

Reaching through the bars: Chicago-area prison ministry

by [Phyllis Kersten](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

The same Spirit that was upon Jesus, bringing good news to the poor and proclaiming release to the captive, is found among Christians today who have a heart for prisoners and their families. Led by two members with such a heart, our church began a ministry to prisoners. We began by inviting representatives of agencies involved in prison ministry to speak in Sunday morning education sessions, at women's group meetings and at a special breakfast to which we invited individuals we thought might be interested in this ministry. We then began to plug into the work of these agencies.

Through Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, three women from our church periodically take children from Chicago to the women's prisons in Dwight or Kankakee to visit their moms. Studies show that children who have a parent in prison are most at risk themselves for ending up behind bars.

Three women also tutor in the Cook County jail, helping detainees attain their GED while awaiting trial. Cook County's resident population is over 10,000, making it the largest "city" of incarcerated men and women in the world. The number of women there has jumped dramatically because of the increase in sentencing for drug offenses.

The church members who have become tutors include a single lawyer, a Barnard graduate who is a mother of two, and a grandmother in her 70s. A recovering alcoholic volunteered to work in an AA program in prison. A young psychologist in the congregation, a mother of two, offered a four-month parenting class for women. The presence of such people who have chosen to walk with those in prison helps those behind bars believe that they have value and worth.

It isn't, of course, only jail residents who are affected by this ministry. We, too, are changed by the people we meet and the stories we hear. One woman told me why she joined a gang: because her father used to beat her, her mother and her brothers

and sisters. "I used to beg him to hit me, instead of the others," she said. Now her father visits her in jail. Her dad cries when he comes. He says he's sorry for how he treated her, and doesn't beat her mother and brothers and sisters any more. Light still comes into the darkness.

Alerted by those agencies that work most closely with prisoners and ex-offenders, a group of us joined some 50 or so others at state legislative hearings on prison reform. (One scheduled hearing didn't happen because only one state representative showed up. The meeting had evidently been canceled, but no one had told him or those who came to testify.) We sought to ensure that a proposed measure that would prohibit women prisoners from hugging their visiting children would not be enacted into law. By our presence we also sought to encourage state lawmakers to increase funding for community-based drug treatment programs, where children and their mothers are not separated, as an alternative to incarceration. Back at church, we sponsored a four-week adult education series on restorative justice.

Children and adults have been involved in other projects through an organization called Companions, Inc. Church members buy journals and books for Aunt Mary's Story Book Project, which records the voices of incarcerated women reading a book, and then the book and tape are given to the women's children, so that they can hear their mom's voice every night reading to them.

Since holidays only accentuate the separation of incarcerated women from their families, church school kids and women's groups have participated in Companions Inc.'s Mother's Day project: assembling over 300 stationery packets (five cards with stamps) that are distributed to women in jail so they can write to their children and moms.

We have also twice sponsored concerts at the Cook County jail by Christian musician Dave Schmidt of Phoenix. A dozen or so church members have come along to help distribute home-made cookies and Coca Cola. At the end of the last concert, the superintendent of the men's division let us take the remainder of the refreshments up to one of the tiers of cells. A woman officer handed inmates cookies through the bars, while a church member, Dan Muriello, and I poured Coke into the plastic cups for the men who lined up on the other side of the bars. It wasn't bread and wine, but it seemed holy to Dan and me, and perhaps in some sense it was for the men also. The jail bars were a visible reminder of all the brokenness and divisions that exist in

the world and in ourselves, the various barriers that separate us from God and one another.

What we had to offer, cookies and Coke, was surely inadequate, but I'd like to believe the refreshments represented at least those basics that imprisoned men and women hunger and thirst for, those things we all hunger and thirst for—a simple gesture of care; someone who will grieve with us over our losses, over those areas of our past where we messed up; someone who will love us in spite of our brokenness and help us become whole; the opportunity for forgiveness and a new beginning; a oneness that can somehow overcome those things that separate and divide us.

Our congregation's limited ventures into jails and prisons have taught us that getting out of our comfort zone and reaching out to others enables us to see again God's intervention and action in our own lives. That's what happened to us, at any rate, after that last concert. We gained a new insight: that Christ's Holy Communion is always, in one way or another, God in Christ reaching through prison bars to us; Christ intervening across those things that would keep us locked in or shut out, to feed us and free us; Christ stretching out his arms and hands once more to offer us grace and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit.