the living of life in the face of it, revealing a profound sense of the spirit of survival. This supports Dr. Frankl’s vision that a person can determine who he or she is by acting or reacting to any situation. Transcendence is a key to this. Get beyond your own mind. Transcend rather than reflect. Even if one is in prison or incarcerated within the mind. This is the meaning of logo-therapy. See meaning and affix the mind and actions towards meaning.

Meaning saturates all existence, as does Christ-consciousness. Work within this mind and vision fills the “existential vacuum” described by Dr. Frankl.

Dear Deborah,

Let us begin the process of growing in faith and knowledge. Read these two enclosed books, Man’s Search for Meaning and The Courage to Be. Reflect upon them and read them alongside your readings of the scriptures. Write a paper about Christian Meaning and Courage. Include within the paper insights from your experience and the knowledge derived from these readings. Try to articulate how Christ gives courage by revealing meaning. Affirm your own beliefs and how they can give courage unto others.

Dear Elizabeth,

Your paper on Christian Nonviolence was brilliant. I sent it to Dr. Ruether to evaluate. Your work is of high quality.

Please study and meditate upon the enclosed materials; “Living Buddha, Living Christ” by Thich Nat Han and “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” by Dr. Martin Luther King. Rather than writing about each chapter, please write a paper on how spiritual principles and disciplines can help in the rehabilitation of a prisoner and the prison system. What is prison theology? How do principles and insights from Buddhism and Christianity apply to your situation in prison? How does Dr. King apply Christian principles to social justice? How can mediation techniques and monastic disciplines be translated into your situation in prison? How can it liberate the mind and heal the soul? What is the function of religious education in prison and what is the role of the chaplain? How can a seminary operate within prison?

These are points to consider. We would like to extend some intellectual freedom to your response. Please try to focus your paper by presenting a point of view and substantiating that view with scriptural insights and teaching from these materials. In the process of forming an opinion, perhaps you will derive some truths about suffering and liberation from suffering. These insights could be of great value towards the healing of society, as well as, the individual.

Dear Elizabeth,

Try to build upon your understanding of “Prison Theology” by adding the dimension of “community.” Possible questions to explore may be –

What are the principles of a genuine Christian faith community? Remembering your understandings of base ecclesial Christian communities from Liberation Theology, how can genuine communal Christian principles reconstruct prisons into rehabilitative experiences?

The New Testament is the story of Jesus and community, “chosen” to be a sign of the promise of salvation, but not a requirement. Jesus initiated this community, Paul, a Greek and Hebrew, expanded and focused it and James rooted it in Jerusalem, the city of peace, the ancient kingdom. If the Sermon on the Mount was given to the “lost and chosen community of Israel,” then how can this radical social order which renounces violence and accepts all perpetuate itself within a violent and judgmental world? Are prisons a reflection of this world? What practical structures can we build to free ourselves of this “patriarchal domination?” Can a genuine feeling of unity and love become a method of nonviolent transformation of society? Do we need to seed it first into a “community of disciples?”

Dear Rev. Litchfield,

Peace and blessings to you and all the women at Fluvanna. Enclosed is a letter to the evaluation of a course for Elizabeth. I offer it as an example of how university and church structures in society can work with prisoners and chaplains inside.

Dr. Rosemary Ruether is a highly respected women’s theologian. She has high regards for Elizabeth. She has suggested the possibility of publishing her work. The spiritual weight and vision of Elizabeth is touching world renowned theologians. This voice of liberation needs to be proclaimed from the pulpit. The moral foundation of ecclesial structures needs to be rooted in the liberation from

suffering. Women in prison can speak upon this. Perhaps we can develop a “systematic” women’s prison theology. Women may be the trinity.

Dear Ted,

Peace. Thank you for your interest in Elizabeth’s work. With millions of people in prison here or in Iraq or on parole or in detention or work camps etc., we feel the need to address this from a theological perspective. Jesus was on death row. Joseph interpreted dreams of pharaoh while in prison. James claimed that “mercy is greater than punishment.” Mercy and intelligence can heal the wounds of incarceration, as well as, healing an “incarcerated nation.”

I sent the contract and journal, *Dialog*, to Elizabeth.

We would like to help you and Elizabeth and the millions of incarcerated souls develop a “Prison Theology.” Elizabeth, as well as many others, is in our theological program. Ken is a commissioned minister within Groveland prison who has written insightful papers, on which was entitled “Prisons, the hidden mission field.” Elizabeth, Ken, Jesus, Jeremiah, Dr. King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and many others all wrote theologically about prison and the spiritual solution to this problem.

Dear Elizabeth,

Please consider yourself our teacher and our equal, regardless of the walls which separate us. Let us pray together about how we may grow together. The church is a community of believers. We are brought together by circumstances beyond our control. We do not choose our family or our spiritual community, it is “chosen” for us. We are “called”, we are “chosen.” You have a gift for teaching, for insight and for writing.

May God bless you as you have blessed the world.

Dear Machele,

Blessings of peace. Thank you for the wonderful paper, “Prison Walk.” We will send a response soon.

We sent a book to the chaplain for you entitled “Healing of Memories.” Your spiritual autobiography and the “Prison Walk” paper for Human Spirituality are both filled with memories. You have an acute awareness of how you came to be. It is a gift. We hope that this process is healing for you. Perhaps this book can help in your growth.

Take some time to read and meditate upon this book and your own healing of memories. Meditate upon the instruction of Christ—“healer, heal thyself.” Continue to use prayer, meditation and journaling in this process.

For your next assignment in the New Testament, take the above instructions and sometime between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, write a response. Express what you are feeling and thinking about meditation, the healing memories of Christ and of the power of your own personal experience. Think and write about some of the parables of healing that Jesus spoke. Take a parable of healing from Jesus and apply it to the healing of your personal memory. You may put it into the form of a story. If you have questions or concerns, then feel free to write to us. Let us grow in faith and knowledge together.

Dear Machele,

In your previous work, you developed an understanding of your personal spiritual journey in a very autobiographical way; using memory. Much of your reflection gave insight into the reasons for your incarceration, your prison walk and the spiritual tools you are utilizing for healing.

As we read the prophets, we will see that they transformed personal healing into social healing. Their concern for the poor and oppressed and for justice and equality is very clear. Each prophet merged a personal testimony into a larger truth about God's righteousness and a just social order. We are asking you to do the same. Become a prophet for justice within the prison system. Many prophets speak of "exile" or "punishment" or "prison." Many prophets distinguish between the judgment of God and humanity. What would the prophets say about 21st century incarceration and the society that incarcerates? Are there similarities between their vision and your vision? How can your personal testimony give depth to a social analysis?

Dear Machele,

This is an excellent paper! Some of your understandings expressed are profound insights. For example—that love is greater than law, that empowerment comes from experience, that the nature of rehabilitation should be education and compassion where there is brokenness and that there is hope in suffering. These are key theological insights. We encourage you to develop these ideas further and deeper.

Your choice of Hosea and the prison system was also wonderful. Your devotion and love shine through the words. You wrote that "love is like a beautiful morning that evolves into a scorching day." The book of Hosea seems to move in the opposite direction. The prophet showers judgment and words of fire upon the people before bringing a gentler tone and an offer of reconciliation. Perhaps the love or knowledge of God could not be felt before the purification by fire. Is this what you understand as hope in suffering or empowerment from experience? Or are there other meanings to these words and to your words and understanding?

In a similar tone, Hosea personalized the suffering of his people. The people became "adulterers after foreign gods" just as he loved an adulterous woman. Abraham Heschel, writing about the prophets, claimed that they intuitively felt and experienced God. God was/is not an idea but an experience (the prophet loves the people so much that he/she takes on the joy and suffering of God's chosen). You and Hosea allude to this when you make a distinction between the heart of God and the "fallen" idea. Is this "fallen" idea the thing that creates the "unhealthy beginnings" you wrote about? Think more about the connection between "unhealthy beginnings" and the mass incarceration of primarily poor people. Love is the primary solution to "unhealthy beginnings" and to the rehabilitation of people but it is not the only solution. What else can be offered? Also, can love change unjust structures in society? How does love integrate into the law?

At another point you wrote that "internal redemption causes external healing." Recently, at Pelican Bay in California, inmates went on a hunger strike to draw attention to horrendous conditions in prison. Multitudes of people outside

fasted in solidarity. It will be seen how these internal redemptions lead to external healing. Also, can these internal purifications and redemptions be directed towards changes in social policy? If so how?

One final thought—Hosea speaks often about Ephraim. Ephraim, the second born of Joseph in Egyptian captivity, translates as “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.” How does this spirit manifest in prison, within captivity?

Dear Mabelle,

Enclosed are two evaluations; one for the Old Testament and one for the New Testament.

We also are sending books for you through the chaplain’s office for your upcoming course in Liberation Theology. Read the book “Love, Power and Justice” by Paul Tillich while reading the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, 6, 7 and in Luke 6. We also sent books by Terese of Lisieux and Mother Teresa. These two spiritual luminaries address some of the qualities you are looking for, namely, “peace, love and simplicity.” These are also qualities that are integral for the administration of justice. Someone said that “justice is love made social.” This can then bring peace. Try to see how love and justice bring liberation, both personal and socially.

Dear Mabelle,

Excellent paper! Your insight and spiritual intellect continues to grow. You have made clear how love, power and justice are intertwined. Agape love, the “light from above,” is also below in community. This too is justice. This “simple path of love” is the power of the Sermon on the Mount, as well as, the Missionaries of Charity.

You speak of justice as equality. This is true. Can justice also be restorative? Can it heal the wounds of victim and offender? This is the key insight of restorative justice. Restorative justice is also a key to religious justice. Religious justice is merciful rather than punitive. And so, in some sense, restorative justice is equality in that the “crime” or “sin” is not made extraordinary but is addressed as a conditioned to be healed and made equal with love. This healing love is power.

This healing power of love in community is the kingdom of God on earth. How can this community be formed in prison and how can people outside be reconciled with the community inside? Please try to answer this question for you final paper.

Dear Lori,

I write many letters. It is a meditative dialogue. We are not interacting in an immediate sense, but we are responding to the deeper emotional and spiritual visions of one another. Your mediations from prison are beautiful and true.

I have heard it said that you can’t do much in prison except tell the truth and pray. Jesus wept in the garden of Gethsemane after long hours of prayer. He offered insights into prayer within the Sermon on the Mount. He went up to the mountain with three disciples to pray. Similarly, Anna, the prophet who foresaw the coming of the child king in the second chapter of Luke, spent years fasting and

praying while incarcerated in the temple. The Psalms are prayers.

We sent two books to the chaplain for you on centering prayer and contemplative prayer by Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington, monks who live a life a prayer. Just as a carpenter teaches the techniques of carving wood, these authors offer us the techniques of prayer.

Read these books alongside of scripture. Pray for wisdom and insight before your study and pray for thanksgiving after your study. Write down your impressions, thoughts, feelings and experience. Pick scripture passages that speak about prayer and contrast it to the insights from these books.

People within prison can teach churches on the outside how to pray. The institutional churches can then form communities of support to provide financial, legal, physical and other support structures.

Dear Lori,

Although you don't write long papers, there is a depth of feeling. This allows the reader to focus upon what is said. We feel that you can, however, expand upon your work. More concrete examples and testimonies would help to bring your vision and ideas into clearer focus. In other words, build upon what you write. In life, build upon your experiences. You have much to offer! You have begun to "penetrate the mysteries" through prayer and humility. Your scriptural insights are very good. We get a sense that you both believe and understand each of the teachings. This is a big feat. Many ministers may understand but not believe. Many people in prison may believe but not understand. But you understand and believe. And so you can bridge many gaps among people.

I was reading how the man of authority, King Nebuchadnezzar, fell prostrate before Daniel, the prophet, and said to him "Your God must be the God of gods, the master of kings and the Revealer of mysteries, since you have been able to reveal this mystery (Dn. 2:47-48). Both you and Daniel share the experience of captivity and the capacity of penetrating the mysteries, with humility. The titles of your papers reveal a direction of thought—"Purpose" and "Unlocking the Mysteries."

How can religious justice, prayer and love reveal and heal the "mystery" of sin which leads towards redemption and purpose, while serving time in prison?" Perhaps this mystery of incarceration reveals this—suffering and redemption, the cross and resurrection. Build upon your insights and your mental anguish will fall away. We all fall short of the glory. Punishing ourselves does not honor the God of life. I sense that you have been given the gift of sensitivity; you can feel the ecstasy and pathos of the prophets. And you have the belief in the power of liberation. The prison of the mind is broken with love.

Your thoughts build upon each other to reveal a theological understanding of incarceration/restoration. You quote Titus 3:3 on what brought you to prison which then reveals the joy of wisdom within Colossians 3:16. You lament like Job understanding that we need to be heard to be healed. All of this emboldens redemptive knowledge born of experience. This knowledge allowed the people to "cross the Jordon" from the captivity of Egypt to the freedom of Canaan. This is another example of "prisoner reentry." While there, in the promised land of

spiritual freedom, the call was put forth in Isaiah 1:7 to do good and uplift the oppressed.

Dear Lisa,

Your use of Psalms, Romans and Philippians show us that you have insights into “prison theology.” Paul was cast into prison in Rome, the seat of the empire. He wrote letters from prison to the Philippians, Ephesians, and Colossians and to Philemon, which is a clear example of “prisoner reentry.” It may do well to meditate upon these teachings as you begin to minister “outside the walls.”

Concerning your point about judgment and gender; misogyny is often linked into the sexual cycle of domination and submission, pain and pleasure, reward and punishment. Genuine equality would work through this.

Dear Peter,

You thank us for “simple faith” and “informed faith.” We thank you for the same. Simple faith is the heart of the child, which Jesus asked of us, to enter the kingdom within. This is faith, joy and wonderment; the “innocence of the dove.” Informed faith is the mind of the prophet, the “wisdom of the serpent.” A fine balance and synthesis of heart and mind, love and justice, simple and informed faith is a path we are exploring. Perhaps you can meditate upon the strength and mercy of faith.

Dear Ken,

We live in an information age, so anything can be researched with initiative. What we have been doing is not quit information based or research. We are trying to meditate upon fundamental questions of crime and punishment and liberation from these shackles. The statistics are out there but genuine transformation is on a deeper level than information or emotion. What is the path of love and how do prisons help or hinder? We are theological and so we examine root causes of ignorance. We put a lot of faith into the vision of each person. We create the framework for the articulation of vision, but we do not expect a certain response and so the criterion for evaluation of intelligence is not standardized. Perhaps we could codify some of our understandings.

I looked at some of your old papers and they are good. Your master’s thesis on Paul’s letters from prison and unity as the first principle of prison ministry is excellent. Your insights into addictions are healing knowledge.

Our curriculum asks a student to answer the question, how can concepts of religious justice, scripture (primarily Judeo-Christian), personal experiences and testimony create a vision which heals the trauma and suffering of prison and the actions which led to prison? Once inmates articulate this healing knowledge in their own terms, then that knowledge or they themselves can begin to offer solutions and alternatives to mass incarceration for social ills. This is our basic vision.

Could you write a short paper on your experience as a theological teacher in prison and insights into the practicality of prison theology?

C. Letters of the Prison-Industrial Complex

Dear Alice,

Working with prisoners and working with peace activists has clarified my

vision of the “military - prison - industrial complex.” At first I understood this in the sense of punishment, segregation and violence which is institutionalized. In time I saw a similarity in technology and an economy completely absorbed into the oppressive and destructive structures. I also began to see the conversion of weapons technology into “super max prisons.” It has clarified the need for a systematic rehabilitation process and for restorative justice and community based policing and restoration. It has also made me thankful for you and others who bring a healing to such a system.

Dear George,

The “praxis” you referred to has been moving with me. This “praxis” is rooted in the “poor in spirit” that Christ spoke of, that King and Gandhi exemplified and perhaps may intuitively be ingrained in the African Cultural Organization which you spoke of.

Dear George,

Concerning teaching, I understand your point about solidarity. Freedom can only be experienced when all have equality. My freedom is conditioned to your freedom. This is why I do my part on behalf of people in prison or others who are suffering of have suffering imposed upon them. The rehabilitation of society goes hand in hand with the individual. Our society tends to view salvation and every aspect of reality from a perspective of the individual. The living concept and experience of solidarity and community is not practiced by the consumer society. I feel that greed and violence under gird the actions of this system. Why does the wealthiest nation in the world incarcerate the most people in the world?

Within the understanding of “the world” and “the system,” I feel we have the power to discern yes from no. I can say no to negative influences in my life and take responsibility for negativities or crimes or sins. I can also say no to systemic poverty, racism, violence, greed and oppression which are clearly not conducive to a “beloved community” nor to the evolution of human consciousness, love, unity and the desire to attain our higher conceptions towards truth.

Dear Deanna,

Thank you for your honesty and prompt response. Your letter and your poems reveal a person of insight and creativity. It is these qualities within you that I am addressing.

First, we do not believe in proselytizing. It is not our intention to coerce or force people to believe or to think in a certain way. We are not dogmatic. We respect the inherent freedom of the individual. Putting conditions upon freedom is a form of ignorance. Many Christians judge and condemn because they are afraid. They feel threatened and build up justifications and philosophies and religions to defend their ignorance. They subsequently threaten people with the burning torment of hell (many gifted artists have transformed the burning images of hell into beautiful poetry and art).

And so I think I understand your disgust at seeing the name Jesus. History is filled with examples of people and movements which have killed and oppressed in this name. Slavery has been justified in the name of Jesus. Many in prison attempt

to redeem the poor, lost souls in the name of Jesus.

On the other hand, you mentioned Gandhi, Mother Teresa and St. Francis in your letter. These three spoke the name of Jesus in ways similar to the way we do. We are a knowledge based service organization. We have provided free educational materials and a facilitated education when mutually agreed upon, for many people. We are not asking you to believe or become a teacher or student. We are simply honoring your gifts as a writer, extending our friendship and offering books if you want them. We have some modern and ancient literature, semantics, philosophy and essays which may be tools in the literacy course you teach. When we see people doing good things, we want to support them, not fight them, change them or save them. I hope that you understand our intention and sincerity. Feel free to correct us of misunderstandings on our part. And again, thank you for the clarity within your letter. Peace.

Of course we would be interested in reading more of your work, if that is what you want.

Dear Shicon,

Peace and many blessings to you as well. Be strong and filled with faith. Let your knowledge overcome your doubt. Let your knowledge and faith give you confidence in the belly. We are distressed to hear of your situation. Enclosed is the copy you requested. Robert sends a good word to you. We pray for you.

Keep a record. When possible, get documentation from prison authorities. Your struggle for justice must persist. It will free the mind of anxiety. Also, keep a journal. Express your feelings and try to articulate your cry for justice. Much great art and philosophy has come out of trials and tribulation. The process of expression is healing. Think about the psalms and lamentations. What great outbursts of pain they contained. Perhaps they can counsel and guide you.

We are all in need of healing. Your situation is more extreme and immediate than most. We honor your struggle. Persist in your faith.

