

Changing America's Prisons

What do you want to do with guys who are hurting people?" said the corrections officer with some frustration. He was escorting a group of us through the Security Housing Unit (SHU—or in everyone's parlance, the "shoe") of Pelican Bay State Prison in California, one of the grimmest maximum-security zones of any prison in the United States. Prisoners are mostly kept one to a cell (they tend to murder each other too often when stuck together) in total isolation from other prisoners and indeed from virtually any other human contact.

For 22-1/2 hours each day they can watch television, read, sleep or perhaps scream. Food on trays is pushed through security hatches into their cells. Exercise is 90 minutes of pacing like a grief-stricken dog around the bottom of a concrete well 20 feet by 10 feet by 20 feet high with a wire grating over the top.

Undoubtedly, some of these men are dangerous. Many are members of militarylike prison gangs. Many, though, are in the "shoe" for their own protection from gangs or because they are at risk for other reasons.

But the presence of the "shoe" seems to have done nothing to reduce overall prison tensions, and six months after a fatal riot among the 3,400 inmates last February, there is still a "lockdown" of the entire prison. The sense of intimidation and silent, sullen rage is palpable.

Yet Pelican Bay is not some decrepit dungeon that has survived

from the 19th century. It is actually a modern structure erected 11 years ago, with all the latest technical devices to control the prisoners and keep the guards safe.

But it is like control over a cemetery. The human beings incarcerated in this “correctional facility” fortress are further away from “correction” than they are from the moon. It is a tragedy.

There is something seriously amiss with this nation’s efforts to deal with crime and criminals. Though violent crime has declined in the last three years consecutively, the rate of recidivism—the tendency of prisoners, once released, to go back to crime—remains nationwide at 70 percent. A chaotic inconsistency in imposing prison sentences means that people sentenced for marijuana possession or insurance fraud sometimes serve more time than murderers and rapists.

Thanks be to God, a wonderful light of hope is growing amid this darkness within the criminal justice system. Three years ago Prison Fellowship launched in a prison near Houston a voluntary but full-time Christ-centered discipleship program inviting prisoners to have their lives transformed through the power of the gospel. Today, two similar programs operate in Kansas and Iowa.

At Newton Correctional Facility in Iowa, Inner Change Freedom Initiative (IFI) operational director Jack Cowley explained: “There are dual purposes in IFI. One is to get the men into the kingdom of heaven. The other is to reduce recidivism.”

It is too early to tell for sure what the long-term effect on recidivism is, though it is likely to be dramatic among the

IFI graduates. The program requires full-time discipleship in prison but thorough aftercare work with the former prisoners when they are released.

At Newton, a medium-security facility, the sense of joy, fun and mutual caring among prisoners in the IFI unit is startling compared with regular units of the prison. The schedule is rigorous: up at 5 a.m. every day and intense group Bible study, discussion and accountability sessions until 10 p.m.

Some guards and inmates have sneered at the IFI unit as “the God pod” or have deliberately picked on IFI participants in an effort to find weaknesses in their Christian witness.

But the most startling evidence of the program’s effectiveness was offered by Vance, 41, serving 10 years for cocaine possession: Vance could have been out of prison last March, but he is staying an extra eight months in prison—just to finish the course.

Pray for Vance (see Heb. 13:3) and the 291 other IFI prisoners at Iowa. Just think, places like Pelican Bay might eventually be out of business.

A wonderful light of hope is growing amid the darkness within the criminal justice system.

David Aikman is a senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C. For 23 years, he was a foreign and domestic correspondent with Time magazine. Today he lives with his wife, Nonie, in Burke, Virginia. Contact him at aikmand@.