Exchanging letters with people in hell

My state has the same number of churches as prisoners. This fact haunts me.

by Chris Hoke in the October 25, 2016 issue

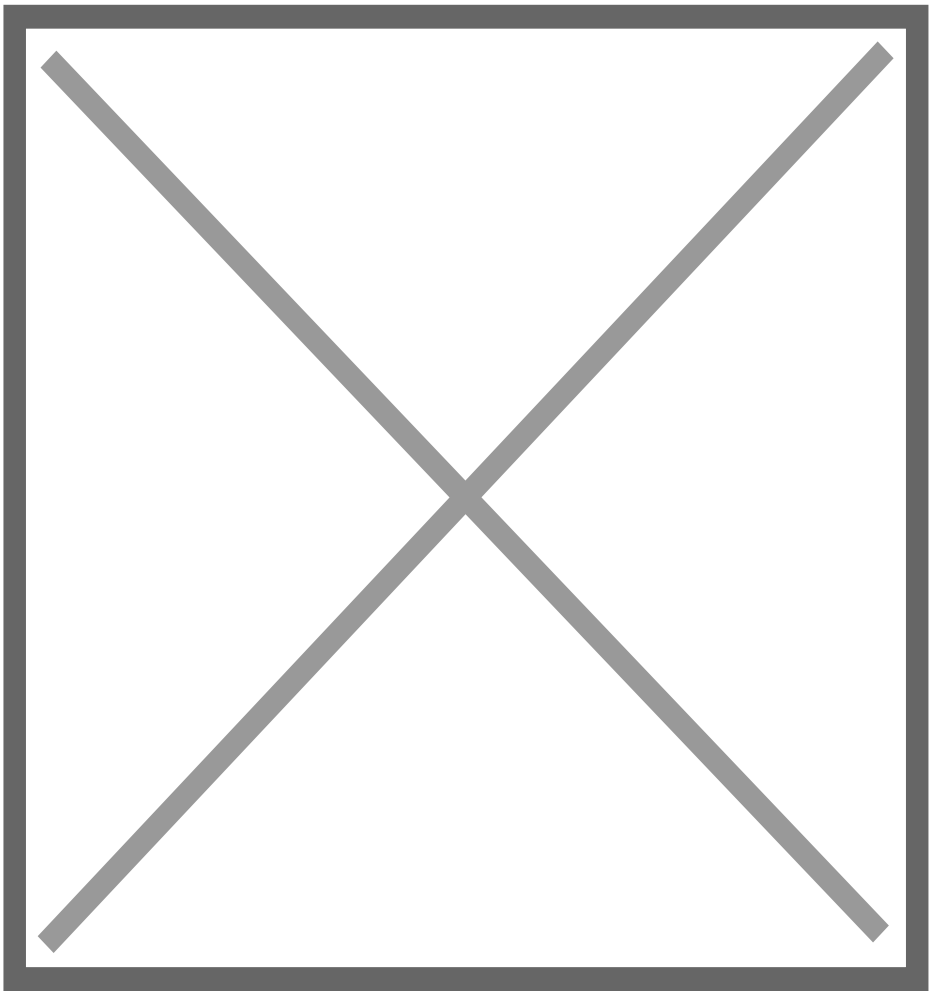


Illustration by James Yang

I was telling a room full of retired volunteers about mystical experiences that my friend Neaners had when he was in solitary confinement in a maximum-security prison. I told how he and I—a Mexican gang member and a dorky white church guy of about the same age—had exchanged weekly handwritten letters for nearly seven years, and how it had changed both of us.

In that isolation cell my friend Neaners had visions of becoming a pastor and ministering to other gang members and lost youth in our hometown when he got out. He wrote raw, tender descriptions of a mysterious love that would sometimes wash through his veins. It led him to nights of sweet and unstoppable tears as he lay alone in the bathroom-sized cell, where he existed 23 hours a day without natural light.

I told the small audience how dozens of my friends and family members began exchanging letters with Neaners, and how those letters changed him, ignited his faith, and prepared him for life on the outside. And of how the exchange affected my friends and family. They confessed things to Neaners that he says he'll take to the grave.

Standing in front of this gathering, I suggested that prayerful, personal letters sent to inmates like Neaners can be a subversive act, moving deep inside the human disposal system that is the prison system. The act of outreach, of making contact with the dead, was stirring new life inside a mass social grave.