Submission to the Erie County Legislature concerning abuse and the U.S. Department of Justice Investigation of the Erie County Holding Center in July 2009:

Thesis proposal: The majority of inmates within the prison-industrial complex are there because of addictions. The majority of addictions are caused because of physical pain and poverty. Therefore, one solution is to reduce poverty by creating employment in health care. Any reform to the system must begin to deconstruct the system by creating a vision of an alternative reality. The appropriate rallying call of many is “we need jobs and education, not mass incarceration.”

1. The U.S Department of Justice investigation cited deficiencies and denials of health care to prisoners. On-site health care workers and better enforcement were two recommendations. Medical staff could begin to replace guards and administration. Because this nation has the largest prison system in the world, any increase in employment in this industry would be counterproductive. We need a transfer of employment from prisons to health care, both physical and mental.

2. In Erie County, health facilities are constantly threatened with closure while the prison business continues to thrive. Therefore, decriminalize drugs by

framing them as a health rather than a crime issue.

3. Create a better dialogue and working relationship between prisoner rights advocates and health care workers.

4. The mental health, substance abuse and prison institutions can all be considered abusive in their own ways. Therefore, we cannot replace one institution with another.

5. Detox health clinics exist outside of prison. The question needs to be asked, would addicts under police authority be better served by a clinic inside or outside of prison? It is understood that society would be better served by reductions in addictions of any kind. Power (punishment) and money (greed) are rarely addressed as addictions.

Testimony before the Erie County Legislature Community Enrichment Committee; 10/1/2009

1. The American Prison System derives its spiritual lineage from the American Plantation System. Any solutions to the present human rights abuses at the Erie County Holding Center and the Erie County Correctional Facility need to be seen in this light.

A. The 13th amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolished legal slavery. However, it did allow for forced servitude as a punishment for crime, that is, within prison.

B. The civil right legislation in 1964 and 1965 abolished legal segregation. Within 2 generations of these acts, the United States underwent a vast expansion of the prison industrial complex. The numbers of inmates multiplied 10 fold.

C. The reluctance of the Erie County administration including, but not limited to, the Erie County Executive, the Erie County Attorney, and the Erie County Sheriff is reminiscent of the actions and mentality of American slave owners and the Jim Crow civil order.

D. The American Prison Industrial Complex is similar to the American Military Industrial Complex. Both systems are inheritably oppressive and destructive, and both are composed primarily of poor people, and therefore, poverty is the main contributory and perpetuating force.

2. Our elected officials are public servants and therefore must do the will of the public. We demand that federal and state investigations and reforms be undertaken, that human rights abuses end and that standards of human decency, respect and health be implemented. We demand that elected officials abide by the law they have sworn to uphold. In other words, we advise that our elected officials “Undo the heavy burden, and let the oppressed go free.”

III. General observations and theories

Jesus was poor and in prison. Jesus the Liberator has built its ethical consciousness and theological intelligence upon the humility of poor prisoners. We have integrated the praxis of Liberation Theology and made it the foundation of our educational philosophy. This has informed our understanding of what Christianity was and should be; a revolutionary movement. The foundation of this movement is and always has been the poor and oppressed people of the dominant social

order who possess faith and intellect. The democratic Jesus also understands the value of working with people living within the confines of the dominant social order who will assist in this revolutionary process. Therefore, we see the need to develop “covenant” relationships with the ecclesiastical structures in society. We also understand the inner and outer, genuine and false meaning of words such as “rehabilitation,” “restoration,” “sin,” “crime,” “suffering,” “healing,” “mercy” and “judgment.”

We have come to understand that the development of intellect is intimately linked to emotional well being. Prison and punishment is antithetical to this. The crimes, and people, that are punished with prison usually have root causes in the emotional chaos of a broken social order; negative social forces create negative actions. This does not excuse harmful actions. The spiritual law of ahimsa, non-injury, is one we aspire to. To atone for harmful actions is a step towards spiritual freedom. The atonement of an individual within an oppressive and violent society is a key insight of spiritual and Christian liberation. The spiritually liberated individual offers the key to a spiritually liberated society. Those who have been broken by a violent and oppressive society and have subsequently liberated themselves offer the clearest and most powerful testimony. The poor and oppressed “save” the world.

Our praxis and immediacy allow us to focus upon the present moment – Christ consciousness. We see Christ within all people. And so love is ever present, even if well hidden by ignorance. Since love and Christ are within the present moment, we tend to be a-historical, or rather, we do not teach the historical development of Christianity. We leave that to the domain of others. And since the love of Christ is ever present, it simply needs to be drawn out of others; “The kingdom of God is within you.” This is the essence of a facilitated approach to education. The communal growth in the spirit becomes the primary focus. We are a community of believers. This is the essence of the Book of Acts. The teacher/student relationship becomes unimportant or nonexistent. The “teacher” is a guide. The “teacher” listens in order to instruct. A priori knowledge and absolute truths, if they exist at all, exist first within the experience of each person. And each person’s experience is valid and contributes to the comprehensive vision of truth. This “unified theory of physics”, within ethics, is born out of experience. The experience of liberation from oppression and suffering is the central message of Christian Prison Theology.

We encourage critical thinking. In order to guide the thinking soul, it is necessary to listen and respond to individual needs and vision. The criterion of truth or intelligence is a personal expression of objective reality. Christ addressed the objective reality of power and punishment with love and freedom. The individual incarcerated soul within this world of suffering, this imprisoned social reality, detaches from the suffering, doubt and punishment and honors the “still small voice within” of love and freedom. This eternal power, reborn every generation, is the revolutionary force of Christianity which overcomes the world of the empire, the world of prisons.

In order to overcome the world of prisons, we need to listen to the “still

small (revolutionary) voice” within the empire’s prison. The beauty and intelligence of this suffering voice is the captive weeping like a willow by the rivers of Babylon in Psalm 137. It is the voice of the prophets crying out for justice. It is the reasoning pleas within the book of Job which questions suffering and even a God of a world of suffering. It is the lamentations of any conscientious person knowing love is greater than punishment, but who suffers nonetheless. And so we have come to confront the suffering of life and the suffering caused by mass incarceration. Not by eliminating suffering or by being distracted by superficial happiness can we overcome suffering. And so we enter into the heart of suffering, like a merciful bodhisattva. The cross of Christ precipitates the resurrection of joy. Meaningful existence empowered Jesus to liberate the social order alongside the individual, which led to a cross of joy.

These insights have led us to resonate with a literature that speaks about liberation from suffering. Prison Theology is an extension of Liberation Theology. At the core of our literature is the vast corpus of Liberation Theology which has gone on to include Black Theology and Women’s Theology. Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” and Gustavo Gutierrez’s “A Theology of Liberation” are seminal texts.

The emotional power of the Psalms, the Book of Lamentations and the Book of Job give us a key to the spiritual transcendence or loving embracement of the human condition. Great poetry, literature or memoir, being an honest expression of this vastness, reveals this depth and power. Facilitating that emotional expression into the architecture of a theological language is a part of our prison pedagogy. And so the “literature of memory”, which leads to the writing of a spiritual autobiography, has allowed students to understand and be healed by releasing the trauma of crime, punishment and oppression in a constructive form. There is no judgment of autobiography and the only criteria would be honesty and intention.

Meditational techniques from both the East and the West “free us” from the world of samsara, or perhaps root us more deeply into it. The vast world of Christian “mystical” literature has been useful in centering ourselves within the punishment of prison. To this end, we have used the works of St. John of the Cross, Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington, among others. Meditational writers like Kathleen Norris and Henri Nouwen have shown us how to personalize our spiritual longings.

The great vastness and depth of Buddhist scripture, which is rooted in the vaster depth of Sanskrit literature, teaches us methods of detachment from suffering and ignorance and roots us in the freedom of the “pure” mind which can only come through spiritual discipline, which is the highest form of “work.” “Mysterious is the path of work” declares Lord Krishna within the Bhagavad-Gita. Work within the mind and body connection, under the general umbrella of Hatha Yoga, is more valuable than the separation of the mind and body that is passed down within Western consciousness. And so, Patanjali’s insights and the science of mind within the Vedic and yogic traditions are more pertinent than Plato and Descartes.

Jewish Holocaust literature gives added depth to the African-American experience. Since the greatest percentage of people within prison are African-American and poor, a literature that explains and explores the racial and class makeup of the American prison system is another great resource for a Prison Theology. To this end, the writings of Angela Davis, Mumia Abu Jamal and Michelle Alexander confirm the racial legal underpinnings of the prison system and adjoining laws. Sociological, political and psychological studies such as Viktor Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning" can go alongside of Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Readings from Anne Frank, Primo Levi and Simon Wiesenthal can enhance and enrich Malcolm X, George Jackson, Jalil Muntaqim, and other literature which emerged out of the consciousness of Black Nationalism.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Letters & Papers from Prison" remind us of the personal resistance of the Christian who remembers that "grace is costly." Similarly, Dorothy Day, the Berrigan brothers, Sister Helen Prejean, and Kathy Kelly among others have testified to the Christian witness that Thoreau articulated in secular terms. The writings of the great Russian authors, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Berdyaev offer a profound depth to the freedom within Christian "trials and tribulations."

Prior to all this great spiritual literature is the experience of the individual. Life is with the living. A person in prison is to be honored as a reflection of God. A reflection of God is a deep source of light and wisdom. The light of God within prison is a human being with a story to share, a love to give and insights which can heal us. Amplifying that voice while suspending our judgment of their actions is an act of merciful justice, which is restorative justice, which is religious justice. The voice of the living is as great as the voice of the dead. The words of the bible, though true, are the words of the dead; the ancestors of our consciousness. King David was a great sinner, a killer of men and an adulterer. Moses killed an Egyptian. Both David and Moses were exiled from the Kingdom. Some of our students speak of prison as an exile. Some of our students "penetrate the mysteries" of life, like Daniel did within prison. And Paul gave counsel and built up the early Mediterranean church while in prison. We are asking prisoners within the 21st century American prison to reawaken and redefine the spiritual liberation of our land.

The living voices of people within the dead system of prison are a testimony of spiritual survival. This is why we facilitate the bringing forth of the inner light and meaning within each inmate/student. The letters included in the preceding section show the variety and depth of Prison Theology as exemplified by inmate/teachers. The "student/teacher" outside of prison who responds to inmates points out and elaborates upon the essence of what is written. At times, the "student/teacher" brings forth added depth of meaning that may be unspoken but is implicit. This is akin to the insight that faith is the "assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hb. 11:1) A teacher can hear what a student is saying and what a student is intending to say, without imposing doctrine or putting words in his/her mouth.

Faith and devotion to the individual as a student and a person is at the heart of service. Service and knowledge synthesized is at the heart of Jesus the Liberator.

It is also at the heart of the message of the great saint Ramanuja, who synthesized Jnana yoga (knowledge) with Bhakti yoga (devotion) to create an integrated path to enlightenment.

We give our devotion and knowledge to the spiritually and economically poor people in prison. This fulfills the two forms of poverty expressed in the Christian gospels. Christ is in prison. Jesus the Liberator wrote letters to Ken about the 1st noble truth of the Buddha; to Faruq about Black Theology of Liberation; to Charles about the Law and Christian self esteem and judgment; to John about forgiveness; and to Anthony, Robert and Deborah about courage and meaning within suffering. And so within these correspondences, like the correspondences of Paul to the churches, we eked out a vision of a Christian solution to the crime of punishment, judgment, isolation and prisons. Simultaneously, Jesus the Liberator wrote letters to Elizabeth, Machel and Lori cooperatively guiding and developing a “systematic” educational approach.

And so we have begun to focus and articulate the collective wisdom and experiences of thinkers and ministers both inside and outside of prison. Our approach has included ethics, sociology, psychology, theology and literature, among other intellectual disciplines. As pastors and humanitarians, we have extended compassion and suspended judgment, knowing that love is the highest form of knowledge and the greatest act of Christian service. Keeping in mind the wisdom of Bo Lozoff, who reminded us that we are all “doing time”; we have come to understand that the proper question to ask an inmate would not be “what have you done?” but rather, “what is within you?” This opens the way for forgiveness. Forgiveness is the necessary prerequisite for atonement and justice. Truth needs reconciliation, as the experience of South Africa has shown us. We can critique work by students without judgment and with great emotional support. This approach leaves a door open. It also frees us from giving a sense of rejection. Prison is a cage and the worthlessness of individuals is a degradation of the spirit that we want to replace with dignity and empowerment. Justice must restore rather than punish. The society that punishes is addicted to violence. And poor people are always the first to receive violence and the last to be forgiven.

We have further come to understand that there is no consciousness at the time of a crime but that we can learn from mistakes. A Pentagon general, who orders mass murder, or a Wall Street banker, who engages in mass theft, has no consciousness but their actions are not criminalized. Can the empire which rewards the lack of consciousness of the rich and punishes the lack of consciousness of the poor be said to be a just society? Suffice to say, the prisons of America are filled with the poor.

The poor in prison have reminded us of this truth; the mystery and paradox of Christian power is that it is powerless. “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

From the Inside, Out

Ken Lashway

In February 1999, I was arrested. I never thought such a thing would happen to me. I was devastated! But I also was guilty. Later that year I pled guilty in a court of law and was subsequently sentenced to 4 to 12 years in a state prison. I thought I had hit bottom. I was wrong! Things went from bad to worse. Within eighteen months my wife died in a car accident, I lost the house we had owned for over ten years, family took most of what I had, and I saw much family and many friends abandon me. But I am glad the story does not end there! That's where I was when I was introduced to Jesus the Liberator Seminary (JLS)... on the "inside".

I heard about JLS from a fellow prisoner. I wrote to Rev. Hugh Pratt. He was very encouraging. I soon decided to begin the coursework for the certificate program. My home church agreed to pay the modest fees. Within about eighteen months I finished the coursework. I was blessed but thought - "OK, now what?"

During that time, I began to teach a weekly Bible Study in rotation with two other men. I also became involved in the leadership of the Protestant community. The chaplain often spoke of his desire to offer more for the men in the facility. In one of the many letters from Rev. Pratt, the solution became obvious. An onsite pilot program with JLS would fill the need. After more writing, phone calls, and much negotiation with the prison administration, the first course was planned and advertised. About twenty students registered.

The program continued for over six years. I participated as a teacher for over four years until I was transferred.

I am not writing to tell about the specifics of the JLS pilot program. I will not dwell on either the successes or the failures. Instead, I want to focus on the godly fundamentals that applied then, and still apply today. They provide the framework for anyone who would seek to teach or preach in a prison setting. It is not only a philosophy but a practical, hands-on and proven approach... from the "inside, out."

I would like to highlight four aspects of my prison ministry that became vital to all I did. These include: consistency, use of biblical principles, the importance of mentoring, and establishing relationships. Each of these maxims helped me to touch the lives of hundreds of men both as a teacher of seminary courses and as a Christian in nearly impossible circumstances.

One of the first things I did when I arrived in prison was to walk. I walked at a brisk pace and usually at the same time each day. When someone wanted to talk my reply was, "Come on, let's walk." I was known as "the guy who walks a lot."

People in the facility watched. Soon, I found out they were watching other things. My work, personal attitudes and behavior became topics of conversation; when I got up and went to bed, my prayer and devotional times, what books I read and studied and who I spent time with. I heard the word "consistent" used about me by both prisoners and staff. As a result, men often came to me "just to talk." I was asked many times, "How do you maintain your consistency?" What a great opportunity to tell of my testimony and my "walk" with Jesus Christ! The

apostle Paul's words rang true, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him." (Col. 3:17)

The use of biblical principles in prison is unexpected and often looked down upon by both prisoners and staff. Yet, it is necessary to live by them anyway.

Mike had been incarcerated since he was sixteen. He was doing a sentence of 25 years to life. He had been incarcerated for nearly 30 years. Mike was immature, hurtful, used people to get what he wanted and generally could not be trusted. When he began attending church, many in the Protestant community asked the same question - "Why?"

Mike began to attend church and Bible Study regularly. His lifestyle outside of church changed. He was seen giving with no expectations of getting back, he didn't act out as much, he began to pray publicly, he even spoke of the Bible when there were no Christians around to impress. Yet most of us were still skeptical.

When the JLS program began, Mike was among the first to sign up. When it was decided that a five-dollar fee would be charged for each course, Mike donated to a scholarship fund for the prisoners who could not afford the fee.

The teaching staff decided not to give exams. Instead, several short papers were assigned for each course. Mike's average was B+/A-. On one paper, however, I gave him a C- because I believed this paper was not of the same caliber as the others I had seen. He reacted in class. He reacted even more as we left the building and the chaplain was not present. I thought Mike would respond with physical violence.

Mike avoided me for a few days. When it became apparent that he would not come to me, I decided the responsibility was mine. I prayed and meditated on Mt. 18:15. "If a brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." I went to Mike and asked him to walk with me.

Many other men watched us that afternoon. All of us wondered what the response would be. I did not apologize for the grade. I apologized for offending him and for saying things I should have stated in a gentler manner. Mike stopped me. He said he was the one who needed to apologize. He said, "I'm sorry." Before we began the next class, Mike apologized publicly to the class, the chaplain and myself for his words and behavior. Mike had been the epitome of a "hardened criminal." Yet by using biblical principles, he allowed the Holy Spirit to touch his heart. Though the C- remained unchanged, a brother in Christ WAS changed!

The notion of mentoring is modeled in the gospels by Jesus with His disciples. Paul also mentors Timothy and Titus as he writes the epistles. I learned how important it was to be a mentor... even in prison.

Peter was a man I met through my work assignment. He had been incarcerated at an early age and was given a sentence of 15 years to life. He had been in prison about 25 years when we met. Peter was talented in many ways but art was his gift.

As we talked (and walked), Peter shared that he had occasionally been involved in the church. However, the disparity between the behavior of most of the

prisoners in church and out of the church troubled him greatly. He had no intention of returning to church.

A short time later, I was scheduled to preach at a Sunday service. I invited him to attend. Peter rolled his eyes and replied with a hesitant “maybe.” He did attend. After that, he occasionally attended other services, too.

We still talked (and walked) periodically. We discussed many spiritual and everyday topics. Peter’s attendance at church became more regular. He even began attending the weekly Bible Study. Several months later I spoke with him about an opening on the newly formed deacon board. They were to care for the physical needs of the church. One of those needs would be to redecorate the chapel. After some prayer and meetings with the chaplain, Peter agreed to the appointment.

As the year wore on, a position opened on the elder board. As assistant pastor, I recommended Peter for the job. The others in leadership agreed. Yes, it was again time to talk (and walk). Of course Peter was overwhelmed. But he soon accepted the challenge. Part of the responsibility of an elder was public prayer, leading worship, public reading of Scripture and filling in as needed as a teacher in the weekly Bible Study. Peter did all that was asked of him and more. We supported and encouraged him. He also was the first to complete the JLS pilot program at the prison!

Ironically, within a few months, I was transferred to another prison. That was several years ago. Peter is still involved in the church as a preaching/teaching elder. What a blessing it is to know that Peter is still a leader in the prison church!

The last principle is that of establishing and maintaining relationships with a host of people in the prison setting. These relationships were with many different groups and individuals. Maintaining these relationships on a daily basis proved the most difficult.

Different relationships within the Protestant faith community included those like Mike and Peter who were regular attenders, men who attended occasionally, men who used the church and the services to have their physical and/or relational needs met and many others too numerous to list here. The Protestant community also included Rev. C., the prison chaplain. He and I often saw issues differently. He did not live there. I did. His leadership style was different than mine. But, with the help of God and many meetings, we managed to get along quite well. Today I realize we became good friends.

Relationships with other faith groups and religious traditions are another important aspect of this principle. I am grateful for Rev. C.’s skill in that area.

Relationships with the prison administration, corrections officers and other employees were paramount. It was easy to build walls with these people. It was more difficult to tear down or to stop walls from being built up at all. Having working relationships made prison life easier for all of us.

Lastly, relationships with other prisoners were important. Regardless of his beliefs, language, or behavior, I needed to be in a place where, when someone needed help or wanted to talk, I was approachable and available. Again, the works of the apostle Paul became real, “I have become all things to all men so that by

all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings.” (1 Cor. 9:22b 23)

That part of my life ended several years ago. I have been released from prison and remain on parole. But I still employ these principles on the “outside.” Yes, They work here, too!

The result? A measure of credibility is gained. As a convicted felon, there are many things I cannot do. Certain jobs, some relationships, the ability to drive, and being locked out of some ministry opportunities are a few examples. But the areas I am able to do still show that credibility. I am still asked, “How are you able to maintain your consistency?” The answer is still the same: because of my relationship with Jesus Christ!

Are there opportunities for me in spite of the limitations? Yes, both formal and informal. The formal include teaching adult Sunday school and leading a Men’s Prayer and Discussion Group that meets twice each month. Informal opportunities involve numerous phone calls, texts, cards, coffee, breakfasts, lunches and dinners to mention a few. Opportunities are not always obvious. Sometimes I need to carefully seek them out.

The last word? I could go on and on. Prayer. It is my prayer for me that I allow the Lord to use me as He has all these years. For you? I pray God will touch your hearts and lives to be motivated to reach out to others regardless of whether they live... on the inside... or out!

Reconciliation

Machelle D. Gardner

Fellowship in Community

The “Kingdom of God” is we who have accepted Jesus Christ as Our Lord and Savior by faith. We who are mature should take such a view of things in a way that puts into practice the things we have obtained on the journey. (Ph. 3:15) In community, we are strong in the Lord, who has given us authority and power to do amazing things. Jesus has made this power available to us through our knowledge of Him who called us by His glory and goodness. (2 P. 1:3) When we choose to do the things of God in complete obedience, holy and acceptable, we live in love, which binds us together in perfect unity. (Col. 3:12-14) We are in a position to breakdown the opposing forces of evil through reconciliation and forgiveness, uniting people outside of prison with those inside.

Within community is where we are able to fellowship, grow and learn the will of God for our lives. We are able to join and create an environment that is safe and secure, protecting one another from the attacks of the world. Fellowship is defined as a group with similar interests. Fellowship in community can bring reconciliation between those on the outside with those who are incarcerated. As a believer begins his/her walk, fellowship becomes a vital part of the journey.

We see fellowship in scripture early on when God creates Adam. God then brings all the beasts of the field and birds of the air to Adam to name them; whatever Adam calls the living creature that is its name. (Gn. 2:19-20) Consider the idea that the first animal Adam looked at was a four legged catlike beast with a mane. Adam called out, “Lion!” By sharing this task of naming with Adam, God in all his sovereignty understands that fellowship is an important part of His divine plan.

The story of Adam and Eve shows that God desires to commune with each individual and also embraces the fellowship between people. It is a revelation for us to see that God is in agreement with us when believers fellowship. We believers talk with one another, sharing our burdens and ideas. We also offer our gifts and talents to support the mission at hand. When we are in fellowship with God and one another, we can speak life into the lives of those around us.

I remembered being in fellowship and sharing about how I wanted my life to change. I shared the fact that my choices were causing pain in the most important relationship in my life, which was with my son. My choices were causing a negative impact on our relationship and thus I ended up in prison. This understanding took place on a Kairos walk where volunteers from the outside came in and shared the love of Jesus Christ through testimonies. I had to sit and examine myself by considering what the reoccurring factors in my life were. I had to accept responsibility and create a different life for myself if I had any real attempt in changing. Kairos offered a safe place for me to share and I began to speak out about a new life. As I shared my hurts and pains, God placed the right people in my life. In fellowship with others who had experienced similar hurts, we were able to connect and ask God to come into our circumstances.

The Violence and Reconciliation of Moses

Moses became overwhelmed when he witnessed an act done to a fellow Hebrew. He rises up, kills the Egyptian, and hides the body. He then becomes afraid and thinks, "What I did must have become known." (Exodus 2:14) This probably caused Moses to fear and make choices without considering other options. This violent act of Moses robs him of his humanity, yet we see God restore so much through Moses' trusting in the Lord. God's grace offers healing to a shattered life. Throughout history violence has become a way of life. To think of something new like reconciliation seems to be far from the reach of humanity.

In Moses' wandering and desperation, he asks for forgiveness and starts the process of reconciliation; forgiveness was probably sought in the wilderness of his journey. This is paralleled in the story of the Israelites in which God led them into the wilderness. The wilderness has a connotation for barrenness, which is intended to draw us into a closer relationship with our Divine Father. God taught the Israelites to trust and depend upon Him in the test He gave them along their journey. God's method of teaching provided them with a tool for overcoming their past and offered them a new way of living spontaneously.

In his escaping death, Moses came to this place called Midian where he sat down by a well. We can only imagine the conversation between God and Moses. Moses may have said, "Lord, I have just killed a man knowing that the law states that my life has to be given in exchange for his, so I fled to avoid my punishment. I have just traveled across the desert, and endured the scorching sun by day and the wind by night. I came upon this well tired and afraid from the journey as well as thirsty, but in the midst of my pain your presence was with me." God may have answered, "It is written 'Thou shall not kill;' but I have something better to offer you today, my dear son, and that is my grace and mercy. Therefore, I earnestly urge you to consider repenting and confessing your sins and then open your heart to receive the gift of forgiveness, my beloved son." Thus, we see in the journey of Moses that he fled to Midian to start a new life, but through his new life, he was reminded of his former life; He will use Moses to bring about a better life for the Israelites.

Now he was gaining wisdom into his circumstances living as an alien in a foreign land. Through this insight, he remembers his suffering from the past and cried out to the Lord for help. God uses this to show him the suffering of those in Egypt. The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt." (Exodus 3:7) I believe Moses future was connected to his past and the deliverance he sought was in the lives he saved. God brings Moses back to Egypt in which He makes one nation out of two violent events.

Being Called

Another example of communing gives us a closer look at God's desire to be intimate with his children. This is where we come to know him and his attributes, his redemptive names, his laws and how to worship. Exodus lays this foundation out strategically just as Moses' life gives us a closer look at this theme. Moses is tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, when he notices flames coming from the mountain, Horeb. He sees that the bush is on fire, yet it did not burn up. Moses

goes over to see the strange thing and that is when God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!” (Exodus 3:5)

I see a parallel between my journey and the life of Moses; we both were called by God to come into a personal relationship with him at a place of wilderness. While attending Kairos, I had an experience with God similar to that which Moses did at the burning bush. God had already orchestrated the place he would call me. In my obedience we came to fellowship together while the Holy Spirit came into my life. This experience filled me with a passion and opened me to a new way of life. I had given my life to Jesus Christ. I believe God was saying - “Now I am calling you into a personal relationship with me to share My Will with you, my loving daughter, Mabelle.” Just as Moses answered God, “Here I am,” and bowed down, I too bowed down on my knees and lay out prostrate full of His Glory. What an amazing experience! This shows that God does not force His will on us. Instead, He pleasantly invites us to “Come let’s share together.” In Moses’ response, the nature of God’s characteristics was revealed, as well as the fact that, wherever God meets you is Holy Ground.

These two examples give us evidence that God places emphasis on us and within us. When we open our hearts to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, He draws us into a personal relationship with Him. As the believer seeks God and spends time with Him and others, the nature of God starts to come alive in the life of that individual. God understands that in order for Him to be seen in the world, He has to establish His plans in the hearts of His people. He sets things in motion by revealing Himself to those who are paying attention and willing to surrender their lives. As He communes and watches for fruit to be produced, He begins to give instructions that need to be obeyed and shared within community. We will look further at Moses’ journey to establish this fact.

God tells Moses that He has heard the cry of the Israelites and that Moses is to go and bring them out of Egypt. First, God sends Moses to the elders of Israel. This shows that there must be order, respect and honor in the place where God has established fellowship. God seems to have already orchestrated the right people to be open and attentive to the things of God; which in this case is the oppression of the Israelites. Moses has to go to the elders and share what God has shared with him. Then he sits with the elders in community, where all of them probably sought God in worship to help guide Moses along in his return to Egypt. It is in this type of setting that believers can share in common what God has revealed to each person as it relates to the overall agenda. As this takes place, all focus is narrowed down to a central focus where each believer can take part by operating with his/her own gift to help further the kingdom.

I witnessed this in worship leadership where we had a prayer seminar. The guest shared how her ministry had been fasting, praying and seeking God in the welfare of those incarcerated. She explained how the first stages of the plan had already begun through sharing and studying of God’s Word. Now she was setting up the middle and last stages by sharing and giving instructions of what we, as fellow believers in Jesus Christ, should be doing with our time. She gave instructions to implement a specific scripture, Isaiah 35:1-6, into our prayer life and

began thanking God for the things we prayed for in prayer time. It really got my attention to sit and listen to how God had spoken about a situation that needed His attention. Prayer was the avenue to solicit the needs of the people. To accomplish the goal, God in His love graciously answers with a word and a plan. The intercessors loosen what heaven has established in scripture, taking ownership on the land. Then the troops of the territory claim new territory through declarative prayer. The final stage is training the foot soldiers to possess the land and partake in the Kingdom benefits. God uses everyone in the Kingdom!

Machelle's Reconciliation Story

I have come to understand that in my own spiritual journey, I am living in a wilderness time in my incarceration. I did not understand this in the beginning and for that reason I kept going in circles in life, like the Israelites. My view of God was distorted due to the relationship I had with my earthly father and those who were in my life as a child. As my relationship grew with God and I came into fellowship with other believers, my view and understanding of God changed rapidly. Thank You, Father! I spent time getting to know Him through prayer, reading the bible, listening to Christian ministries and attending church. In my earnest desire to seek Him, I cultivated a loving relationship that is the center of my life now. However, I still fall down and often stray from time to time but there is nothing that can separate me from Him. "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

It is a daily ongoing commitment to place God first, like the Israelites. And like the Israelites, I often forget and go back to things in my past. His mercy and grace remind me that with each step I take He is with me. Moses was a visible sign to the children of Israel that God used to walk with them as well as warn them of the tough terrains of life. Understanding the lessons of the Israelites helps us, in the Body of Christ, to manage our lives and make efforts to reconcile to God. We have to believe there is a greater power than ourselves by acknowledging Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior and relinquishing our will to Him. "For we do not have a high priest, who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are yet was without sin." (Hebrews 4:15)

God has a better plan we must be able to choose. In order for us to experience deliverance from our suffering, we need a power stronger than human to hold the pieces of our broken life together. Satisfaction can lead us into different views concerning reconciliation, but to attain it and enjoy a liberated life of the devastation of violence we must agree to step into what God offers through reconciliation. "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18)

Holy community is the place where God brings all people together to demonstrate how He reconciles past and present by taking in two people and making them one. We observe this in scriptures taken from Ephesians 2:12-16 that God is reconciling the Jew and Gentile just as He does the sinner and the sinned against.

Two people are pitted against each other, yet each person must not see the other as the stranger. Scripture says, “Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” (Ephesians 2:12) God’s role in reconciliation becomes a gigantic task in our society, yet He uses community to bring about mutual healing for both parties. Those who reject the message open the door for the others to come in and receive the message of reconciliation. Often the parties view one another in several different ways: demonized, colonized, generalized, not all these possibilities play in the relation between the individuals. Yet, those parties’ view of one another is from a place of hurt and violence. Each party has to forgive and see each other as God’s wonderful design.

Just as in the story of Moses, I have faced challenges in unhealthy relationships. Too often I have felt defeated in life. I continued down destructive paths that lead me to many disappointments; often going in circles doing the same thing repeatedly. I had no idea that every time I went from one relationship to another I was just going deeper and deeper into a revolving cycle that had no end. I tried everything to stop my own destruction but nothing seemed to fix the problem. I would do things like move in an instance and then I would blame myself for the breakup.

This was so overwhelming that I could not sleep at night. Sometimes, I would say things like, “Why do I keep doing this?” but got no answer. I often felt like running and not looking back, but I was responsible for another life, I could not do what I thought. This was not a good life! I did not cry out and the cycles continued until it lead me into a life of committing crimes, drinking, using alcohol and lying just to survive. I never contemplated doing anything illegal but as I went to this dark place, I just wanted all the craziness in my life to stop. I did not know how to stop it and neither did I know whom to ask. I was incarcerated for breaking the law, but my actions were not improving. I was doing the same things as I was on the outside. Slowly, I realized I had to make some changes and fast so at one of my tough moments I just decided to try JESUS. Those around me made it difficult but I kept going on. After receiving my 15-year sentencing, I knew that it was the bottom for me. All kinds of thoughts raced through my mind but I remembered as a little girl that my mother prayed and things turned around for us. Therefore, now it was my time to pray.

I would have not realized the effect that it was making on my life until I sought God in my experience. I invited Him into my life at the jail and He stepped in graciously. He has brought me to a place of peace. Though I still have challenges, I must testify they are not like what I lived before Jesus came into my life. Being able to have fellowship with others and be reconciled with God continues to be more than I ever expected.

The Reconciling Blood of Christ

God knew that for all the sin in the world, past and present, even into the future, that the only blood that would be needed to vindicate all humanity would have to come from a sinless man. “He who knew no sin but became sin so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor. 5:21)

Many Christians often find that the reconciliation offered during suffering is not within them but comes from God. Suffering is often a path to reconcile to God who offers mercy in the life of the wounded. As God takes the lead, in the process of reconciling, the heart of the victim turns from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh. We saw this earlier in this life of Moses. God dealt with violence and in return God sent Moses to help the Children of Israel. During the journey, God is first in the victim's life and the lie that once had power becomes weaker and weaker through the redeeming power of God's Word. This produces courage and hope to reach out and trust the plan of God's sovereign will. God really cares about our suffering so much that he experiences it first hand by enduring His passion to Calvary.

The precious blood of Jesus that was shed that day is the source of life to all humankind in the face of violence. As reconciliation is sought, it takes us beyond the limits of existence and into the depth of life. Blood is a symbol of both life and death. Paul wrote that the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18) The symbols of the blood and the cross acknowledge violence, suffering, death and life. They also provide the vehicle for overcoming, preparing the basis of reconciliation.

The Forgiveness of Christ

Often in the world, punishment becomes the primary path to undo the violence that was committed on the victim. Only forgiveness can truly bring the perpetrator to repent. Punishment does not always guarantee repentance. Incarceration has been used as a form of punishment. This method has not met the needs of the wounded; instead, it has created a greater burden for the citizens. Prisons were designed to provide a monastery-like setting to allow the offenders to meditate on their sins, hoping that it would lead to repentance. Only through Jesus Christ, the one who forgives sins, can anyone receive forgiveness.

Paul declared His Word in Acts 13:38: "Therefore my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you." Paul is making it absolutely clear that we are unable to forgive, so the burden is upon the shoulders of Jesus. Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for you souls." (Mt. 11:29) Jesus understands the state of this imperfect world and the evil, which preys upon His people. He does not create our bodies to carry stress, bitterness, anger, and the trauma caused by violence. Yet, like sheep we have all gone astray. (Is. 53:6) But when we come to the Father, "He is faithful to forgive, and cleanse us of all unrighteousness." (1 Jn.1:9) This begins the healing process. Forgiveness is the bridge to reconciliation.

Believers must realize that it is not our efforts which are needed to bring about reconciliation. Jesus' death on the cross breaks barriers. The means of reconciliation takes us to limits beyond human existence as well as into the very maw of violence.

"But God proves His love for us that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by His blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God." (Romans 5:8-9) Thus, the

offer of reconciliation is not given to us gratuitously, but comes to us from God who felt the enmity deeply, to the point of wrath. The process of reconciliation is most effective when it starts with self. Consciously seeking to uncover the root of the pain and discovering God's forgiveness of one's sins. The process begins by initiating God, which places Him in His rightful position to enable the victim to rebuild his/her own humanity. Rediscovering faith and trust in God creates an environment for God to come in and heal. As the believer seeks God through a personal relationship and takes part in community, the focus is placed on God, by which the door is opened to receive the power for resurrection.

Jesus and Reconciliation

Now that I have laid some foundational principles, let us examine the principle of reconciliation and how community can be a pathway to bridge the gap for those incarcerated. Scripture says that it is God who reconciles us to Himself; it is not of human work. (2 Cor. 5:18-19, Rom. 5:10-11) When we come together in holy community and start to share our own story of the violence and suffering that took place in our lives, it opens up our hearts to invite God into the situation. There must be some guidelines established in community with an emphasis on trust and confidentiality. This must be established so that all who come will feel safe and secure enough to share. Then, as we gather together and invite the Holy Spirit into our hearts, minds, circumstances and situations within community, Jesus begins to empower us to address the problems at a greater level. The understanding of God's perspective comes into view and takes the lead in the process of reconciliation within the victim. This offers the believer the reassurance of the love, mercy and grace of God. The victim gains courage as well as develops trust in him/herself, others and God. It is when we begin to cry out to God that He hears us and puts things into motion. In the reconciliation process, the believer must discover and experience God's forgiveness of his/her own trespasses. This is reflected in the fellowship that takes place between the believer and God. The victim has been bought by God's reconciling grace to be able to forgive his tormentor. God steps in during this stage and begins to work in the life of the wounded.

As a follower of Jesus, it is urgent that I understand the process is initiated by the one harmed. We as a society and community must understand that the objective of reconciliation is not the crime done but the humanity of the life of the person who did the crime. What makes the suffering coming from violence so difficult is that it tends to rob us of our life. It is when the wounded rediscovers his own humanity, which takes place in community with others who have experienced suffering. Experiencing suffering opens up the heart to accept, in faith, God's offer of humanity. It is here that God's grace to the victim's shattered life wells up and compassion is offered to the one who committed the violation.

Celebrate Recovery

Celebrate Recovery addresses pains, hurts, and hang-ups that all humankind deals with in life. Time often makes things worse; wounds that are left unattended fester and spread infection. Celebrate Recovery is a biblical balance program that is based on the words of Jesus Christ. While in this program, I have witnessed

transformation in women who have experienced the same challenge as Cain. Many of the women struggle with addictions ranging from alcohol, drugs, money and relationships, but one of the common threads in all of us is the fact that we were led by our emotions. I sat in a group where one of the women shared a story of how she was so accustomed to pleasing others, that when it came time for her to leave an unhealthy relationship, she was unable. As she drove away from the house the emotions became so overwhelming that she returned home. Shortly, after returning home she acted out and committed a crime. But in light of the circumstances, the recovery she has gained while incarcerated has transformed her life immensely. The family that she once pleased all the time is now a family who respects her and has started to change. She attributes this change to Celebrate Recovery which teaches a new way of thinking through scriptures that speaks directly to the problem. While stopping one way of thinking the program offers a new way, which is the Word of God.

