

Taking The Light Behind Prison Walls

The number of incarcerated women in America is escalating. How can the church serve them and their families?

Society calls them “criminals,” “crackheads” and “losers,” but to those of us who find our pulpits inside prison walls, they are JoAnn, Mary and Tonya—sisters and friends. Frequently we who minister “behind the wall” find tender hearts that are open to hear the good news of Jesus Christ.

During the first century when many Christians were being imprisoned for their faith, the writer of Hebrews stressed the need for believers to strengthen and comfort the body of Christ behind prison walls and to share their brethren’s suffering (see Heb. 13:1-3). It is for this reason that thousands of workers leave the comforts of home each week and travel for hours to the rural areas where most prisons are located.

They are there to minister to those in spiritual and emotional chains; this is their mission field. When you ask them why, you will probably hear, “I see the glory of the Father in each of these women” or “But for the grace of God, there go I.”

I was introduced to prison ministry early in the late 1950s. My mother, Marguerite Nash, was deputy sheriff and matron of the Summit County Jail in Akron, Ohio.

It was difficult to understand her interest in “her girls” until shortly after my conversion to Christ, when she asked me to minister to them. For the first time, I experienced the joy of giving hope to those who had suffered the wounds of abuse, discrimination, domestic violence, prostitution and rape along with the hopelessness of incarceration.

Fifteen years later, Prison Fellowship invited me to speak in the maximum-security unit of a women's prison in Delaware. My first reaction was sheer terror.

I thought: What do I have to say to these women? I have never been to prison. To my surprise, the women were positive, upbeat and open to receive Christ.

My maiden voyage into prison ministry was life-changing. So significant was this event that for the next seven years I served as an in-prison seminar instructor in state and federal prisons throughout the nation.

Now I serve as the national chairperson of the Operation Starting Line Women's Task Force. I find myself doing a "life sentence" on the installment plan.

PRISON TRENDS

Today, the primary function of penal institutions is retribution—vengeance and punishment—for those who threaten public safety. But from the late 1800s to the early 1900s prisons were places of rehabilitation.

Quaker and Mennonite ministers encouraged prisoners to reflect on their crimes and helped them with penitence. This is the term from which we derive the name "penitentiary." Offenders were released and welcomed back into the community through forgiveness and reconciliation after paying their debt to society.

A trip to any prison today will confirm that we need to do something more than what we are doing now. Sadly, most people don't care about prisons as long as neither they nor a family member has to spend time in one.

However, if current trends in the United States continue, in 20 years everyone will know someone in prison, and all citizens will be paying taxes to keep the offenders there.

The number of incarcerated females in America has exploded from 13,400 in 1980 to more than 200,000 today. At approximately 2 million, the total number of inmates represents as many as 1.5 million minor children with one or more parents in jail.

Incarcerated females were the principal caregivers for 75 percent of these children. Most go into foster care or some other form of state custody.

Clearly, women and men come to prison with very different issues—and for different reasons. It is a frightening place. Many women find themselves ill-equipped to handle the emotional roller coaster they must endure.

Because women make up a smaller percentage of the incarcerated population and their sentences are shorter, many falsely assume that programs designed for males work just as well for females. Consequently, women prisoners have not received the attention they deserve.

In spite of booming prison construction, most states have only one facility for women, which increases the possibility of a one-time offender's being bunked with a career offender. While incarcerated, women also face more physical, verbal and emotional abuse than male inmates.

The profile of the typical female offender includes substance abuse, low self-esteem and sexual abuse. Typically, they are in their mid-20s and are serving time for drug-related or property crimes.

Ramah International, a post-abortion ministry, reports that 60 to 80 percent of incarcerated women today have had abortions. They hypothesize that abortion is a key factor in criminal behavior because many women view it as the unforgivable sin.

Reaching these women with the love of God isn't easy. Their rehabilitation requires a loving approach that fosters healing

in every aspect of their lives.

OPERATION STARTING LINE

And that's just what Operation Starting Line (OSL) is equipped to provide. The organization was birthed in 1998 when Chuck Colson and Tom Pratt, founder and president, respectively, of Prison Fellowship, Reid Carpenter, president of the Pittsburgh Leadership Foundation, and Franklin Graham embraced a mandate from God to lead an army of volunteers into one of the last frontiers of evangelism.

Operation Starting Line is a collaboration of several Christian ministries. The program is designed to take the gospel to every prison in America through the use of open-air meetings.