We're an epistolary faith, I reminded them. Much of the New Testament, what we now call holy scripture, was letters. A good number of them were prison letters. "This is how the church grows."

Then I told them that such letters passing in and out of prison walls had the power to transform inmates' cruel lockdown cells into something entirely different. "Love," I said, quoting St. John of the Cross from his tiny dirt cell, "is ever throwing out sparks."

As Christians writing letters to inmates, I went on, we could help light and toss mystical fires—to burn through the belly of the beast of the American prison system today. We could burn the whole thing down, with mercy, from the inside out. I saw nods, big eyes, and smiles around the room, from the frail lady in a wheelchair to the businessman type in a crisp Oxford shirt.

I'd feared such talk might sound scandalous. But this was Crossroad Bible Institute, and those in my audience were a few of the 5,500 volunteers who are already writing letters to incarcerated men and women. The CBI program offers a (somewhat stiff, very Reformed) correspondence Bible course for prisoners. "Lessons" are completed and mailed to volunteers who "grade" them and return them with encouraging notes. Over the decades, however, the notes have become personal letters that open relationships between church members across America and thousands of people in penal institutions. These rare relationships are not just changing the lives of inmates and of the volunteers on the outside; it's causing the CBI to transform its program as well.

I'm a visiting author and jail chaplain from the rainy lands north of Seattle. I was in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for a speaking engagement at a writing conference, and this talk was a small, off-site gig. But it turned out to be the most important stop of my trip.

When I arrived at CBI, I got the tour of what turned out to be an impressively smooth operation. Most of the ground floor was a kind of prison-letter-response staging ground—something I'd always dreamed of developing back at our ministry, Tierra Nueva, in the Northwest.

More than a dozen morning volunteers were busy at two rows of computers on long tables, opening envelopes from various prisons with stern institutional warnings stamped on the outside about uncensored contents. But inside each was fragile handwriting holding raw hopes on loose-leaf paper.

Large windows looked out on a pond with ducks and cattails. Soft worship music lilted through the air. I wondered: What kinds of sounds echoed through cinder-block walls and heavy steel doors on the other sides of those letters? What kinds of razor-wire views? What kinds of tattoos and scars etched the hands that wrote them?

Here, most of the hands that gently folded back the pages and typed or wrote cursive replies were grandmother and grandfather hands, hands that had raised children, cradled grandkids, worked for decades, and been folded in prayer for the better part of a century. The younger, stylish director of communications introduced me to Dottie, who told me she was in her late seventies. She'd been coming to CBI and corresponding with inmates for 31 years. Dottie looked at me through bifocals, a thin gold cross hanging against her blouse and cardigan.

“There were years when coming here was the only thing that got me out of bed in the morning,” she told me. “These men were waiting for my replies. Oh, the questions they ask sometimes!” She laughed. “It gave me reason to get out of bed some days. Especially in those years after Hank passed.”

When I visit retirement homes, I usually leave early. The stale, quiet loneliness becomes too much for me. A few residents are usually working on puzzles. *Jeopardy!* is on the TV but no one is watching, and residents are asking aides if their families will be visiting today. If there is another population that’s forgotten in America, it’s the elderly. But here at Crossroads the seniors were using their mornings, their wisdom, and their life-filled hearts to write to the kinds of men I know so well as a chaplain—equally lonely men aching to receive mail in their fluorescent-bulb cells, to hear from anyone who cares.

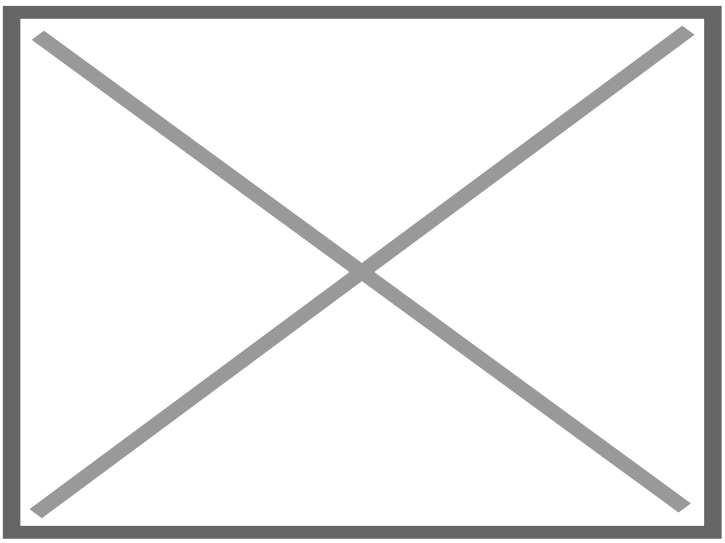
Several people raised their hands at the end of my talk. They wanted to know why the men they’d been writing to had to spend so many years in prison—for what these people felt was a relatively minor crime, usually drug possession.

“They need help, not more years in there.”

These were not the usual conservative sentiments about crime and punishment in America. One gentleman asked why students had such a hard time “getting on their feet” each time they got out of prison. “I guess I don’t understand why someone who sincerely wants to change their life can’t get approved for housing or hired for jobs.”

Another person mentioned the Marshall Project—an edgy, nonprofit journalism website committed to changing the criminal justice system.

This is what happens when churchpeople exchange letters with those in hell. They fall in love with the damned. They learn their names. They hear their cries. And they start questioning the system of gates that’s keeping them inside.



Each of the 5,500 volunteers out there—writing from their kitchen tables and studies—belongs to a larger church. It struck me that I could be seeing the tipping point for churches joining the anti-mass-incarceration groundswell in America.

The Lazarus story is, I believe, the story for the American church in this age of mass incarceration—that is, not only for our role in facilitating mass resurrection, but for our own resurrection as a social body today.

America leads the world in incarcerating its own people. Almost two and a half million human beings are locked away in mass social tombs, an overstuffed underground beneath our society. They are not physically dead like Lazarus, of course, but philosopher Lisa Guenther calls it “social death”—cut off from loved ones, family, and their children. Huge geographic distances, dozens of thick walls, and expensive phone calls seal these men and women off from the land of the living. They are effectively dead to society.

But as Christians, we proclaim the resurrection of the dead.

Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the underground can be a blueprint for resurrection and prisoner reentry today. For starters, Jesus knows the name of the dead. He loves Lazarus. He weeps over his friend. That's what motivates the miracle. This is where letters come in—the relational power that CBI has discovered, which triggers transformation on both ends of the envelope. We can participate in resurrection today when we know the name of an incarcerated person.

Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead by calling his name. That awakening of someone's truest self, in the dark, is a divine event. As a jail chaplain, I have seen many men spiritually awaken. They wipe tears away from their eyes in our circle of chairs. They write letters with new hopes and dreams of raising their kids. I regularly bear witness to a repentance more authentic than anything I saw in church growing up. God is bringing dead hearts back to life in dark places. We volunteers see this. We get to be near it.

But there's a problem. What if Lazarus came back alive inside the tomb but the huge stone was not rolled away for him?

How would you feel if you woke up in a dark place surrounded by death, all bound up still, and hitting your head against that heavy barrier? You'd rather go back to being dead. I believe that's what happens when men and women relapse in addictions or criminal behavior after their release, and go back to prison.

When inmates walk out the prison gates, they are still underground. They are not yet back in society. Even if some of their family is intact, legal barriers hold them in a kind of civic netherworld. The stone is in place.

To start, they can't get a driver's license. Often thousands of dollars of court fees and other financial obligations have been piling up with interest while they were in prison, unable to pay. This mountain of financial debt means a hold on their driver's license and their credit. Any time they try to drive somewhere it's a misdemeanor, and without personal transportation, they struggle to get to probation appointments, required treatment evaluations, and classes—all with more fees they cannot afford. Where do they get that money? How do they get to a job interview? Employers and landlords screen against criminal records.

These are disheartening obstacles that no individual can remove on his own. Most former inmates are trapped in this kind of social underground after prison. They go back to old friends, neighborhoods, addictions, illegal drug dealing, knowing they'll get caught eventually. No wonder the recidivism rate is over 70 percent.

That stone—who put it there? It was not a natural phenomenon. It was shaped and constructed by communities since the beginning of time: to keep a barrier between the living and the dead. The massive stone today is the cyclical societal barriers we've built against prisoner reentry.