God sets the mark for us to gauge our actions and to reflect on His living word so that we begin to apply it to our lives and the way we treat one another. There may be a fundamental difference in the way we approach this in our individual lives. Perhaps the only action to take is “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Christian reconciliation never takes us back to where we began. It goes beyond the removal of suffering, fear, shame and guilt. Reconciliation takes us to a new place. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” This is often hard to grasp in our own intelligence, often slipping away. Therefore we must attend to our thinking through fellowship with God in His Word. This new way of thinking and living can be shared among us all.

It is through fellowship in community and being a part of Celebrate Recovery that has transformed my life. I came to Jesus Christ with my own agenda, but in His great unfailing love for me, I am able to see myself like He sees me. This took a willing heart on my behalf and the determination to change. I found myself choosing a better way through the Word of God by attending community and doing the work.

I came from a family that held to the saying that what happens in the household stays in the home. This often made it almost impossible for me to address some of the concerns I saw in the family. For instance, I witnessed several physical altercations between my uncle and his wife that created a sense of fear in me. This fear of him often kept me guessing about what mood he would be in when we were in the same area, so in order to survive I learned to just act as if everything was fine, but it was a lie. I wanted to ask my grandmother, who raised me, questions about my uncle but I felt she would only say, “Machelle that matter is not a concern for a child so don’t concern yourself with what is going on with your uncle.” This was the answer to much of what I saw in my household. The abuse was a random occurrence so it became a guessing game to me when he was around. I wanted so badly to talk to someone about what I was witnessing but I knew it meant trouble if I had mentioned anything to anyone. I could not understand that a man who was kind, loving and so happy one time had become a

monster. I looked up to this man because he was not only my uncle but also a big brother. He and I at one time did things like ride a motorcycle, cook homemade French fries, listen to the smooth sounds of the O'Jays, Kool and the Gang and Teddy Pendergrass. My parents had no idea how to deal with the destruction that he was causing within our family.

Then I noticed, as a teenager that I would avoid any type of confrontation because I was afraid of the anger that the other person would display. I would become agitated but would not voice my opinions. I would become so nervous that I felt nervousness in the bottom of my stomach. Shortly after I would start to feel so angry inside until I could explode - instead I buried my feelings and just felt defeated.

I uncovered all these things in recovery as well as the thinking that often caused me to be angry with others and display the aggression that I witnessed for most of my life. It was a difficult battle to share all of this with strangers but I knew I could not go on this way. I had to for my own son. I felt so ashamed when I realized my attitude and behavior was affecting him in a negative manner. As I applied the Word of God and the practical techniques that I was learning, my life changed tremendously from anger to joy. It was a joy that I had not come upon while living in the world. This joy came from up above and I was so elated that God would be so kind, due to what I had done in my life. I felt undeserving of His love but when the Word started to take root in my life, transformation happened in a way that I could not ever imagine.

Through fellowship, I have been able to forgive my uncle and my parents. Most importantly, I have forgiven myself. Forgiveness opens the door for so many amazing things in my life, two of them being: a loving relationship with my son and my paternal grandmother, who was not part of my early life. Reconciling to Jesus Christ continues to be life giving, even inside. It has opened doors for me to serve on the worship leadership here at Fluvanna, to be a leader in Celebrate Recovery and to lead on my job. These are just a few of the awesome things God's reconciliation has done in my life.

Robert J. Schreiter's 5 Reconciliation Points

God's grace is beyond unmerited gifts; it is the ability to regenerate life. Grace transforms and creates conditions and possibilities not only for forgiving but also for rediscovering life. We, all who are willing, enter into that with a personal relationship with God through confession and repentance. Discovering a new way of life by leaving our past behind; this starts with renewing our minds through the Word of God. Transformation takes place in the mind: "Be not conformed but transformed by the renewing of our minds." (Romans 12:2)

This amazing grace was given to all who are believers in Jesus Christ. Zechariah 12:10 declares that God poured out the spirit of grace upon us which opened the doorway to overcome the challenges of the world. To all that received Him, He gave the power to become sons of God and remain sons of God! The power of grace and truth enables us to accomplish the things God has predetermined in our lives through His Son Jesus Christ.

Understanding reconciliation brings us into a new creation; a consideration

of Robert Schreiter's five major points (1):

1. It is God who initiates and brings about reconciliation. We are not able to overcome the damage that has been done without first beginning the process by turning to God and experiencing His forgiveness, grace and mercy to become an agent of reconciliation.

2. Reconciliation is rooted in spirituality. True reconciliation is a spiritual viewpoint that recognizes and responds to God, bringing about the action in the world. Reconciliation becomes a way of life through the amazing grace of God.

3. Reconciliation makes both victim and oppressor a new creation. Reconciliation does more than righting wrongs and repenting, it brings us to a new place where none of us has ever been before.

4. The new narrative that overcomes the narrative of the lie is the story of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The body, blood and cross are the new symbols of transformed life by which we identify as the suffering, death and life of Jesus Christ into a resurrected life.

5. Reconciliation is a multidimensional reality. Reconciliation involves coming to terms with "alienation" through violence and oppression. This creates lamenting and healing of memories.

Paul exuberantly states the ministry of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:20: "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God!" We, the believers of Jesus Christ, have an active role in reconciliation in which we contribute to the process. Our attitude must be one of complete humility where we develop an attitude to be open, listening attentively and waiting. Testifying about the goodness in our lives shares in the process of the one who is oppressed, the suffering is of essence. In order for the violence and suffering to be broken, the narrative must be told. As we recount our own narrative little by little, it begins to construct a new truth that comes by grace.

Through the telling, we learn to listen, to have compassion, to wait. Waiting is an active role and learning this produces clarity between the illusion and reality. It also involves being calm and comfortable with self. It is a skill we must relearn and in that place of relearning we develop what is needed to share in God's grace.

Attention is developed in waiting. Attention develops trust, creates a safe environment for us to move into a new place and opens a path for the world to enter. A great example of reconciliation welling up in the soul is taken from Ezekiel 47, the vision of water flowing from the temple. There is a stream flowing out of the destroyed land, but God restores what man's choices have destroyed. There is hope for the once damaged land and there is hope for us. It all comes from God.

A few other internal resources aid in the ministry of reconciliation. The power to share in the welfare of those who are in need; from providing for the poor, helping the homeless find shelter, mentoring children from broken families or educating single parents with skills to assist in the place of the absent parent. Also, teaching the importance of celebrating the communion, the gathering together to partake in the suffering of Jesus Christ, which is symbolized in His body and blood that was shed. Paul reminds us of this in 1 Corinthians 10:16.

Another role to aid is in the retelling of stories in the bible which provide images to shape a new way of thinking out of tragedy. An example of this is in Luke 15:11-32, the parable of the prodigal son.

The Church and Reconciliation

The church's role in offering other aids in the reconciliation process takes some of the anxieties away that have been formed in the minds of those who are wounded. This demonstrates that the church is taking responsibility in helping to reach reconciliation through other interventions.

The Samaritan woman in John 4:7-26 demonstrates Jesus' embracing of a woman who was an outcast. He offers her new life. This woman came to the well at times when no one else was around. But at the appointed time, Jesus was there to meet her. He opens the conversation by asking for water. That gave Him an opportunity to teach her about the gift of life He had for her in exchange for the life she was living. This life took form in two distinct ways. He offers eternal life and physical life. This would change the way she lived as a woman. She quickly responded to God's gracious gift and went away to share what had happened.

In the reconciliation process, we are called into faith and invited to share in the sufferings of all who are part of God's great, awesome creation. In faith, we rediscover our own humanity, expressed by reaching out to others in trust. We restore broken relationships by trusting in Jesus Christ to live as a community in the world. Reaching out to others, we touch those wounds and encounter Jesus who has suffered for all of us and continues to share in our suffering. This reaching out to other's humanity through which "He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him and by His stripes we are healed." (Isaiah 53:5) For it is through Jesus Christ's death that we can share in the resurrection of new life; for it is through the cross that God has reconciled the world.

Endnotes

1. Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S, *Reconciliation-Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, New York 1992)

A Journey Through the Wilderness

Lori Carter

Abstract: As a prisoner I learned the way to come out of the wilderness of disobedience and drugs and bound in mind. I found peace through prison theology courses. It helped me to find purpose and a reason for living. Because of theology studies, I can and have been able to be free on the inside as well as the outside. God sent me the comforter that is spoken in the bible: “And I will pray the Father and he shall give you another comforter, that He may abide with you forever.” (Jn. 14:16)

Key terms: obedience, favor, heart, prison, renewing of the mind.

A Second Chance through Prison

In September, 2006 I was high, tired, bitter and addicted to crack cocaine. I was wandering and needed help. I sought help from counselors, church and mentors, but nobody had the answers I needed. I needed Jesus but my pride and blame wouldn't allow me to admit I needed Him. I sat on the curb on the side of the road that night and prayed. I didn't know exactly what to pray for, but I knew I didn't want to go on living like that. I finished praying and went to my family home. I felt like the Prodigal Son (Daughter). (Lk. 15:11-32) How my family welcomed me in with open arms!

I was arrested two days later and put in jail. I prayed and waited for God to open those doors. Rv. 3:8 speaks about an open door. See, I knew how to read the bible; I just didn't have the faith to put the words of the bible to work in my life. Months went by and no prayers were being answered. At least that's what I thought. I found out later on that I had my answer. I was where I needed to be to get what I wanted from God. I was lost and wavering in the mind. I was serving two masters. (Jm. 1:6-8) Joyce Myers talks about the Battlefield of the Mind.

I went to be sentenced in February of 2007. My pastor, John Campbell, spoke for me and it was uplifting to hear him speak so highly of me. Yet, I was on trial for shoplifting. It was like the thief on the cross seeking forgiveness. (Lk. 23:32-43) I was sentenced to four years. I instantly felt my heart harden. I went back to my cell with bitterness and anger.

I stopped reading my bible and started questioning. Who is God? If God is good, how can evil happen? Can God feel emotion? What does God want from me? Why did God allow this to happen to me if He loves me? Where was this mercy? And finally, where is the justice for the righteous?

In liberal democratic governance, justice is accountability to clearly defined law. To convict a criminal, a just legal system has to prove without a shadow of doubt that the person is guilty. I had nobody to seek these answers from. If the jails were short staffed we couldn't receive the ministry. And like me, the cell was full of broken hearted lost people. If they were reading their bibles in there it was for self, not to fellowship.

“Yet we know that a person is justified, not by the works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the

works of the law.” (Ga. 2:16)

I had to go through some things to get where I’m at today. Prison and theology studies got me through and helped with the renewing of my mind. (Ps. 51) I had to recite and fast on. And as I continue to give my testimony, you will understand why.

On Sunday mornings I would get my visits. Instead of feeling blessed I was miserable and had my visitors crying or accusing them for the reason I was there. Guess what? I was moved to Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women shortly afterwards. I didn’t get those visits any more and the outside communication became slim to none. I walked those grounds miserable and I silently cried myself to sleep every night. I was my own worst enemy.

We had to have physicals before we could go to population. I, like the lady in Lk. 8:43 with the issue of blood, had to have surgery. Of course you are told about the cons as well as the pros. I was lonely and scared, but I was too proud to call on Jesus. Still I wanted to know: Why me? I went to medical the night before and I was talking to an older lady about my fears and she left me with these words. Why not you? I didn’t know how to accept that. And I didn’t know how to ask for help because I just wanted people to leave me alone. To my surprise I had lots of people that cared for me and nursed me well once I was put back on a regular hall.

I didn’t want to get close to those convicts. Their crimes were awful. That was what I was telling myself. I’m only here for shoplifting. They are murderers, child molesters, and drug dealers. I didn’t belong there. But little did I know that their crimes were no greater than mine. And those were the people that God put in my path to bring me out of the wilderness.

I started back going to church again. But it became a social gathering where I was going to meet friends from other buildings. I didn’t care about the message because I was angry at God and I thought He had given up on me and I was going to Hell. One Sunday night, the chaplain spoke about the Chaplain’s Library.

Though I wasn’t trying to read any of the religious material, I wanted to go and see what it was about. We didn’t have TV’s unless you purchased them of commissary. I didn’t have one so I did a lot of reading. Monday morning bright and early the call for Chaplain’s Library was called. I didn’t go. I just lay in bed. Then I heard a voice say, “Get up and go.” I got up and got put on the list for the next group. When I got to the library, I started reading pamphlets about bitterness and love, repentance, to be born again. What caught my eye were the applications for Jesus the Liberator Seminary. I read the advertisement and I knew I needed what it was offering.

That night I began to read: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Ye believe in God, believe also in me.” (Jn. 14:1) I was tired of being miserable. I wanted to be free in my mind and heart. The bitterness was eating me alive. And that night, I know I was where I needed to be. God needed me where He could have my whole attention. There were things that I needed to get rid of and most of all I needed to find my purpose in life. I got off my bunk and knelt on my knees and I prayed for God to come into my life and forgive me of my wrongs. One of the most important themes of the bible is justification. It means, “being put right” and refers to

the work of God, who “puts right” sinful humanity.

Needless to say, I wrote a letter along with my application because now I was thirsty and I wanted the Word. I wanted to learn and live the Word. All my life going to church I was living off milk. Bread is the meal that satisfies the quest for a full and enduring life. It is the symbol for Jesus Himself.

“Jesus replied, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’” (Jn. 6:35)

I often compare my wandering with drugs to Moses’ journey through the wilderness. An eleven-day journey turned into forty years because of the disobedience. Bread played a major role with them. It was sent down as manna because of the barren land. They arose each morning to bread supplied by God. Bread of life meets the needs of the heart and soul. Tears constantly fell as I wrote my letter. I wanted to confess and admit I was a drug addict and thief. I wanted to admit I was a liar, envious, bitter and full of hatred. I wanted God to find favor with me and have mercy on me. I needed a clean heart. “Create in me a clean heart.” (Ps. 51:10) I knew that God looks at the heart while man looks on the outside.

Prison theology: What did this mean? Why hadn’t I heard about theology before? How is it going to fit into my life? These were the questions that I had while I waited for an acceptance. I started by looking up the word in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Theology: (1) The study of the nature and religious belief. (2) Religious beliefs and theory when systematically developed <Christian theology.

Because of the course being offered through prison, it saved my life. It led me to freedom of bondage in chains. It taught me to be content in whatever situation and state I was in. (Ph. 4:11) I learned that no matter what I go through I can find the answer in the bible.

The world is so full of denominations and beliefs. Theology studies showed me that there is one God, one Baptism and one Holy Spirit. Earlier, in my testimony I talked about the questions that I ask about God. I found those answers around the term covenant. A covenant is to restore people lost in sin and to move history to its fulfillment. In the Old Testament, covenants were conditional: Do this for God and God will do this for you. The New Testament covenant is unconditional, giving a way of life. (Heb. 9:15)

There are two great truths that have been proclaimed from this platform for many years. The first is that salvation is free to every man who will have it. The second is that God gives salvation to a people whom He has chosen, and these truths are not in conflict with each other in the least degree. (C. H. Spurgeon)

Though I was studying the lessons, I still had a void that I needed to fill. I wrote a letter and explained how I was feeling and I got a response from one of the instructors with scripture backing everything that he was telling me. And as I read what he wrote, I began to cry because this man loved me and never laid eyes on me. And this was free. It was no short response but about five pages long. Being in prison you feel like nobody loves you or has turned their back on you. And you tend to stray. I know that until I got into theology studies within the seminary, I used the scripture to my satisfaction. One of my favorites was Rm. 7:14-21. Paul talked about the carnal mind and being in the flesh, how he did things he didn’t

desire to do, but the flesh he was in is caused it. I knew I loved God but, hey, God understood because I was in the flesh. I had to study that scripture and get it right. I think that prison should require theology as a credit because it rehabilitates you and gives you a sense of direction.

I know this to be true because I have applied what I studied and followed it in my life today. Other times, whether people get locked up for one day or are life criminals, they make all these promises to God if only a second chance can be awarded to them. Soon as you get out, back to the old habits. I've been home going on three years. It hasn't been easy and I have run into several circumstances that could have led me back down the road, but because I learned to apply my faith and trust in God, I was brought out of those circumstances. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Ph. 4:13) I refuse to put the bitterness and anger back into my life. I finally found purpose in my life so I knew that God had something for me.

The reason why I say that is because I used to walk the straight and narrow in prison. I had respect from C/O's because I respected them. And at times we would inspire one another on the job or just waiting in line for diabetic stick line. One particular day I had told a friend I would carry something to her friend. Yes, I knew it was wrong but once again, I thought it was for a good reason. I didn't think it was wrong. I was busted by a C/O that I highly respected. I didn't want any favoritism and I knew there would be consequences. What I didn't expect was for her to take it to the extreme and cause me to lose my job. We had many talks and she knew I needed my job. I only had six months left. There were conversations we had that I could have retaliated on her. And I'm sure if I hadn't become a new creature in Christ, I would have. Instead I began to pray and fast. I was already becoming anxious about going home but at that time, I wasn't stable. God knew He didn't have my whole heart, so I needed to be put in a spot where He could work through me. At the time I didn't understand what was happening. And I allowed anger to creep back into my heart. A couple days later lessons came from the seminary. "Unlock the Mysteries" and "Purpose."

I asked God what did He want me to do because this was truly a test. I needed answers from Him. I usually take several months to do my lessons because it would take research and reading that I had to fit into my schedule. But it was different with these two particular lessons. I wanted and needed favor from God. I was about to be free again and going out with the same attitude. I knew that it could only lead to corruption and either land me back in jail or even worse, hell. I had a family that needed a mother, not an instructor of the "do as I say, not as I do" rule; blaming everyone else for my choices and mishaps.

Unlock the Mysteries

The definition of a message in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary is a communication sent by one person to another.

This paper is a message that has taken me quite some time to write because of obstacles that I allowed to invade my space and I procrastinated from being led by the messages that I received for guidance.

I would like to share some experiences that I had from messages that were

sent to me that I ignored. “For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another.” (Tt. 3:3)

Before the charge that sent me to prison, I was sent a messenger to forewarn me of the trouble ahead. But because of my disobedience, I self-destructed which brought me misery. (Rm. 3:16) If I would have taken the admonishment of my Christian sister that brought me the message (Col. 3:16), I wouldn’t have the anguish I have today. (Jb.15:24)

I can say that I still didn’t get the message even through all of that. I recently got what I needed as a learning experience. My most important lesson was to learn to fear the Lord. (Dt. 31:13) I’ve also learned to do well by seeking (Is. 1:17) and obedience. (Heb. 5:8)

Mysteries are things we don’t know. We don’t know what the perfect will of God is for our lives “But it is written: ‘Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.’” But God has revealed them to us through His spirit. For the spirit searches all things. (1 Co. 2:9-10)

Yes, the deep things of God.

When we pray we get answers. In circumstances I’ve experienced I was sent a messenger to warn me or give me revelation. I missed mine by being disobedient but I have it now. I am thankful for a second chance.

I know and believe that God has things far better than what I’ve seen but can’t figure out. But I know now that when I pray and am obedient and accept God’s guidance, then I’ll get beyond my natural knowledge and receive supernatural understanding.

