

..... you visited me: The call to prison ministry

by [Kenneth L. Carder](#) in the [October 3, 2006](#) issue

When I was a newly ordained pastor in 1966, I heard a speech by a federal judge that significantly shaped my life and ministry. The judge said that he kept in contact with every person he sentenced to prison. His rationale for writing or visiting inmates was simple: he didn't want his only impact on an individual to be the act of denying his or her freedom.

This highly regarded jurist then said, "Pastors should be as familiar with the inside of the local jails and prisons as they are the local hospitals." He observed that most people who are hospitalized have a strong support system and are surrounded by people devoted to their healing and well-being. By contrast, people housed in jails and prisons receive minimal support, and the people around them are mostly committed to confining and punishing them.

Though as a pastor I had visited hospitals almost daily, I had never been inside a jail. Within a few weeks of hearing that judge's challenge, I made my first visit to the county jail. I reluctantly and anxiously entered a world often hidden from and ignored by congregations and pastors. There I met more than law enforcement officers and inmates. I met the One who said, "I was in prison and you visited me."

The incarcerated are among the fastest-growing populations in the U.S. Approximately 4,500 are added to the prison population each month. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics for 2004, there are more than 2.2 million inmates in the nation's jails. The 2004 figures reflect a record 32-year continuous rise in the number of inmates. The U.S. incarceration rate of 724 per 100,000 residents is the highest in the world. The rate of incarceration has quintupled since 1971. Prisons and jails are grossly overcrowded, with no relief in sight.

Prison ministries are usually relegated to specialized groups such as Prison Fellowship or Kairos. Inmates are seldom on the regular visitation schedules of pastors. Government-funded prison chaplains are relied upon to provide pastoral

care and religious services to inmates. Very few local jails have chaplains. While many dedicated chaplains serve in prisons, they are often seen as hired hands of the department of corrections, and they often lack the trust of inmates.

For pastors, finding the time to add prisoners to the list of those to be visited is a challenge. Personal fear and lack of confidence in relating to the criminal-justice system creates understandable hesitation and resistance. Entering the unfamiliar world of inmates entails moving outside comfort zones, and those who desire to do so will receive little encouragement.

Hostility and prejudice toward the incarcerated are impediments to ministry. The criminal justice system is dominated by notions of retribution, vengeance, punishment and isolation. The core values of the Christian gospel—forgiveness, compassion, redemption, reconciliation, restorative justice—run counter to prevailing sentiments in the justice system.

Pastors and congregations engaged in prison ministry often meet bureaucratic resistance. Prison staffs are overworked, underpaid and undervalued, and they work in a high-stress environment. They are among those who need the ministry of the church. Building trust among the staff is essential for access and effectiveness in any prison ministry.

Though the obstacles are formidable, the potential benefits to pastors and congregations are substantial. And much is at stake: faithfulness to Christ's mandate and mission, renewal of the church's witness and ministry, the theological integrity of the church's proclamation, the spiritual vitality of pastors, and the well-being of more than 2 million inmates and their families.

Prisons and jails present in microcosm the challenges confronting the church and the world—racial polarization, economic disparity and poverty, terror and violence, drug and alcohol abuse, personal and family brokenness, isolation and loneliness, anger and meaninglessness and guilt. Behind the walls of every prison and jail are fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, friends and neighbors—all persons made in the divine image who, like the rest of us, have distorted that image and who long for love, reconciliation and purpose. Ministry in such contexts of intense needs and opportunities can energize and shape ministry in the broader society where the same realities exist in less concentrated form.

Inmates and their families have shaped my own experience and understanding of the gospel. During my first jail visit a young man asked to speak with me privately. Ed was a muscular man whose arms were covered with tattoos. On his left arm was inscribed Born to Lose, and on his other arm, Born to Raise Hell. He immediately blurted out, “How do I get God in my life?”

“Why,” I asked, “do you want God in your life? What difference do you think that would make?”

For the next several minutes he shared his life’s story of abuse, foster homes, repeated incarcerations for drunkenness, theft and larceny. He then added sorrowfully, “I’ve obviously made a mess of my life. I want to amount to something. I’ve hurt a lot of people and I ain’t worth shit.”

I responded, “Ed, you don’t have to get God in your life. God is already present in you. Your guilt and regret, the longing to make something of your life, the desire for a sense of worth—that is God’s presence with you. We can begin by thanking God for being present in those feelings and desires and then open your whole life to that Presence.”

What theologians call prevenient grace took on new meaning in that conversation. I learned that we never take God anywhere; we find God already present.

Ed helped me learn early on that the Christian gospel must be more than a theological abstraction; it must be embodied. How was Ed to know the meaning of love when all he had known was rejection? How was he to understand forgiveness when vengeance and retribution had dominated his experience? How was he to experience the worth and dignity rooted in grace when he felt worthless?

After several visits, Ed asked, “Can you introduce me to a man in your church who can show me what it’s like to be a Christian?” That opened the door for congregational involvement. I introduced him to a person in the congregation who subsequently involved others in baking cookies and providing reading material for inmates and organizing occasional worship services.

Some of my most profound theological insights, transforming experiences and enduring friendships have come out of my relationships with incarcerated persons. Inmates have plenty of free time, and artwork can be a popular pastime. Several men who occupied the same cellblock in one county jail were particularly adept at

creating cartoons. I provided them copies of the New Testament in a modern translation and asked them to read the parables and sayings of Jesus and identify those that lent themselves to cartoon portrayal. The result was a collection of insightful portrayals of the blind leading the blind, a rich man trying to go through the eye of a needle, a man removing the speck from another's eye while a log was protruding from his own, and the laying up of treasures where moth and rust destroy and thieves steal. The cartoons led to long hours of discussion of the teachings of Jesus that would rival most seminary classes for passion and depth of insight.

Involvement with prison and jail ministries keeps the pastor focused on life-and-death matters. Leaving the "free world" and entering the world behind prison walls tends to strip one of pretense and superficial preoccupations.

No place confronts us with life-and-death challenges like death row. Relationships with the condemned and those whose job is to guard them and execute them are among the most intense and transformative pastoral relationships. Capital punishment ceases to be an abstract political, ethical and theological issue. Being present with persons who are awaiting execution, along with their families and the families of the victims of violence, pushes the pastor to the edges of faith and stability.

Bill has been a friend since I met him on death row more than 20 years ago. We have shared many experiences—his retrial and resentencing (to life in prison) and my changes in pastoral assignments. When I was elected bishop he called me from prison to say, "Finally, an American election that turned out right."

Bill is always forthright, insightful and compassionate. When I asked him if any pastors or people from local churches ever visited his prison, which houses approximately 3,000 people, he said, "I've been in this prison six years and I haven't seen a preacher yet, and I'm not aware of any churches that are involved here." I had passed several churches of various denominations along the rural west Tennessee road that leads to the sprawling prison complex.

Since I now help to educate and form pastors in seminary, I asked Bill, "What do you consider to be the most important qualities of a pastor?"

He replied, "Integrity, consistency and dependability." By integrity he meant that there should be congruity between the pastor's proclamation of the gospel and the pastor's life. Consistency, for Bill, involves treating people consistently with respect,

compassion and dignity regardless of their status or condition. Dependability is “doing what you say you will do.” He added that over his more than 25 years of incarceration he had seen many pastors and churchpeople promise, with good intentions, to visit, but “only a handful can be depended on to stick around very long.” Such unfulfilled promises add to the cynicism and disillusionment of inmates.

Unless it is involved with the people in jails and prisons, the church will surely lack integrity, consistency and dependability.