Jesus does not miraculously make this grave seal disappear. Nor does Lazarus move it alone, proving he is truly resurrected. It's a handful of ordinary people listening to Jesus and working together who push against this barrier.

Two years before Neaners was scheduled to be released from prison, we started putting a plan together. It took a lot of conversation, a lot of careful planning. But Neaners would be released directly from a bathroom-sized solitary confinement cell into a real home—my two-bedroom house, with my wife and me.

We'd already become like family. Over the years I'd applied for special visiting clearance to bring his five-year-old daughter to meet him for the first time. She smiled at him through the visitation glass, sang "You Are My Sunshine" through the scratchy intercom system, and called him Daddy. He taught her how to count in Spanish, fingers against both sides of the glass, by numbering the years until he could have a home and raise her.

People who'd read my e-mails and were praying for him sent gift cards to our home weeks before his release. Some sent checks to help with the costs of starting a new life. He would not need the gang now or have to pressure old girlfriends for financial help.

We had a small barbecue his second day out, with a backyard full of people who'd been writing him and were excited to see him. We celebrated the one coming home. After not having been touched by sunlight for nearly a year, his skin was paler than mine. It made the tattoos on his shaved scalp and face stand out in sharp relief. He hadn't been around this many people in years, and it was a fragile day for him. It would take time to adjust.

Neaners didn't want a job right away. This was a wise move: he needed people to take him to probation appointments and treatment evaluations, to clear up old warrants the system had not cleared, to help him get his ID, buy some new clothes and toiletries, to go with him and his daughters to the beach, go running together, make meals, stick with him. He needed friends to talk to in the evenings, when anxiety and nightmares closed in. He was like someone just home from war.

After the stone is rolled out of Lazarus's way, there's more work to do. He's still trapped in all those layers of protective cloth that wrapped him up in the darkness like a mummy. Men and women leaving the underground don't just face external obstacles; there are layers of distrust, survival patterns, addictions, defenses that cover deep stories, and wounds that have not healed. This can keep other people at arms' distance, afraid.

But Jesus tells the community to "unbind him." Draw near. Beneath that intimidating appearance and the protective wrappings there is a fragile human, a story coming alive. And in gentle relationships, those many layers slowly come off—for all of us. Once in relationship, we start to see one another for who we really are. We heal.

After Neaners had been home for several months, a small Presbyterian congregation reached out to me. "We've been reading your e-mails about Neaners and praying for him. When do we get to meet him?"

Neaners and I preached at their church a few weeks later. There were dark stained-glass windows and electric keyboard hymns. Most members of the congregation were retired. Neaners brought his new girlfriend Vanessa and his daughters. The whole place fussed over him. They went back as a couple the next Sunday. And the Sunday after that. He's the only Mexican, the only person with tattoos, and the only person under 50, not counting Vanessa and his daughters. "It's cool," he told me with a shrug and big smile. "I feel safe there. It's chill. The people are so nice, bro."

He preferred this quiet church to the outreach-oriented mission of Tierra Nueva. He didn't want to be always stuck with other people getting out of jail or off drugs. At Trinity Presbyterian, he felt normal, accepted, respectable. He joined the bell choir.

When Neaners and Vanessa got married the following summer, the women at Trinity Presbyterian decked the place out in colored crepe paper. "We haven't had a wedding here in at least seven years," one of the church elders said to Neaners as she squeezed his arm.

Now Neaners brings along an occasional homie he's reaching out to. And when he needs help in the custody courts for his own kids, or in finding side jobs for extra income, or someone to watch his youngest daughter for an afternoon or help out at the outreach garden he started, he calls an adopted aunt, uncle, or grandparent at his church. They show up.

Someone told me last year that here in Washington State there is roughly the same number of churches as there are prisoners. That statistic has haunted me every since.

It's had me thinking: *What if every church wrote to, adopted, and received just one prisoner? Two things would happen. We would empty the prison system, and every church would be changed.*

A church has just about everything someone just out of prison needs: rides, friends, prayer, child care, employment connections, lawyer references, teachers, rental opportunities, lawnmowers, people to stand alongside you at custody court and neighborly misunderstandings, and a used car that runs. We could call the movement "One Parish, One Prisoner."

Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, calls for "a new underground railroad"—informal networks of normal people and their homes, families, and communities, all conspiring to welcome released captives into a life of freedom among us.