It’s called unlocking the mysteries of God’s plan for my life in faith and obedience.

Purpose

All things happen for a reason and Rm. 8:28 confirms the fact “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

In the past I knew that I had a calling to do God’s work, but I was like Paul who talks about being in the flesh and not doing the things he wants, but doing the things he hates. (Rm. 7:14-15)

Being in prison has given me a great deal of wisdom by teaching me to put doubt into faith and leaning solely on God. In the past, I’ve been let down so much by man.

I was so filled with bitterness, envy, jealousy and strife until I was put in this setting to have to deal with all kinds of people and mainly to have to work; to work and labor with my hands for things that I was so used to getting easily. I can accept today that I don’t have and that I can live without the worldly luxuries as long as my needs are met and God has provided like He said He would in His Word. (Ph. 4:19) I am content in my state I’m in today.

I lost my job in December and I got 90 days left to make ends meet. Lately, I’ve been blessed with outside help and I know it’s the grace of God that has

opened this door for me.

I lean heavily on the scriptures in Ps. 28:7 and Ps. 121:1-2. I also know that when I get to doubting, I turn to Jm. 1:8 about a double minded person.

I'm to be released in a couple months and I'm not scared anymore because I have developed my relationship with God and I know the only way that I can or will succeed is through the love of God.

I still get depressed and I cry out to God whereas at one time I would just be angry at Him and walked around miserable. Then I stumbled on the verse from Ps. 30:5; "weeping may endure for a night but joy comes in the morning."

I don't have to be envious of anyone else or jealous of what they have because God has no respecter of person. (Rm. 2:11) That let me know that I can have the same as anyone. Mt. 6:33 said to "seek ye the Kingdom first and everything else shall be added."

Today I can and will say that I was sent to prison to be saved and it actually saved my life because I was dead and now I'm free.

Because of my chance to use my time wisely and learn the difference between religion and being Christian, I have been able to live freely in mind and society. The twenty year journey through the wilderness took all of six months to come out of. Prison theology not only helped me get my life back in order, it saved me from self-destructing.

I'm able to give back without thinking that somebody owes me or blame people for choices that I made. I'm under strong leadership and a congregation that knows Agape love. Nobody stares or whispers when I come through the door, but allow me to praise God and pray with and for me.

Forgiveness is a big part of letting go of the past and moving forward to a life of freedom and salvation.

God didn't look down on me when I was down but He knelt down and picked me up and created in me a new heart.

Salvation is described as God picking up someone stuck in the muddy valley and setting them on a stable ground. I was taken out of the darkness and placed in the light from outside of God's Kingdom to the inside. From isolation to fellowship, most of all and best of all from death to life. When I go through things in everyday life, I'm able to go to my Bible and find the answer. I will not tell you that it's a smooth road because you go through suffering and sometimes persecution, but in the end you know: "Weeping may endure for a night but joy comes in the morning." (Ps 30:5) At least when I wait on the Lord, I know I'm making the right choices.

Today I must say I have turned my mess into a message.

Incarceration/Restoration

Thomas Lamora

Incarceration and Restoration

While the main purpose of this paper is to articulate a prison theology, I believe it will be helpful to begin by describing the current state of the judicial and penal systems in the United States, which over the past 25 years have had to increasingly deal with the “get tough” actions of state and national politicians. The ramifications of these actions have been overcrowded prisons and diminished prisoner programs, which I believe are counter-productive to both prisoner rehabilitation and safer communities. As our prison theology will be viewed through the experience of those living in this environment, I believe this information is important to include.

I have also included some brief information on restorative justice which is a movement that considers crime to be primarily a violation of people and relationships that are now in need of restoration.¹ This process attempts to repair the damage done by crime, through mediated sessions which aim toward reparation and reconciliation between the victim and offender. Lastly, I will articulate my prison theology which is formed through the experiences of the incarcerated and will serve as a challenge to our legislative, judicial, and prison systems, as they are also in need of restoration.

With 756 individuals being incarcerated for every 100,000 of our citizens, the United States has the largest rate of incarceration in the world. By contrast, Canada incarcerates only 116 of every 100,000 citizens. France, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Ireland each incarcerate fewer than 100 per 100,000.² These statistics would seem to indicate that the United States either has an overabundance of criminals, or a judicial and penal system in need of reform. I believe it to be the latter.

Groups advocating prison and sentencing reform point to the increase in mandatory minimum sentences, increasingly longer sentences and a prison system with an overabundance of individuals serving time for drug-related offenses. According to *The National Journal*, the U.S. has 2.3 million people incarcerated, “about half of them for nonviolent crimes, including most of the 500,000 locked up for drug offenses. Forty percent of these prisoners are black, 20 percent are Hispanic and most are poor and uneducated. This has had a devastating impact on poor black families and neighborhoods, where it has become the norm for young men – many of them fathers – to spend time in prison and emerge bitter, unemployable and unmarriageable.”³

This toughening of sentences has had little to do with what is fiscally sound, rehabilitative or effective. In fact, some of the “get tough” actions have had quite the opposite effect. Studies have shown that longer sentences result in prisoners having a more difficult time reentering society which contributes further to the U.S. having the highest rate of recidivism in the world.

The cost of this continuous growth in prison population, in both financial and human terms, has been enormous. While billions have been spent on new facilities, many states and the federal government remain under court order to

continue to relieve overcrowding. And in spite of the explosion in prison population, prison staffs have not increased at a similar rate. In many areas, this has left facilities unable to perform adequate intake assessments and counseling or to continue programs designed to give prisoners the knowledge and skills they will need on the outside.

In testimony before the California Prison Commission, Professor Craig Haney of the University of California stated:

By the start of the 1990s, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that nearly 40 percent of the nations prisoners had no prison work assignments at all, and that another 40 percent were assigned to what were termed “facility support services” that included primarily laundry, kitchen, and building maintenance jobs. Only 7 percent were involved in prison industry programs where they were likely to obtain job experiences and develop skills that could be transferred to the free world. A decade later, a number of large prison systems still were reporting the same or similar levels of idleness. For example, only a little more than half of all prisoners in California are employed in prison jobs of any kind.⁴

In addition to the diminished training programs, the lack of adequate assessments has at times placed prisoners with mental health issues, or those who are among the most violent in with the general population. This combination of overcrowding and inadequate services has caused many prisons to become little more than holding pens. As this becomes the case, the focus of prison administrators is often less on rehabilitation and preparation for life on the outside and more on simply maintaining order.

In the 2007 book about his life in prison, Michael Santos wrote about this exact situation as he related the comments of a prison unit manager who told him, “We don’t care anything about the preparations you’re making for release or what you do when you get out. The only thing we care about is the security of the institution.”⁵

While administrators and staff with attitudes such as this are a major problem, the attitudes and actions of correctional officers may exacerbate conditions. Charles A. Graner, one of the military guards at Abu Ghraib convicted of abusing prisoners, remarked about his involvement in the abuse: “The Christian in me says its wrong, but the corrections officer in me says, I love to make a grown man piss himself.”⁶ Graner and several others involved were prison guards in civilian life.

While I am not suggesting that the Abu Ghraib guards are the norm, there have been too many civil suits brought by prisoners and too many indictments of correctional officers for abuse, to believe that Graner’s attitude is a totally isolated one. It is not difficult to see that when a “corrections” system is based primarily on retribution some guards will cross the line and begin distributing “justice” on their own. And with that, is it any wonder that some inmates are leaving prison with an even greater anger at society than when they were first incarcerated?

Without a change in the philosophy of how our judicial and prison systems are being run, we can only expect the high rates of recidivism to continue. With fifty percent of those entering U.S. prisons having previously served time, the financial cost of this level of recidivism is staggering. And while one could make a strong case for change in our penal system based on the financial cost alone, the greater concern should be the effect it has on those incarcerated and on our society as a whole.

Numerous groups, both religious and secular, have worked tirelessly for many years on these very issues. As a result, a number of long-term prison conditions have improved. In spite of their gains, the “war on drugs” and the “get tough” mentalities of numerous politicians have created setbacks. Nevertheless, there have been recent successes, among them the increased use of restorative justice, which is a process that goes beyond retribution and seeks to involve both the criminal and victim in repairing the harm done by crime. While I will discuss restorative justice only as it relates to the judicial and penal systems, it has been used in a number of other areas including school and workplace disputes and gives some hope for improving our system of justice.

Restorative Justice

While the term “restorative justice” is being used by a variety of programs with very different objectives, the first programs began from the knowledge that the needs of victims were not being met by the criminal justice system. The primary concern of these initiatives was in bringing the victim back into the process and in attempting to repair the relationships and damage done by crime. This has been done by a variety of approaches including possibly a meeting between the victim and the offender. If an encounter does occur, the victim and offender will sit with a facilitator or a panel consisting of a facilitator and possibly one or two members of the community. The victim and members of the community will express to the offender the damage he has done to both the victim and the community. It is hoped that through these encounters the offender can come to understand the harm he has done, take responsibility for his actions, offer some level of repair and the victim can achieve a sense of closure.

According to sociologist Howard Zehr, one of the early supporters of restorative justice:

Victims often feel that “control has been taken away from them...control over their properties, their bodies, their emotions, their dreams.” He notes that involvement in their own cases as they go through the justice processes can be an important way to return a sense of empowerment to them. However, those processes are still largely beyond their control. And even after an offender has been convicted and sentenced, many victims are left grappling with the emotional aftermath of the offence in their lives.⁷

While the victim may be the primary concern, there are a number of initiatives under the restorative justice banner that give an increased focus to the reha-

bilitation of the offender. Dr. Zehr and some victims-rights groups are concerned that this focus on offender benefits may cause the restorative justice movement to be drifting away from a focus on the victim. While their concern that programs not lose sight of victims' rights is understandable, initiatives that aim at the rehabilitation of the offender must also be supported if we are to improve the system of justice.

While there are numerous restorative justice programs coming from the secular community, some of the faith-based initiatives have had impressive results. One example is the InnerChange® Freedom initiative at the Carol Vance Unit at the Richmond State Prison in Texas. This is a faith-based program which got its inspiration from the Humaita Prison, a facility in Sao Paulo, Brazil. This Brazilian prison has gone from a 75% recidivism rate as a state-run facility to somewhere between a 10 and 16% recidivism rate as a Christian facility.⁸ The Brazilian facility operates without armed guards and with only two full-time employees. The rest of the work is done by volunteers and the 730 inmates. Each prisoner has another prisoner assigned to him that he is accountable to and has a mentor from the outside who works with him while in prison and after his release.⁹ The success of the Brazilian prison has caused the creation of several faith-based units in the United States.

The InnerChange Freedom Initiative in Texas is run by Prison Fellowship which is a Christian prison ministry founded by Chuck Colson, who served time in prison due to his activities in Watergate. They describe their program as follows:

The InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI) is a holistic program that provides educational, values-based program services to prisoners on a voluntary and noncompulsory basis to help prepare them for reentry to society, employment, religious and community service, and family and social relationships. The program is based on values reflected in the life and teachings of Jesus.

Living in the same housing unit, inmate participants are given values- and faith-based teaching along with life skills education for up to 18 months while in prison. Participants receive guidance from a mentor and support from a local faith community for twelve months after they are released from prison.¹⁰

In addition to training and guidance, another positive aspect of the program is that inmates at Vance feel they are treated with respect and love. One graduate from the program said, "A bunch of cats in prison, they never had anyone show them love – even their mother and father. You get in the program, and everybody shows you love."¹¹ I believe this aspect alone, treating prisoners as fellow human beings, with dignity and love has to have positive effects.

According to a study by the University of Pennsylvania, the faith-based program at Vance:

...was distinctive in "emphasizing restorative justice, in which the offender works through several phases of treatment to

reshape his value system.” They also found that “narratives of IFI members revealed five spiritual transformation themes that are consistent with characteristics long associated with offender rehabilitation: (a) I’m not who I used to be; (b) spiritual growth; (c) God versus the prison code; (d) positive outlook on life; and (e) the need to give back to society.”¹²

I believe that these five themes support the idea that if prisoners are treated with respect and allowed to grow spiritually and reshape their value systems that a far more positive result will be achieved than if they are disrespected and simply face retribution.

Prison Theology

Why do we need a prison theology, what should it look like and what would it hope to achieve? Since any theology is based on how one views or studies God, we should first understand the circumstances of those in need of that theology. For those who are incarcerated, their circumstances and perspective are totally different than those who are free. Under the best of conditions those who are imprisoned have lost their freedom, their livelihood and their daily contact with family and friends. If they are in a U.S. prison today, there is a good chance that the length of their sentence far outweighs their crime, they are in an overcrowded facility living with prisoners they should not be with, they are given little or no training and consequently there is little hope for their positive reentry into society. To compound this, the vast majority of the prison population in the U.S. consists of the poor, the uneducated, the mentally ill and racial minorities. There is a great deal of injustice here which has a definite impact on our theology and which must be challenged. And just as liberation theology came about when faith confronted injustice to the poor,¹³ our prison theology will come about as our faith confronts the injustice being done to those who are incarcerated.

The primary goal of this theology, however, is to lay a foundation for the spiritual growth of the incarcerated which allows them to see that God is displeased with this injustice, that He is forgiving, that He loves them and that He values them as human beings. In order for this theology to be accepted, however, it must be one that prisoners can relate to, one that understands their personal experiences and one that then connects those experiences to religion. While this could be accomplished through a number of faith traditions, I believe the writings and teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition I am most familiar with can make that connection.

With the excessive sentencing that is the current practice and the fact that the prison population is disproportionately poor, the U.S. corrections system is immediately in conflict with many of the teachings of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. From the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, we were told that what was acceptable punishment was “an eye for an eye, a tooth for tooth.”¹⁴ These words were intended to establish equal punishment for the crime committed, a standard which is too often ignored today. And while we could list numerous examples where “get tough” legislation has created excessive sentencing,

one of the most glaring examples is in the state of Alabama. Alabama's Habitual Felony Offender Act mandated a life sentence without parole for a fourth felony even if it is a non-violent crime – like stealing a bicycle, writing a bad check or drug possession.¹⁵ While lawyers and philosophers may argue about what is “excessive” and others may point out that our laws are not based on the Hebrew Bible, I feel that most people would find a life sentence without parole for these crimes to be excessive. This is only one example of how far lawmakers have gone beyond what is fair and just. And fairness and justice are themes throughout the Hebrew Bible and in the teachings of Christianity.

Some of the strongest voices in the Hebrew Bible calling for fairness and justice were those of the 8th century prophets, who demanded equal justice for the poor and stressed the value of caring for each other above engaging in religious ritual or displaying false piety. And false piety and unnecessary ritual may be exactly how a number of prisoners view churchgoers and the religious establishment on the outside. The fact that the prophets were challenging these practices 3000 years ago would make their words a solid addition to my theology, which I believe those who are incarcerated will connect to and appreciate.

The first of the 8th century prophets, Amos, offers a straightforward rebuke from God to those who practice religion for show, while at the same time ignoring the injustice around them:

I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not join in your
solemn assemblies.
Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I
will not accept them:
Neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts.
Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not
hear the melody of the viols.
But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a
mighty stream.¹⁶

The prophetic calls for “justice, kindness, and humility” need to be heard not only by the incarcerated, but also by our politicians, judges and prison officials, who quite possibly are visible at their own religious services on Saturday or Sunday, only to dole out injustice on Monday. If there is to be restoration, it must be of both the prisoner and the prison system as well. The importance of the role of the prophets in a prison theology cannot be overstated. And while their role of challenging authority is important, their message of what God requires is equally important:

And what doth the LORD require of thee,
but to do justly, and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with thy God?¹⁷

This message of justice and mercy being more important than routinely following religious ritual was also central to the teachings of Jesus. As Walter Rauschenbusch has written, “To the ceremonial aspects of Jewish religion Jesus was either indifferent or hostile; the thought of the prophets was the spiritual food that he assimilated in his own process of growth.”¹⁸ Likewise, prisoners who may

not be interested in regimented religious practice may find their own spiritual food for growth coming from the thoughts of these same prophets and also the teachings of Jesus.

We see the importance of the teachings of Jesus to this theology when we recognize that His teachings were really quite simple and human-focused. This could serve as an awakening to some prisoners whose previous exposure to religion may have been more regimented. We see an example of this when Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest. He replied that loving God was the greatest, “And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”¹⁹ Jesus went on to state that we are all neighbors and consequently all responsible for each other, including those living on the edge of society. This was demonstrated as He sat at dinner with tax collectors and sinners. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples:

“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

But when He heard this, He said, “Those who are well have no need for a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”²⁰

The Pharisees were clearly making judgment on the “tax collectors and sinners” and also on Jesus for associating with them. One of the central points of our theology, which I hope those who are incarcerated will see, is that it is not making judgment, but rather is extending forgiveness, for it is formed by the belief that “mercy triumphs over judgment.”²¹

This message from Jesus on caring for each other is consistent throughout the gospel, but may be best stated in the parable of the sheep and the goats:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and He will put the sheep at His right hand and the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at His right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer Him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the King will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to Me.”²²

While the scripture I have referred to established that this is a God who extends mercy and demands justice, one who is forgiving, and one who cares most for the “least of those” among us, this is only the starting point for our theology. From the prophets we have come to understand what our God is about and that His expectations are for us to simply “do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.” And from Jesus we learned that we should care for each other, extend mercy and be forgiving. But how do we move from this, to establishing a relationship with this God who clearly cares for us? Part of this comes in our perception of where and how we see God and His place in our surroundings. As we know, this is by no means a new question. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming. He answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.”²³ The idea that the kingdom of God is here and now and among us is central to our theology, since it is not only among those who are free, but also among those who are incarcerated.

It is also central to our theology to understand that God being God of all that is, is also always among us. Among those who understood this was Brother Lawrence, the 16th century monk who knowing that he was always in the presence of God, was able to connect his everyday life to prayer and to God. “The time of business” he said, “does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clutter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament.”²⁴ The example of the life and faith of Brother Lawrence is a powerful one since it shows how one with little connection to the outside world and at times “in the noise and clutter of my kitchen” can be prayerful and always in contact with God. This same connection to God is available to those who are incarcerated as well, as demonstrated by Paul and Silas while they were in prison:

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were open and everyone’s chains were unfastened.²⁵

While prisoners today may not see their physical chains unfastened, their spiritual growth may allow their inner selves to be free. Numerous other people of faith have found comfort in their prayers while incarcerated. The apostle Paul wrote four Epistles from prison, while Martin Luther King, Jr. established himself as a modern day prophet, challenging both the secular and the religious establishments while he was incarcerated.

In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Dr. King wrote:

I have heard many ministers say: “Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern” and I have watched many churches commit themselves to completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between

body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.²⁶

I believe as Dr. King did, that there is no distinction between “body and soul” and that the gospel is very much concerned about what some may view as social issues. Hopefully, those who are incarcerated will also come to see this and while their body may remain incarcerated, their inner self will be free.