During these campaigns, hundreds of volunteers speak one-on-one to inmates. Those prisoners who are interested are invited to attend a six-week Bible study and to become involved with the inside church or enroll in Christian training and education. OSL seeks to empower and equip Christian inmates to minister behind the wall where real prison evangelism ministry takes place.

The OSL Women's Task Force is comprised of 20 women—from an ex-offender to leaders of major Christian women's organizations. Together we have developed a scriptural and holistic curriculum that will address the unique needs of incarcerated women.

As a way to deter recidivism—the return to criminal behavior following release—volunteers are trained to deal compassionately with the complex needs of women, many of whom have been wounded, traumatized and criminalized by abortion, guilt, shame, fear, suicide and prostitution.

Bringing scriptural understanding to issues of anger and forgiveness as they relate to homosexuality, abortion, drugs and alcohol requires skill and training. A 180-page syllabus

prepares volunteers and churches to provide a support network for women returning to the community.

LIVES THAT WERE CHANGED

Operation Starting Line has proved that the lives of inmates can be turned around by the gospel. Here are a few examples of those who triumphed after being won to Christ while in prison.

Audrey was sexually molested at 13. When she was silenced by her mother, her life spiraled down until her grades made her almost ineligible to finish high school.

A series of illicit affairs with all types of men followed. One of the men turned her on to drugs.

By her mid-20s Audrey was addicted to cocaine and drinking heavily. To support her cocaine habit, she began shoplifting.

After years of doing drugs and committing crimes she was sentenced to prison, where she heard the gospel and accepted Jesus through a mentoring program. After her release, she earned a master's degree and enrolled in a doctoral program while working as a counselor at drug-treatment facilities and halfway houses.

Saundra, addicted to cocaine and down to her last \$10 in food stamps, went to a store to buy bananas and cereal for her children. On impulse, she robbed the attendant at gunpoint.

She was sentenced to five to 10 years in prison, and her children ended up in foster homes. But God used prison to set Saundra free through Christian inmates who kept inviting her to Bible studies.

After serving five years, Saundra started Inside-Outside Prison Ministry. She has traveled to churches within the United States and Africa, training women to care for their children.

Connie was depressed and attempting suicide when her car

careened over the divider and hit another car head-on. The driver, a young mother, was killed.

When the husband and father of the victim visited Connie and offered her forgiveness, healing began in her life. She served five years and during that time became born again. Now she is a caregiver for children and the elderly.

Patricia was addicted to drugs and a practicing homosexual. She was also a burglar, prostitute and check forger who found Christ while serving 11 years in prison. Patricia now holds a responsible position with the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers.

Cassandra's oppression by demonic forces led to a life of drugs and bizarre conduct. When she was convicted of armed robbery and a probation violation, she was sentenced to prison for five years.

Her destructive behavior caused her to be in the "hole" (prison within the prison), where she heard an inmate singing "Amazing Grace." The inmate shared her faith with Cassandra, who was later nurtured by Fran Howard, a prison volunteer and founder of Freedom in the Son (FITS). Cassandra is now a community health worker in California.

IT TAKES THE FAMILY OF GOD

None of these women made it alone. Each one needed a mentor or volunteer to provide a support system along with spiritual and social resources.

Full restoration requires that an entire congregation become involved with the offender in a long-term continuum of aftercare. Help is initiated by the church but carried out by the inmate as she participates in her full recovery from a criminal lifestyle.

In his epistle to Philemon the apostle Paul encouraged him to receive Onesimus, the fugitive slave converted under Paul's ministry, as a beloved brother—not a slave. Furthermore, Paul

offered to pay Philemon for anything Onesimus had taken.

This story remarkably illustrates the character of Paul and the transfiguring power of the gospel. According to Ignatius, an early Christian historian, Onesimus later became a bishop in Ephesus.

The key here is that Paul looked at his converts and saw the glory of the Father in each face. We who desire to minister to inmates must do the same if we hope to penetrate prison walls.

Countless volunteer opportunities exist for mentors, Bible study leaders and workers for evangelistic events. Project Angel Tree reached nearly a half million children of inmates last year. Pen-pal volunteers can encourage women behind bars through their letters and cards.

Ultimately, ministry to prisoners and their families requires a genuine love for the lost and the understanding that Jesus saves from the uttermost to the uttermost. As we speak His truth, we will see God's glory manifested in the transformed lives of incarcerated women.

Read a companion devotional.

Lorraine Williams has been a national chairperson for Operation Starting Line Women's Task Force. To volunteer for ministry to women in prison, you may apply online at .