Conservatives say social change is the church's role, not the government's. Liberals are looking for ways to make the Christian message real to their congregants—transformative, community-building, and social justice–focused. Both are looking for ways to make the church relevant in this post-Christian age, to "do mission" beyond short-term, expensive trips to impoverished countries or homeless shelters in the inner city. This is how mission can happen on the home front. It's local. It's relational. It's learning the work of forgiveness and the mystery of atonement, one parish at a time.

When Jesus suggests that people remove the unquestioned barrier between these worlds, between them and Lazarus, some understandable concerns pop up. Like, what about that horrible rot, the smell? Things can go wrong. Unpleasant realities come out. Jesus does not reassure them. Instead, he asks: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

Lisa Blystra, executive director of CBI, became involved when her friend's husband got in trouble with the law and was sent to prison. As her church supported the prisoner's family, the people were exposed to "the injustices of the justice system from the inside out." Then the man came home and worshiped among them.

"My faith was challenged," Lisa said. "I had to struggle with scripture, theology. I had to recognize my own brokenness. And not just me—it changed the heart of our church."

"Just think," says Lisa, "of the value church can be in our time if it leans into being a healing space for returning citizens . . . [and] I can't think of a group that's more capable of teaching the church . . . than prisoners."

Is there any other issue so perfectly matched with our story as Christians? We are fallen sinners forgiven by grace: the dead raised to new life with the wall of hostility torn down, becoming one body of Christ as we learn to love one another. After all, Jesus founded his church with prison-gate-defying imagery. He told Peter that the gates of Hades—the barriers to the underworld—would not be able to resist Christ's ecclesia (Matt. 16:18).

The church does not have gates, bolstered against evil forces. That misses Jesus' metaphor. Rather, the church he inaugurated here—as a people, as a phenomenon, as a movement—is aimed at hell. We carry the authority of heaven and, following Jesus, together defy the barriers of death. It's what we, the church, were made to do.

We've forgotten this over the centuries. But the most popular icon in the early church looked like this cosmic prison break: the resurrected Christ busting out of the underground with the gates of Hades broken beneath his feet, chains and locks and keys scattered. Souls in the darkness below rise with him into the realm of the living and the saints. The glory of God shines at the rupture, on everyone, both dead and alive.

As churches gather around one prisoner, we will be living out this icon in our communities. We can rediscover, together, the original image and power of the Risen Christ in this age.

Of course, scores of partnerships between jail/prison chaplaincies and faith communities are already in place. The Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham, for example, pairs no fewer than five committed folks in a church with one returning prisoner each and trains them for the adventure that follows.

The director of the Catholic Church's criminal justice ministry for the entire Seattle archdiocese heard me use the phrase "one parish, one prisoner" at a juvenile detention roundtable and called me up. "How do we do this?" he asked. He's thinking big.

In two United Methodist churches I visited recently, someone brought me a copy of official propositions for the UMC's annual conference that would have each congregation embrace one youth released from incarceration and be a support system in its community. The proposals came from juvenile detention chaplain Terri Stewart and were approved last summer. Our ecclesial structures are becoming an underground railroad.

Still, most churches aren't involved in prison ministries. But when I'm preaching at a church I ask, "How many of you know someone who's locked up?" and a hand almost always goes up—timidly. The family or the prisoner might be right there in the church.

Yesterday I got a collect call from Dirty. Recently he's been going by his real name, Alejandro, or Alex. Two months ago, Alex had a spiritual breakthrough in his lonely cell when he tried centering prayer. But yesterday he sounded as if he was coming back to life. He's been asking more about how Neaners, his old homeboy, changed his life when he left prison. Now Alex wants the same thing.

"I wanna find my own little church, in my hometown, you know? I only got two years left in here."

I told him that one of the Methodist churches where I'd just preached was in his hometown.

"D'you tell 'em about me?" he interrupted, excited.

Yes, I said. Two people had met with me over coffee, and I'd given them Alex's prison address and photo. "They'll be writing you this week." The line was quiet for a moment.

"Oooh—I got *chills* when you told me that!" I heard his voice echo through the solitary confinement hallway.

"It feels like a fresh breeze just blew through here," he said more thoughtfully. "Feels like one of these prison walls just tumbled down."

A version of this article appears in the October 26 print edition under the title "A church for every prisoner."