Conclusion

I have described a judicial and penal system in need of serious reform before it is capable of administering justice and rehabilitating those in its care. Until the current lengthy sentences are done away with and those in need of treatment for addictions or mental illness are receiving their treatment outside of prisons, our prisons will continue to remain overcrowded and our justice system will continue to fail. And with the vast majority of those in prison being the poor, the undereducated and people of color, our “justice” system appears to be anything but just.

These current conditions have created a situation in which a strong prison theology is necessary, both to create a prophetic challenge to these conditions and to offer hope and restoration to the incarcerated. The various elements that I have explained provide a foundation for this theology that goes back to the beginning of the Hebrew bible, but that remain relevant today. The words of the prophets reinforce the fact that God is not interested in false piety but wants us “to do justly, and love mercy and walk humbly with thy God.” The teachings of Jesus expand on those ideas and tell us to care for our neighbor and take care of the sick and to visit those in prison, for “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

These are simple but powerful words and ideas, but words and ideas that I believe prisoners can take hold of. They are words that came from strong individuals who were not afraid to challenge the authority of those who would take advantage of the poor and the oppressed. Those who are incarcerated should see that these are not unrelated phrases or teachings, but that they come together as a theology of a God of love, who demands mercy and justice and sees value and worth in each of us.

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Biblical Jail Birds from the Hebrew Scriptures

Rev. Dr. Dorothea Brooks

The ancient Near Eastern World did not really have a penal system like that of the modern world, but it did have several ways that made people not free. One was a system of warfare in which the losing nation's people were sold as slaves. Another was a system of debt, frequently from borrowing to pay taxes or buy seed to farm and losing the crop. To pay the debt, the borrower had to sell his children as slaves and even himself and his wife. In theory, the Israelite legal system said that an Israelite, sold as a slave had to be offered his freedom in his seventh year of slavery. Kings did have temporary jails.

In Genesis, Lot was the first war captive in the Bible. His uncle, Abraham, chased the armies that had conquered Sodom, the town in which Lot was living. Abraham won the battle and rescued Lot and all the spoils of war the armies had taken. (Genesis 14) We have no input from Lot as to his experience as a war captive, so there is nothing to be learned from him.

JOSEPH

Joseph is the next person in Genesis who is sold as a slave and also put in prison. He was the favorite son of his father, Jacob, who was sold to slave traders by his jealous brothers. He was taken to Egypt and sold to Potiphar, one of the king's officers, a captain of the palace guard. (Genesis 37) Joseph had every reason to be angry and upset with what had happened to him. However, he did the best he could as a slave and won the favor of his master. He moved up to be the person in charge of the house. Potiphar's wife was attracted to Joseph and tried to seduce him. He refused her offer and she claimed he tried to rape her. Potiphar had Joseph arrested and thrown in the Pharaoh's prison. Instead of lamenting his fate, Joseph did everything he could to be helpful to his jailors. Joseph again rose to being in charge of the prison as the assistant to the warden. (Genesis 39) After some years go by, two of the Pharaoh's special servants are put in prison, one is the wine steward and the other is the chief baker. They both have strange dreams and want to know what they mean. Joseph interprets the dreams of both men. The wine steward's dream means that he will be restored to his position. Joseph asks him to mention Joseph's unfair imprisonment so he can be set free. The baker's dream was interpreted to mean that he would be executed. When he was restored, the wine steward forgot about Joseph. (Genesis 40) After two years, the Pharaoh had a dream that none of his advisors could interpret. At that point, the wine steward remembered Joseph and his skill at interpreting dreams. Joseph was brought before pharaoh and interpreted the dream to mean that the land of Egypt would have 7 years of bountiful crops and another 7 years of famine. Joseph advised the Pharaoh to store up food during the good years to be a reserve for the bad years. Joseph, the slave and prisoner was appointed governor over all Egypt. He was given a wife who bore him two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. (Genesis 41) The famine hit not only Egypt, but also Canaan where his father and brothers lived and Joseph invited his family to move to Egypt and provided for them there.

No matter what terrible things happened to Joseph, he did the best he could

which won him the favor of those over him. He did not use his power to seek revenge on those who treated him wrongly. God used the difficulties that Joseph experienced to move him into a position that rescued his whole family from a seven-year drought that could have ended their lives. Joseph had to trust that the terrible things that he was enduring had a purpose and a meaning for the future. He is certainly remarkable for the way he took everything that happened to him in stride and just did the best he could in each situation.

SAMSON

The next prisoner I want to examine is Samson, in the book of Judges, chapters 13-16. Samson was born to the barren wife of Manoah after an angelic visitor told her that she would have a son who would be dedicated to God as a nazirite. She was not to drink wine or beer or eat forbidden food during her pregnancy and his hair must never be cut. He would work at rescuing Israel from the Philistines. Samson did not lead armies against the Philistines; he had exceptional strength and as a lone warrior he would provoke them and slay them. He was attracted to Philistine women and that turned out to be his downfall, or as scripture puts it this is the way God used Samson to harass the Philistines. Samson insisted on marrying a Philistine girl in spite of his parents' efforts to talk him out of doing such a thing. The wedding party resulted in Samson losing a bet on a meaning of a riddle and that caused Samson to do a lot of damage to the Philistines. Later he was attracted to Delilah who is not identified as being Philistine. She was made an offer by the five kings of the Philistines to find out what made Samson so strong. It took a while, but she succeeded in learning from Samson that if his hair were cut, he would lose his strength. She lulled him to sleep in her lap and called for a servant to cut his hair. The Philistine kings captured him, blinded him, and took him to Gaza where they put him to work, grinding grain. At a large celebration they had Samson brought to the celebration to celebrate his helplessness. Samson asked his escort, a mere boy, to let him touch the columns that held up the roof so he could lean on them. Samson prayed for one last time to kill his enemies. He then pushed over the columns so the building collapsed, killing Samson and all the Philistines. He killed more Philistines with his death than all he had killed during his lifetime.

Since our current time has seen the rise of suicide bombers who kill themselves in order to kill those whom they consider the enemies of God, we could say that Samson was the first example of this mode of slaying God's enemies. There is much in this story that keeps the scholars guessing as to what is happening. Samson is listed as a judge in the book of Judges. The other judges were God-appointed leaders who rallied the fighting men of Israel to defend the tribes from the neighbors who warred against them. Actually, in Judges 3, Ehud works alone and assassinated the Moabite king. Samson does not live up to his nazirite vow and brings a lot of his troubles onto himself. He is not a model for anyone, yet he does inflict damage on the Philistines who were causing trouble for the Israelites. His imprisonment led to the most damage.

UNNAMED SLAVE GIRL

In the book of 2 Kings there is a young Israelite girl who was captured in warfare and made a slave. She became the slave of the wife of the Syrian General, Haaman. He was a great general, but suffered from a terrible skin disease, usually identified as leprosy. The slave girl told her mistress that there was a great prophet living in Samaria who could heal her master. The prophet was Elisha, who had trained under Elijah. He did heal Haaman.

Again, like Joseph, this little girl when she found herself a slave did not rebel against what happened to her, but sought the best for the general who had destroyed her village and made her a slave. Her actions caused her master to become a worshipper of her people's God. When we find ourselves in very difficult conditions, we can still carry out God's work. This passage also shows that God uses children to carry out his message. (2 Kings 5)

JEREMIAH

The final jailbird is Jeremiah, who was a prophet at the time when Babylon was expanding its empire and in the process of adding Judah to its list of kingdoms to be conquered. Jeremiah advocates that the Judean king not rebel against Babylon, but submit to its authority. Of course Jeremiah is considered a traitor. The account is found in Jeremiah 37-39 and dates to the last days of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. The Babylonian army withdrew from its siege of Jerusalem to attend to the approaching Egyptian army. Jeremiah tried to leave Jerusalem to take care of family business in the territory of Benjamin, but he was arrested leaving the city on the grounds that he was deserting to the Babylonians. The city officials had him beaten and imprisoned in the cistern house of the secretary Jonathan. King Zedekiah sent for him and secretly questioned him. Jeremiah asked the king not to send him back to the prison he had been in and the king sent him to the court of the guard. He ordered that Jeremiah be given a loaf of bread daily. Jeremiah continued to proclaim from his prison that those who surrender to the Babylonians would live and those who fought to remain free would die. Four men went to the king and demanded that Jeremiah be put to death for his treason. Zedekiah told them they could do as they wanted to Jeremiah. They lowered him into a cistern of mud without water and left him to die of hunger. Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian eunuch, serving in the king's house, heard what had been done to Jeremiah. He went to the king stating what had been done to Jeremiah and asked permission to remove him from the cistern. The servant rescued Jeremiah from the cistern, apparently saw that he was fed, but had the prophet remain in the court of the guard. The king sent one more time for Jeremiah seeking advice on what he should do. Jeremiah told him to surrender and live or continue to resist and die. The king did promise not to hand Jeremiah back to the men who had wanted to kill him. Jeremiah remained in prison until the Babylonians captured the city. The Babylonians allowed Jeremiah to remain in the land. Jeremiah sent for Ebed-melech and declared to him that the Lord said he would have his life as a prize for trusting in God. Zedekiah was taken captive. He had to watch the Babylonians slay his sons and then he was blinded and taken to Babylon, where he is not mentioned again.

Jeremiah was imprisoned and put in his situation in the cistern to starve

to death because he was prophesying what he believed God told him to say. He is the first prophet so threatened in scripture, but later writings outside of the Bible, claim Isaiah was put to death. He certainly was afraid as shown in his asking the king to rescue him from those seeking his death. He did not change his message to gain freedom or his life. Apparently, God had to use a total outsider, an Ethiopian servant, to rescue Jeremiah's life. As a black non-Jew and a eunuch, Ebed-Melech, certainly would be considered an outcast. His name means servant of the king, which is merely a description of his job and not his given name. Jeremiah 15-20 includes the struggles of the prophet with having to deliver a message of doom. Jeremiah was not happy that his nation would be destroyed; yet he delivered the message. Jeremiah's imprisonment for faithfully carrying out the work of God means we cannot write off those in prison as society's rejects or as rightfully belonging there. Our own justice system does not necessarily protect the righteous and God does not always protect his own servants from imprisonment or death. In Jeremiah's case, God had to use an outsider to rescue him.

Using Our Demons: Prison Ministry, Imperialism, and the Powers-that-Be

Reverend Fred H. Jensen

Christian Congregations in the United States need to be concerned for the prisoner population and to develop ways to minister to them and hopefully liberate them, literally and/or mentally. Redemptive work is a part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. At the beginning of his ministry as narrated in Luke, Jesus makes a public declaration that is apparently a mission statement. Quoting the book of Isaiah in the synagogue, he says,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim *release to the captives* and recovery of sight to the blind, *to let the oppressed go free*, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”
Luke 4:18-19 (Emphasis mine.)

Furthermore, in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, Jesus states that “visiting” those in prison brings one into deeper relationship with the Son of Man; “I was in prison and you visited me.” (Mt. 25:36) It may sound surprising, but prisons have long had a connection to the church. According to Winnifred Sullivan,

Prisons are a post-enlightenment invention. Before the nineteenth century, punishment in Europe, its colonies, and most of the world, for ordinary criminal offenses, was usually corporal: whipping, branding, public shaming, exile, or hanging.... Prisons, as we know them, were invented in the late eighteenth century in England by Christians.... In the United States, prisons were promoted in the early Republic as a more humane form of punishment, a more Christian alternative to what was perceived to be the casual brutality of corporal punishment as practiced in Europe. ...they were often viewed as the place, par excellence, for the formation of the democratic subject, also understood as a religious project.¹

By contemporary standards, it may seem strange that imprisonment was once thought of as a more humane form of punishment. Yet it was, and this shows that prisons were not intended to be cages for those regarded as less than human. Indeed, the church’s attitude toward the prisoner provides a test for our foundational beliefs that all people bear God’s image and that we are commanded to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. In some ways we see ourselves in the prisoner. Though not incarcerated, we may feel held captive by a meaningless or immoral job, we might feel trapped in a dysfunctional family or we might struggle against an addiction. We all have our “demons.” We reach out to the prisoner because we have empathy; we love our neighbor as our self, because, in some way, he or she is “our self.”

The prison experience has informed Christian theology practically from the

beginning. Past leaders of the church have set a precedent for prison ministry. The Apostle Paul didn't avoid prison, but rather used the prison experience as a means and metaphor for discipleship. While in prison he called himself a "prisoner of the Lord."² Paul saw captivity accompanying the human condition; "...but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members."³ Protestant pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned for his opposition to the Nazis, wrote his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. Both of these modern Christian leaders were opposed to war and were working for human rights, rather than working specifically to make Christian converts. This, I believe, is the model congregations need to pursue now. Human dignity needs to be our foremost value, as opposed to proselytization.

For those who see the call of Christ as a challenge to work in relevant and concrete ways to increase human dignity and improve life on earth, prison work is an obvious imperative. Every social problem is worthy of our attention and the prison system in the U.S. is a massive social problem. According to Sullivan, the U.S. is a place where "a higher percentage of the population is incarcerated than in any other country in the world."⁴ The question is therefore not so much if congregations should be involved with prison ministry, but rather how? How does prison ministry fit into our greater understanding of what it means to be church in the world? What are the goals of the prison ministry? What are practical ways congregations can do prison ministries?

One very strong model of prison ministry has made proselytization a priority; that is, getting the inmates to make a personal confession that Christ is their personal Lord and Savior. This is the model of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative, sponsored by the Prison Fellowship Ministries (PFM) founded by Charles Colson. Colson himself was heavily influenced by the philosophy of The Family (also known as The Fellowship), the powerful evangelical organization that sponsors the Washington D.C. prayer breakfast.⁵ This philosophy promotes proselytization, that individuals must be personally converted to Christ by making a confession of belief in Christ. This purely personal conversion experience is understood as Christ conquering darkness. According to Colson, "The United States, and the world, are to be rescued from darkness, from secular humanism, by individual changes of heart, accomplished through a reaching out from man to man in Christian love."⁶

I disagree with the approach that gives priority to proselytization. Proselytization efforts in prison are inappropriate in our country where, under the Supreme Court's interpretation of the First Amendment, state resources cannot be used to support any one particular religion. In December of 2006, the Supreme Court found the InnerChange Freedom Initiative practices to be unconstitutional.⁷ Proselytization programs will not work in a country that prizes religious freedom. Besides, do we really want to proselytize in prisons where we quite literally have a captive audience? Any conversions that take place there happen in an emotionally vulnerable place and their authenticity is questionable. I also question the theology that says that an individual conversion to Christ must automatically be

considered a victory of goodness over evil. It is better to restore the dignity of the prisoner first and then see what changes in faith occur after, as we shall see in the Gospel story below.

In order to deepen our understanding of what prison ministry is, how it restores both the individual and the community and how it can be seen in the context of the church's work in the world at large, I offer a reflection on a story of a man whom Jesus both healed and liberated—the story of the healing of the Gerasene demoniac. I am unaware of any other efforts to interpret this story as an endorsement of prison ministry; however, as soon as I started to examine it in this light many analogies were apparent. The story also contains a subtle critique against imperialism and imperialism evokes incarceration in many ways. I believe there is a common root to both imperialism and incarceration: both these huge American institutions spring from a chronic craving for control that grips our culture.

Please note: I do not put forth this story of the Gerasene demoniac as a statement about the reality of unclean spirits, with independent existence and intentions. I am not endorsing exorcisms as a type of prison ministry and I make no claims about whether there is such a thing as an invasive sapience.⁸ Rather, it is the metaphorical meaning of the word “demon” that makes this story so relevant to prison ministry today. When we say someone “has demons” we don't necessarily mean that there is an actual invasive sapience inside them. We could mean that the person struggles with addictions or with a mental illness. These two common, metaphorical meanings of the word “demon” speak loudly to the situation in prisons today. According to the U.S. Department of Education, ninety percent of the prison population has been incarcerated for narcotics related offenses and fifty percent of the prison population suffers from mental illness.⁹ Thus, it is very clear that it is not just the barbed-wired walls that keep almost all of our prisoners captive; there are other internal factors at work. It is these very invisible influences that congregations have a long legacy of responding to. Furthermore, these invisible inhibiting influences are not affecting just inmates; they affect our whole society. A line from the Apostle Paul comes to mind: “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”¹⁰ As mentioned above, we have a chronic craving for control that holds us all in its grip. Though the story of the Gerasene demoniac is ostensibly about the restoration of one individual, on a deeper level it is about the restoration of a community, a culture and a consciousness.

Jesus Heals the Gerasene Demoniac

Luke 8:26-39

26 Then they (Jesus and his Disciples) arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee.

27 As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.

28 When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son

of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me’—
29 for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.)
30 Jesus then asked him, ‘What is your name?’ He said, ‘Legion’; for many demons had entered him.
31 They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.
32 Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission.
33 Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.
34 When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country.
35 Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.
36 Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed.
37 Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned.
38 The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying,
39 ‘Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.’ So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

First, let’s talk about the setting of this story. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, the Gerasenes is a part of the region known as the Decapolis, which was a region of Greek settlement formed by veterans of the conquests of Alexander the Great. Note that pigs would have been forbidden for Jewish consumption, but not for the Greeks. The setting of the story and the reference to pigs, suggest a political undertone—this story takes place where one culture has forcibly encroached itself on another. Imperialism is a theme in this story, even if it is not stated outright. The mental and physical captivity of the possessed man takes place within a greater context of one nation forcing its will on another. Jesus discovers the man with a chronic condition. To use the vernacular, this guy’s got “issues,” and has had them for a long time.

The demoniac won’t wear clothes. In the prison system, such exposure is common. Inmates have to shower while being watched by guards and have no privacy while relieving themselves. My mother was a teacher in the Retrieve Prison Unit in Texas and I recall her describing how she could see men relieving them-

selves in a very open latrine as she was walking to her classroom. She commented on how humiliating it must have been for the men and it must have been embarrassing for her, too. Such exposure is forced upon the prisoner externally and I imagine the prisoner eventually simply accepts it. In the story of the demoniac, the exposure is forced upon him by his inner demons and the public has come to accept that this is just the way he is.

Society had tried guarding and binding the demoniac of the Gerasenes, but what they are doing isn't working. He breaks his chains and runs out to live amongst the tombs. In living amongst the tombs, the demoniac shows himself to be alive, but not really. There is something dead about him. We would say he is not living fully. He is "undead." Consider the similarity between a cellblock and cemetery; both are fenced areas filled with concrete. Also note how a recently exonerated death-row inmate calls his memoirs *Life After Death*.¹¹ Surely the story of the resurrection must take on a powerful metaphorical meaning for the inmate.

Thus the story of the Gerasene demoniac parallels our popular mythology of the undead. When we say someone is "near death" we conjure an image of a very sick person in a hospital bed who cannot walk or breath independently. However, when we say someone is "undead" we have an image of a very strong and dangerous entity. Vampire television shows, movies and books are continually popular in our culture. Even Abraham Lincoln is now said to be a "Vampire Hunter."¹² Zombies are another example of the lore of the undead. When a homeless man in Florida was attacked and had his face eaten, people were quick to joke and some actually feared the "zombie apocalypse." In mythology the undead are extremely powerful and parasitic at the same time. Think of one of the most famous portraits of a prisoner in cinema, Hannibal Lector in *Silence of the Lambs*. Here is a man who must be kept under the tightest security possible and yet is still powerful and terrifying and sustains himself on human flesh. While we hear no references to cannibalism in the story of the Gerasene demoniac, it is clear that he is parasitic on society. Does society hold him captive or does he hold society captive?

The undead are the stuff of our nightmares; they are terrifying. Yet when the demons meet Jesus, they are not terrifying but are terrified. These demons are not like the demons in the film, *The Exorcist*, who are powerful and defiant. The demons know Jesus is stronger and beg for mercy. In fact, the fear response appears so early in the encounter that I wonder if fear was the basic problem all along. Is not fear what creates insiders and outsiders, the honored and the shamed, the guard and the prisoner? Jesus has not made any threatening gesture toward the demons, in fact, the story suggests the demons initiate the interaction, albeit fearfully (see verses 27, 28, and 31). But what are the demons so afraid of?

The demons are afraid of being thrown into the "abyss." What is the abyss? Due to the latent fundamentalism of American Christianity, many Americans will jump to the conclusion that the "abyss" is Hell; an otherworldly place that the unsaved go to after death, to suffer forever and ever. However, this understanding of the abyss leads almost automatically to a need to proselytize at all costs and thus leads to a negation of religious freedom.¹³ However, I don't believe in a literal Hell. In Jesus's personal mission statement in Luke 4:18-19, Jesus does not say

he came to prevent damnation after death. Certainly there are a number of verses throughout the Bible that have been quoted to defend the reality of a literal Hell and addressing all those is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that I interpret them all as being about the danger of “hellish” conditions in this life and not the next. Addiction is “Hell.” Mental illness is “Hell.” War is “Hell.”

So what is “the abyss” the demons dread? In short, it is the chaotic origin from which we come that constantly threatens to consume us. The abyss as beginning and begetting exists in several mythologies around the world. Greek mythology speaks of a river-god named Okeanos that surrounds the world, emptying into himself, and from him everything, even the gods, spring.¹⁴ Norse mythology holds that life began in “burning ice and biting flame” divided by a great emptiness called Ginnungagap.¹⁵ The Enuma Elish of Mesopotamia speaks of two bodies of water becoming one in a state of nothingness and namelessness at the beginning of all things.¹⁶ The Bible begins with these words, “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” (Gn. 1:1-2)¹⁷ The abyss is a condition of nothingness and namelessness that both gives life and threatens to take it away. It is the murky past from which we come, a dark and watery womb that looms in the shadowy parts of our minds long after we have left it. It is the source of our appearance and the reason we fear disappearing.

We all suffer from the fear of disappearing. The demons fear the abyss not because they fear incarceration for some crime in the past, but because the fear of disappearing is a part of the human condition. I dare say all religions are, in some way, a response to this all-too-human existential terror. Humanity must face the fact that we are all afraid. Sticking people in prison, no matter how much they deserve it, is not going to take away this fear. Building military bases all over the world is not going to remove this fear. The United States has built more prisons and more military bases than any other country, ever.¹⁸ Nevertheless, over twenty percent of U.S. citizens suffer from severe anxiety.¹⁹ The prison industrial complex and the military industrial complex are doing nothing to alleviate our fears, and indeed, they are probably feeding off of them, like vampires sucking the life from us.

So how does Jesus respond to the demonic fear of disappearing? He asks the demons to tell him their name. The phrase “name the demon” has become an idiom in our culture for the honest confession of a chronic problem that is difficult to acknowledge. It’s a good idiom. However, in our popular mythology, “naming the demon” has taken on a magical flavor. If one can say what the problem is (so it is believed) one can make it go away. Unfortunately, this just isn’t always the case. Generally, actions are necessary to correct individual and social problems. Furthermore, I can’t see any indication in the story of the Gerasene demoniac that the naming of the demon is meant to be magical coercion. Simply stated, I don’t think Jesus asks the demon’s name so that Jesus can force him out. Rather, I think he is giving grace to the demons—he is giving them a sense of belonging.

As stated, the abyss is a condition of namelessness and nothingness. So how

does Jesus respond? By acknowledging that the demons have a name. Jesus alleviates the demon's fear of namelessness by providing a name, or rather, by leading the demons to discover their own name. Please understand, I am proposing a very different way of reading this story. Generally, the story is read as a kind of conquest of the Christ over the powers of darkness. In other words, we have the same kind of Christ in mind that the evangelical group "The Family" believes in, a Christ who has come to "take over." However, this "conquering Christ" doesn't seem to be the suffering servant of our scriptures. Our sacred stories hold up a crucified Christ, willing to take on all the fears, frustrations and failings of society. We find an empathic Christ in scriptures.

The demons are afraid of namelessness and Christ helps them find a name. In all other contexts, having someone know your name or give you a name, is a sign of belonging. In the words of the immortal song:

Making your way in the world today takes everything you got!
Taking a break from all your worries; sure would help a lot!
Wouldn't you like to get away....
Sometimes you want to go WHERE EVERYBODY
KNOWS YOUR NAME!²⁰

Traditionally, names have indicated your family and homeland and what your job is. In these United States, many have lost a connection to family, homeland and employment. Could this be part of why this American life is so abysmal for so many? Do we fear the abyss because we lack belonging?

In spite of all the positive associations a name has in every human culture, we think that Jesus's request for the demonic name is a magical act of coercion. Does it not make more sense to see the naming as an expression of empathy and a part of the healing? As for prison ministries, wouldn't it be better for ministers to help the prisoners discover a name for themselves, which is to say, a way of belonging to society? Remember, the prisoner is in a situation of "namelessness." The institution knows them by number, not name. When my mother was teaching at the prison retrieve unit in Texas, she was not allowed to even use the respectful address "Mister" with the inmates, but was told that she should call them only by their last names. We all, however, need to have a sense that we have a name.

So Jesus asks the demons for a name and the name they provide raises up the subtle political theme of this story, just as the story's setting in the Decapolis does. Their name is "Legion." A legion is a unit of 5000 soldiers in the Roman army, under the Roman Empire that was occupying Galilee and Judea in Jesus' day. This Empire was, at the time, the most powerful Empire the world had ever known. Jesus would ultimately be tried by the Roman prefect, Pilot, and executed by the distinctly Roman method of crucifixion. The use of the word "legion" here bestows the story with a political cartoon-type quality, where the healed man has the word "Israel" written on him, and the demons have the word "Rome" written on them. The story is ostensibly about the healing of one individual or one community, but there is a subtler message here—Jesus came to liberate us from imperialism.

Much interpretation has avoided this political aspect of early Christianity,

and indeed, the resistance to Rome in Jesus' leadership is seldom obvious. Opponents to this interpretation might cite Luke 7:1-10, in which Jesus heals the servant of a Roman Centurion. However, using this text to defend Jesus' friendliness to Rome overlooks several parts of the story, including that the Centurion himself recognizes that he works for a flawed system and the flaw arises from the rigid hierarchy.²¹

Furthermore, Jesus is often at odds with the temple authorities of his day²² and the temple was built up by the Roman puppet, Herod, and had intimate ties with the Roman Empire.²³ According to Hanson and Oakman, "The Judean temple in Jerusalem was a political institution in numerous senses, by virtue of its founding by an Israelite king (Solomon) and later occupation under Persian auspices (Cyrus), by virtue of its privileging a certain class of people by divine right and by virtue of its co-optation in Jesus' day by Herodian-Roman interests." The very fact that Jesus uses the term "Kingdom" as in "Kingdom of Heaven"²⁴ implies that he has come to change the social order and threaten the status quo. Early Christianity, in order to survive, had to keep their opposition to Rome subtle and peaceful. However, the Christian way was antithetical to Roman ways. They endorsed equality,²⁵ equal distribution of wealth, abolishment of private property,²⁶ condemnation of idolatry (which meant Christians could not worship the Roman Emperor), condemnation of the pursuit of "mammon"²⁷ (which was a sign of privilege and honor as well as a medium of exchange),²⁸ a shunning of currency (which was used for taxation purposes)²⁹ and non-violence.³⁰ All of these practices were quietly corrosive of the rule of the Romans.

Given all the political ramifications of Jesus' teachings and deeds, it follows that the demonic name "Legion" in the story of the Gerasene demoniac is indeed a subversive statement. How is this relevant to our current culture? Simply stated, the United States, in that we dominate the world right now, is the current Rome. According to a 2003 Department of Defense "Base Structure Report,"³¹ the United States operated 702 military installations outside of our states and outside of our territories that year. Whether we like the label or not, operating foreign military bases makes us an imperial power. If we include the military bases located within U.S. States and territories, the number comes to 6,702. The United States is different from Rome in that, unlike Rome, we are an Empire without an Emperor. We have a President, who is Commander-in-Chief over this gargantuan military presence, but he³² retains this power for at most eight years and his election is dependent on the receipt of millions and millions of campaign dollars from all manner of sources. It is therefore difficult to say where the true power lies in the U.S. and therefore in the world. Like the Gerasene demoniac, we are not controlled by one visible authority, but by a legion of unseen forces.

I believe there is a connection between the prison-industrial complex and the military-industrial complex, in that, the two arise from the same attitude. Mitt Romney displayed this attitude during his presidential campaign when he said, "I want a military so strong, nobody wants to test it." He evoked Ronald Reagan by saying he believed in peace through strength.³³ How strong do we need to be before we find the "peace" we seek? How much control do we need to exert before

we feel “in control?” The U.S. society is bent on controlling a great number of our own in prison and a great number of outsiders through our military. We have control issues. Captivity is part of our collective condition. Part of reaching out to the convict is realizing our collective predicament; convict or not, we are all caught in a culture of control. In the story of the Gerasene demoniac, it is neither the village nor the “idiot” who is to blame—it is the spiritual condition of both. Thus empathy between the inmate and the “outmate” is not something that we create, it is a pre-existent condition that we need to discover.

Consider the similarities between life at a prison and at a military base. In both places, individuals wear uniforms that cover up their individuality. In one a person is known by number, in another by rank. Both have a regimented day. In both, coming and going is strictly regulated. Both are based on a philosophy of force: that evil must be controlled rather than healed.

Granted, all these similarities are merely analogies. However, in studying “The Family” I found a personal link between the fifth largest military contractor in the world and the Prison Fellowship Ministries (PFM). The contractor is Raytheon and their president, Tom Philips, had a leadership role in “The Family,” where he aided the conversion of Charles Colson, the founder of PFM.³⁴ While this personal connection does not establish a direct tie between prison and the military, it does show that a leader of the military-industrial complex and a prominent leader in the prison system have a similar philosophy and theology. While I share Colson’s view that the love of Christ is redemptive, it seems to me the purely personal proselytization approach leaves something lacking. Just standing up and saying, “I believe in Jesus,” doesn’t mean you are actually doing the things Jesus said to do: work for peace, respond to poverty, address depression and empathize with others. Deeds are a part of discipleship. Jesus challenges us not only to believe, but to do. “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?”³⁵ I question “The Family’s” motives. How can organizations both promote imperialism and preach Jesus? These values are not consistent.

In the story of the Gerasene demoniac, Jesus, as noted, does not conquer darkness in the form of the demons; instead, he helps them find a name. The demons ask Jesus for permission to go into some pigs grazing nearby and Jesus grants this permission. Note once again how Jesus is not a coercive conqueror; he is responsive to the demons, not combative against them. The demons go into the pigs, and true to their destructive nature, they sweep the herd down a steep bank into a lake where they are drowned.

The story might well seem appalling to our modern sensibilities. How could Jesus allow the innocent pigs to be destroyed in such a violent fashion? And what about the swineherds? Jesus has just destroyed their livelihood. The people of the village are terrified by what has been done, and indeed, they should be—Jesus has just destroyed one of their local industries. He is a real threat to the status quo. There is something harsh about this story. However, is the status quo that Jesus threatens a “good” status quo? This is the same status quo that produced the demoniac in the first place. It is a status quo that has insiders and outsiders, honored and shamed, praised and shunned. Furthermore, let’s consider the nature of pig

herding in this time and place. Pigs don't have efficient sweat glands and thus cannot cool themselves effectively. This is why on hot days pigs wallow in the mud, as a way of cooling off. It also means that pigs require a lot of water to raise. In an arid climate such as the one Jesus lived in, pigs were a real threat to the water supply. The pig industry was parasitic on the culture. Yes, the swineherds lost their livelihood in this story. But their livelihood was bad for the overall health of the community. This was an industry that benefitted a few at the expense of the many—and such industries still exist today.

Today, the prison system has become very much an industry, with many people dependent on it for their livelihood. According to Sullivan, “Prisons do not work... yet new ones are being built every day. In many depressed areas of the United States they are seen simply as opportunities for private industry and job creation.”³⁶ The same is true of the military-industrial complex; much of our economy is dependent on it. Any attempt to reduce these industries will be met by fear. People will resist the changes, just as they resisted Christ in his own day.

In the story of the Gerasene demoniac, Jesus does not change the destructive nature of the demons. Instead, he channels that destructive energy toward a destructive end that hurts, but that society needs. When I say Jesus is empathetic, I do not mean that he is gentle. He wants to improve the health of the demoniac and the community, but he does it through tough love. Jesus uses the demons. He finds a place for them, a function to fulfill.

Doubtless there are many prisoners today, and ex-prisoners, who are suffering from unresolved fears, frustrations and failures. The mental anguish from this negativity may well be what got them incarcerated in the first place. Instead of attempting to force this negativity out of the prisoner, the story of the Gerasene demoniac challenges us to find ways to sublimate this negative energy toward a positive end. I am thinking specifically of prison art programs. A quick search on the internet revealed a number of programs for prison art that exist already and have success stories. Space does not permit me to give these programs the treatment they deserve, but allow me to share my personal experience of prison art. When my mother taught basic literacy to adult men in the Retrieve Unit in Texas, the inmates often made gifts to her of works of art. Some of them were quite good. One of them showed a rough-looking man living in the far north who was walking out into a dark winter, away from a cozy-looking house where a warm fire was burning. We framed this picture and hung it on our wall. Was the prison inmate dealing with “demons” when he painted this picture? Did he feel emotionally like he was headed into a cold wilderness? When my mother was killed in a car accident, my family received many artfully drawn sympathy cards from the prison inmates she had taught. I remember my father being emotionally touched by these cards, describing the men who drew them as the “rejects of society” whom he wanted to dignify by reading the cards. My father was not a generally empathetic person,³⁷ and he struggled with the demon of racism, which he had inherited from his prejudiced relatives. Yet he was moved to empathy by these sympathy cards. Many of them were addressed to my mother directly and thus were the inmate's way of saying farewell to my mother's spirit.

It is therefore my personal experience that prison art programs are good ways of creating a sense of connection between the incarcerated and the community. These paintings can build a bridge of empathy. I propose that congregations use their building space to provide galleries to display and sell the works of inmates as a way of beginning the process of restoration.

The story of the Gerasene demoniac became very meaningful to me when I saw a painting depicting the story on the wall of University Christian Church in Fort Worth Texas. I was a student of Texas Christian University at the time and one of my professors, Ken Lawrence, was showing the painting to a class of art students. The painting was the work of Adrian Martinez, who made a dramatic statement about Jesus with the painting. He showed Jesus reaching across the graveyard wall to heal the man, pulling him from his undead life back to the world of the living. If one looked closely at the painting, one could see something surprising; the face of Jesus and the face of the healed man were identical. Martinez had used the same model for both. Martinez had made this decision specifically to convey that Jesus empathized completely with the demoniac and that this empathy allowed the man to forgive himself. He was able to let go of his unresolved fears, frustrations and failures. Thus anything the church can do to extend empathy to the inmate could well be restorative. Furthermore, our theological grounding for this empathy is that Christ himself empathizes with each of us, fully.

After the man is healed in the story of the Gerasene demoniac, he specifically asks Jesus if he can be his disciple. Jesus specifically declines. Jesus is not looking for recruits; he is looking to heal an individual and a community. It is important that the man go back to the community and that the two learn to live with each other again—it is a part of the restoration. Of course, the man on his own talks about what Jesus had done for him. This praise, however, is the consequence of Jesus' work of restoration and was not Jesus' main intention. Jesus is not a narcissist seeking glory, but is the very opposite. His work is self-less. Likewise, when congregations consider prison ministry, it should not be for the task of recruiting, that is, it is not about proselytizing. Our primary goal should be to restore individuals and to restore communities. Certainly, in the process, we will find more people attracted to the call of Christ. However, new disciples are a consequence of healing work, not the primary goal.

I am quite confident that Jesus didn't set out to found a fan club for himself. It would be better if we understood prison ministries as an expression of our own discipleship rather than an effort to make more disciples, although, in the process, the Spirit may indeed call new disciples. This is the model put forward by Bonhoeffer and King. Indeed, I dare to believe that healing was the first and foremost goal of even the Apostles of Jesus, whom Jesus gave "power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases and he sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal."³⁸ My recommendations for congregations are that they understand themselves not so much as places to proclaim, "Lord, Lord" to Jesus, but as a place to extend his invitation to belong and his empathy to all. Jesus didn't shun the Roman tax collector or the sinner, but instead welcomed all to his table in the name of healing and in spite of what the religious authorities of his day said.³⁹

Congregations should work on creating connections with the incarcerated; connections aimed at restoring self-esteem and hopefully restoring a place in society. In doing so, we will be continuing the work of the kingdom of God on Earth which our crucified king commissioned us to do.

Endnotes

1. Sullivan, Winnifred Fallers. *Prison Religion: Faith-Based Reform and The Constitution*. Princeton University Press, 2009. p. 4.
2. Ephesians 4:1, Philemon 1:1.
3. Romans 7: 23.
4. Sullivan, p. 2.
5. Sullivan, “Although PFM has grown and diversified over the years, it has lived very much under the patronage of The Fellowship, as its name indicates, and the religious rhetoric of its programs in many ways reflects the religious politics of that leadership.” p. 71.
6. Sullivan, p. 74.
7. Sullivan, p. 1.
8. As far as I know, I invented the term “invasive sapience” to refer to a literal, malevolent ghost that haunts a demoniac. Do you like it?
9. Sullivan, p. 7. Treating drug addiction and mental illness as public health problems rather than criminal problems would help reduce the prison population, and these are two area where congregations can help.
10. Ephesians 6:12. NRSV translation.
11. Damien Echols, Blue Rider Press, 2012.
12. The film, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* was released in 2012. Many called the very idea “ridiculous.” Yet consider how Lincoln, like Jesus, is regarded as a liberator. Would not Lincoln the liberator, like Jesus the liberator, battle the undead?
13. If it is really true that non-Christians are to suffer forever, and Christians are compassionate people who want to prevent suffering, can we really allow religious freedom? We Christians are often politically opposed to gambling, drug use, and abusive behavior for the very reasons that these behaviors lead to suffering. If the “behavior” of being a Muslim or an Atheist is to lead to everlasting suffering, how can we politically allow it? Perhaps I am making a false dichotomy, but it seems to me a belief in everlasting suffering for the unsaved and a belief in religious freedom are at best difficult to reconcile.
14. Kerényi, C. *The Gods of the Greeks*. Thames and Hudson, 1951. p. 15.
15. Crossley-Holland, Kevin. *The Norse Myths*. Pantheon Books, 1980. p. 3.
16. Matthews, Victor and Benjamin, Don. *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*. Paulist Press, 1991, p. 11.
17. New Revised Standard Version.
18. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the U.S. spent 711 billion dollars military expenditures in 2011. This was far more than any other country. The next runner up was China, who spent 143 billion dollars. http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/resultoutput/milex_15/the-15-countries-with-the-highest-military-expenditure-in-2011-

table/view

19. Kessler RC, Chiu WT, Demler O, Walters EE. *Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of twelve-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication* (NCS-R). Archives of General Psychiatry, 2005 Jun; 62(6):617-27. Study cited from NIMH website, http://www.nimh.nih.gov/statistics/1ANYANX_ADULT.shtml.
20. These are the opening words for the theme song of the television show Cheers, which ran from 1982 to 1993. Song written by Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo. In the context, the words refer to a bar. I do not intend this as an endorsement of the consumption of demon rum, or any other “spirit.”
21. See verses 6-9, and note how even Jesus himself is “amazed” at the insight of the Centurion. It is also noteworthy that this story comes very shortly after Jesus has taught his disciples to “love their enemies, and do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:32) and “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned, Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you.” (Luke 6: 37-38). In doing something good for the enemy of Israel, the Roman Centurion, Jesus is merely practicing what he has just preached. Also note that Jewish elders advocate for the Centurion before Jesus helps him, implying that the Centurion’s deservingness is doubtful (verses 4-5).
22. Note that in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 25-37, it is the temple employees who are negligent. Also note that in the parable of the Wicked Tenants in Luke 20: 9-19, the parable is explicitly directed against the temple employees, and they know it (see verse 19).
23. The temple that Herod built was dedicated to both the Roman Emperor Augustus and the goddess of Rome, Roma. *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*. Hanson, K.C. and Oakman, Douglas. Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 1998. p. 77.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
25. Note Luke 9: 46-48: “An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.’” The critique of hierarchy is clear, here.
26. Note Acts 2:44; “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” Also Acts 4:32; “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.”
27. Matthew 6:24.
28. Hanson and Oakman, p.122. The authors of *Palestine in the Time of Jesus* argue persuasively that “mammon” is, in fact, more about honor and status than it is about buying power, in this society where many still used barter as a means of trade, and not currency.

29. Note how in the story in Matthew 22: 15-22, in which Jesus is asked if it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, Jesus does not have a coin, but has to ask to see one. He tells his Apostles to carry no money with them (Luke 9:3), he doesn't have a coin to pay the temple tax (and implies his followers don't have to) (Matthew 17: 24-27), and how Jesus overturned the tables of the money-changers in the temple (Matthew 21:12). Jesus evidently didn't think too highly of currency.
30. Matthew 5:9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Matthew 5:38-39 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also..."
31. <http://www.defense.gov/news/Jun2003/basestructure2003.pdf>. All numbers are taken from page 8.
32. So far, there have been no female presidents.
33. Quote from a Veterans for Romney campaign speech in Springfield, Virginia, on Sept 27, 2012. Cited from CNN online, http://us.cnn.com/2012/09/27/politics/campaign-wrap/index.html?hpt=hp_t1.
34. Sullivan, p. 72.
35. Luke 6:46.
36. Sullivan, p. 5.
37. My father was so lacking in empathy that I have often wondered if he was on the autistic spectrum. Of course, I have some demons I am dealing with on account of his narcissism. Writing a theological essay on the importance of empathy is one way I deal with these demons.
38. Luke 9:2.
39. Luke 5:30-32.

And Just Who is Your God? A Monastic Prison Dialog

Thomas Kreuder and Chris Barbera

Thomas—My Catholic seminary education included a ‘novitiate’ phase comprised of monastic-like seclusion in silence, prayer and living quite abstractly from the world of noise and business. We were immersed in the great classic tomes on the spiritual life, would read the bible cover to cover and would daily memorize and recite verses to another classmate.

Chris—Escape from the prison of the world has been a cornerstone of monastic formation. The cave of Plato and thinking mind of Descartes has abstracted education and made it easier for the Quakers to create penance in the penitentiary.

Thomas—Of course, there were more positive learning experiences gained from the six years of major seminary. Of these, humility and meekness were two of the five virtues specific to the mission and purpose of the religious community to which I aspired (Vincentians). These two virtues, often the subject of our communal meditation in the early morning before the daily Eucharistic celebration, were consistent with the Vincentian’s embrace of Christ’s proclamation “to proclaim good news to the poor.”

Chris—The majority of people in prison are poor and poverty is considered a crime by many. Poor people are considered by many to be lacking in intelligence.

Thomas—Vincent De Paul wisely instructed his very first members that “the poor are your masters.” Indeed, it has been the poor in South America and elsewhere, studying from their bibles in small groups while discussing the meaning of God and Jesus, who have regenerated in our day this understanding of Jesus’ preferential option for the poor. This peasant class in the third world was and is teaching the already catechized and scholarly clergy non-poor this long forgotten but critical aspect of Jesus’ life and purpose.

Chris—Members of the “Christian Church” should be more engaged in the world and more conscious of breaking down class distinctions.

Thomas—The Second Vatican Council underlined renewed pastoral understanding of ordained priesthood. Instead of being a distant and separate clergy speaking from above, there was a call to be servants and to echo the words of Jesus – “the Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve” and “Whoever among you who wishes to be the greatest must become the least and servant of all.”

Another core biblical issue is the understanding of just what “salvation” means. As a human being, am I not spatial-temporal, living the journey of life here or there, now and before and yet to come? Can it ever be proper to say “I have been saved?” Is it not more realistic to say each day and at each moment that “I am in process of receiving my salvation by following the way of Jesus?” This understanding makes me more of a daily cooperator with God in the act of salvation. With God respectful of my individual freedom, working cooperatively in making a world of non-violence, peace, justice, redemption, turning evil to good,

healing and salvation not just for the exclusive few, but for the many: “go out and invite all to the wedding feast!”

Chris—Prisoners live under judgment where every action is dictated from an external force. The old paradigm of master/servant or student /teacher or pastor/ congregation does not allow for the full blossoming of freedom and growth of individual conscience. Such a freedom is necessary for a person to forgive and be forgiven. Punishment puts a person on the defensive, never allowing the space and emotional stability which is necessary for atonement. At the heart of religious and secular justice is the restoration of loss caused by sin or crime. Freedom of conscience and forgiveness are more effective tools than coercion and punishment. The captivity of body and mind cannot lead to justice. Elimination of the perpetrator will not eliminate the “demons” of human nature. Justice must address human nature in the individual and its manifestation in society. Law must be just and justice, to be human, must be merciful. Mercy, being an expression of genuine strength, makes people and systems of people accountable for infractions of morality, which is the highest expression of law.

Thomas—This understanding of salvation better respects the nature of “gift.” A gift is a thing/value/reality that is freely given by the giver and freely accepted by the receiver. Personal free will to accept or refuse, to choose one thing or its opposite, is respected by God. I am daily invited to work and cooperate as God’s willing partner in living out my human existence with the mind of Jesus, infused with the spirit of Jesus. Most importantly, my “temporality” is respected. The act of surrendering and having faith in Jesus/God may begin consciously at some specific time, but I remain far from “perfect.” I live my life as a journey. The conversion (metanoia) from following my evil, less perfect ways and turning towards the good now becomes not only a momentary high point, but a daily walk with God as my partner. Guidance, direction, correction and gifts of the Holy Spirit come to mature and ripen in each person in God’s own time.

Chris—The mind of an inmate, a person already under an intense spatial-temporal judgment, should be given relative spatial-temporal freedom in order to actively engage in the process of metanoia. In religious terminology, this implies the turning away from evil towards the good, as the prophet proclaimed in the first chapter of Isaiah. To re-form or to be re-born, the secular and religious injunctions towards completeness, requires the loosening of the bonds of judgment.

Thomas—Let time take its time. Let go, let God. Yes, raise consciousness. Communicate hope and joy and positive attitude. There is always tomorrow. Respect the individual dignity of every human being. Show loving kindness, prudently keeping in mind that this most certainly does not exclude words and acts of confrontation properly communicated or appropriately applied. In any biblical search for God, the Christian believer begins in the Jewish scriptures to find a God whose attributes are primarily justice, loving kindness and mercy. The Christian believer then examines Jesus’ words and actions during his three year public ministry as recorded in the four gospels. This ministry begins with the proclamation of the

words of Isaiah:

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me,
for he has anointed me.
He has sent me to bring good news to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to captives
and to set the downtrodden free,
to proclaim the Lord’s year of favor.”(LK. 4:18-19)

Chris—The proclamation of the servant king Jesus is a revolutionary indictment upon the powers of the world. Churches and prisons are both powers in this world. The mystery of Christ is hidden in the world.

Thomas—The most ancient history records that people developed a relationship with the world as they experienced it which included the mysteriousness of it all. The term mystery does not connote that nothing can be known, but that reality is so deep and layered with meaning that one can never exhaust its depth.

Chris—Daniel resided as an exile among the Babylonian sages interpreting the mystery and meaning of the “revealer of dreams” to the King. Daniel was cast into captivity where he continued to experience the mystery and “signs and sacraments of God.”

Thomas—The created order becomes appreciated as the sign and sacrament of God’s presence, the sacrament of encounter with God.

We are the mystical body of Jesus, first as individual believers convicted with faith in God as “God’s own adopted family” and as followers and doers of the way of Jesus. We are individuals who come together, the Qahal YHWH. The assembled, gathered together, congregated social body of Jesus’ followers is more commonly called church.

Chris—The mystical body of Jesus has often been blessed in persecution as Paul in prison. Is the “suffering servant” a fatalistic instrument of oppression?

Thomas—Does the believer ever look at his/her faith critically or is one to just “have faith and go with the flow?” Some say “hey whatever happens or has happened is all part of God’s plan.” Do they mean that God has preplanned the history of the world and each of the lives of the world’s inhabitants, leaving no room for freewill or free choice? Or could it mean that God allows whatever happens and that God’s plan is for humans endowed with intelligence, freewill and faith to make appropriate responses expected of God’s family?

Chris—Appropriate Christian responses have traditionally consisted of mercy, humility, forgiveness and love. This deep feeling of connectedness is beyond words.

Thomas—We are told the story that when Thomas Aquinas completed the Summa Theologia, he laid down his pen, gazed upon the thousands of pages written and concluded that it was “so much straw.” He then remained silent after that until he died. Like the reports of many of the world’s mystics, the dark night of the soul comes upon the searcher after God in a more but deeply loving and wordless,

apathetic, relationship.

Chris—Mystical Christianity has shown how thought leads to silence and peace. Another aspect of Christianity is the social aspect of the gospels, the communal messages in the Book of Acts and the necessity of dialogue.

Thomas—Humans, having free choice, love God, consciously or not, whenever they guide and direct themselves in any of their relationships as co-creators with God of some emerging good. This graceful relationship reveals God's presence among us and brings positive attitudes of thankfulness and joy. A strengthening of all those relationships serves as co-creating with God. The world is always emerging.

Chris—Relationships in love are continually emerging, revealing the mystery and depth of life. Creating a space for this restoration and reconciliation is the ongoing work of Christian ethics and social justice. This space is perhaps more necessary within the confinement and punishment of prison. It is also more necessary in the creation of an alternative to the social construct of prisons as a way to address justice.

Thomas—I am reminded of the developing Evolutionary Theology. This perspective is very consistent with the biblically enunciated "conversion." I can turn away from where I am at any unfolding moment of my life and change or evolve from engaging myself in destructive relationships into constructive, just and loving relationships. I can "carry the cross of my daily life" and, with Paul, be "working out the process of my salvation." I can "lay down my life for another." Wow! Change-growth-evolution is part and parcel of our very existence. If I am truly free then I can turn in either direction; from good to bad or from bad to good. I can surrender to Jesus and God's will as I increasingly appreciate what this means at any time. And, at any time in the future, I can surrender even more deeply or not.

How respectful is such a God of this human nature. How much must a compassionate God suffer and weep when we humans abuse our freedom and commit acts which are against freedom; acts of moral or unnecessary physical violence, acts of grave social injustice, acts that abuse and diminish our health and well being.

Chris—Freedom of conscience resonates deeply with inmates. In an environment of control, freedom of thought heals and allows growth. The Christian concepts of redemption and salvation work well within freedom. Genuine freedom allows a person to choose or not choose religion. It takes out the coercive element. And for the person who chooses, clarity and meaning are much more pronounced. Religion then becomes the effective tool it was designed for by sages of old.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about a "religionless Christianity" while in prison. The concept as I understand it is to demythologize Christ in order to make the teachings experiential and life affirming rather than abstract and a curative for fears of death. To come upon this understanding in prison makes it more profound. Prison is an environment of fear and death and there may be an inclination

to abstract oneself from this reality. Does not the practice of Religion sometimes do this with empty rituals, abstract intellectualism and an overly emotional celebratory release from pain? The communal healing aspect of religion as a medicine for fear, alienation and suffering has become an addiction to irrelevance. Of course, the materialism of capitalism plays a part.

It is easy to see how Marx could claim that “religion is the opiate of the masses.” It is also easy to see how people living within the shadow of poverty and prisons medicate themselves with drugs and alcohol. Within the capitalistic empire, drugs and poverty are criminalized

The empire requires accumulation of wealth. Labor creates wealth. Slave labor creates great wealth. Prisoners provide labor, wealth, for corporations. The legacy of slavery which makes people into objects to be owned is exacerbated by prisons. Much has been written about the connection of wealth, slavery and prisons. Racial discrimination and oppression haunts much of society. Society, then, punishes people in poverty with prison while giving the economic profits to the wealthy. The added incentive for wealthy people is the elimination of poor people from society:

“For the three crimes, the four crimes, of Tyre
I have made my decree and will not relent:
because they have deported entire nations as slaves to Edom
and have not remembered the covenant of brotherhood,
I am going to hurl fire on the walls of Tyre
to burn up her palaces.” (AM. 1:9-10)

Thomas—Effectively raising consciousness is the task of the educator. Education basically translates as the state of being lead out of ignorance and into the truth. Christian education focuses on sinful conditions, which are broken or dehumanizing fixations. These may be found in the destructive and poisonous aspects of society’s structures. They may also be found in the need for the individual to reengage in the basic tasks of self responsibility, spiritual/human journey of recognizing and eliminating negative aspects of personal behavior or of engaging in greater self giving in the dynamic process of living with others in society.

In either the social-structural-organization or the individual, we most frequently encounter our partner in the state of what has been described as “pre-contemplation.” The subject doesn’t have a clue of any need for change. Moreover, there can often be enormous resistance motivated by the survival response of protecting “where I am right now.” This response can include comfort (could be any of us), threats (where the person has lost the ability to trust because of repeated past betrayals), profit (as in wealthy businesses where profit as the *raison d’être* has come to overly rely upon cheap labor to the detriment of the economy, environment and well being in their own community) and convenience (prisons as a solution to crime regardless of expense and as a place of “punishment exclusive of restoration”).

To engage any such situation is an enormous challenge for any Christian committed to the biblical mandate of the gospel. How does a Christian raise consciousness about such elemental values as distributive and restorative justice?

How can we implement Jesus' "preferential option for the poor?" And further, when we hear Jesus advising the rich young man to sell all he has, become poor and follow him, can we integrate this practice into a personal, national and world-wide justice? Can the extreme and life threatening poverty of the majority of humans compel the "haves" to take less or only what is needed? Can this justice change the structure of the institutional church? As Augustine put it, "the church is always in need of reformation."

In the early 1970's, I spent three years as the director of Night People Drop-in Center in Buffalo, NY. John Russell, an Episcopal priest, founded this organization. This essential program was open from 9:00pm until 3:00am. It provided a warm nonviolent alternative to the cold streets. Soup, coffee, clothing, counseling, transportation to emergency medical care and housing were provided. Many people suffering from malnutrition and other diseases who were homeless, war veterans, formerly incarcerated and others with various mental disabilities were served.

With some frequency, volunteers would approach me and ask what they "really" could do "to help" "these people." I would recognize the volunteer's need to see some immediate change but change that did not require the needed engagement with people that would always be an extended process. My immediate response would be; "Do not come here to help people first. Come first to help yourself, that is, come to learn. Form friendly relationships with just one or two people and make them comfortable enough to sit with you and tell their stories over a game of checkers or a cup of coffee. Provide help immediately when needed and also do this by killing the roach on the wall, cleaning up spilled sugar on the coffee table or by driving someone to the hospital. You will be seen as providing such elemental services that bespeak and communicate a nonthreatening sense and attitude of love and care that are consummately human and beneficial. This conduct makes you nonthreatening and approachable, even "co-vulnerable" if you will. It reveals you to be someone not to be suspicious or fearful of when you approach another with the intention of "breaking the ice" and "getting closer" to.

Love and caring are verbs and not just spoken words and advice, however well intended. Actions of love and kindness usually speak louder than words and when these precede or accompany verbal communication, they can make latter communication so much more acceptable and hearable. Loving actions and a display of authentic openness are what make the miracle of dialogue possible. Thus the state of pre-contemplation, where there is no awareness of the need, much less any desire, to begin a journey of changing, is able to move into the next stage of contemplation. Here, a person can at least become aware of the benefits of changing and consider further how to begin and manage such movement. This enlightenment, with lots of sustaining support both within and without the individual (or organization) can then move towards action and actual change and improvement. (rf. The Transitional Model of Behavior Change, James O. Prochaska et al.)

Was this not the way of Jesus' life and stated mission? And if He was "God-made-human" and given the name "Lord," then acting with understanding and helping to carry the burden of others is a way for the God of love to become in

Jesus and to become in us visibly and sensibly present.

Chris—Incarnation within incarceration.

Thomas—My strong hope in the prison ministry of Jesus the Liberator Seminary of Religious Justice is that the prisoner enrollees to whom we provide theological education and correspondence will continue their responding education and teaching of us through their own correspondence and by the wonderful papers they write from behind prison walls. And we hope for something beyond this. We invite and encourage these brothers and sisters to labor thoughtfully and prayerfully while enduring the experience of actually being imprisoned. We hope that in then writing about and sharing these experiences, they become the creators and developers of a unique and well articulated wisdom of Christian biblical prison theology. What an extraordinary witness this will become of how anyone might successfully struggle to use prison experience to grow positively, to overcome evil with good, to be Jesus to other inmates and to prison staff. God chooses the weak of the world to overcome the strong. We hope and pray for the evolution of the prison system such that it serves rather as a place of restoration than as a place of punishment

O God of the universe, you call all people of the earth to be a part of the divine patchwork that is Jesus. As a historical work in progress, let your Holy Spirit among us lead us to both the self restorative and social restoration of one another, including our institutions and exclusive of no one who lives. Let ours be the loving hands that recognize and labor to join together into the mystical body all persons as worthy of yours and our love and caring, respect and cooperation. Let us be the salt of the earth, the light on the mountain. Make us servants of your divine plan by becoming each day servants of one another in the active practice of peacemaking of justice and loving kindness and forgiving mercy reserved from no one. May our practice of compassion and willingness to be your partner bring your divine healing presence to all those who are discouraged, poor, downtrodden and forgotten. Such was and is the all inclusive mission of Jesus. Such must be ours.

