



VOL 2, NO 1

PRISON MINISTRY

PROBLEM: A large number of U.S. residents are in jail or prison: a situation that burdens the imprisoned, their families, and society.

SOLUTION: Faith-based organizations are working to reduce recidivism and to serve the imprisoned in various ways: by seeking their religious conversion, by reaching out to their family members, and by promoting legal reforms.

The number of people imprisoned in the United States has doubled in each of the past two decades, while the rate of serious crime has decreased significantly. A recent article in the *National Institute of Justice Journal* noted that, “This unanticipated period of declining crime may be unique in our nation’s history.”

One may interpret these facts—rising imprisonment rates coupled with falling crime rates—as contradictory, or as a demonstration of cause and effect. In any case, today there are 2 million people in our jails and prisons. The increasing rate of imprisonment for drug-related offenses is a major reason. The FBI estimates that there will be 1,250,000 arrests this year for drug-related offenses. The U.S. currently incarcerates seven of every 1,000 residents—an extraordinary rate by international standards. European nations on average incarcerate fewer than one in 1,000.

For some, that we are locking up so many criminals is good news. For others, these statistics pose questions about policy. For many in the faith community, they indicate a large population—i.e., prisoners—in need of support and life-changing intervention. Religious organizations have been prominently involved in both these areas—with the trend in recent years being away from an effort to reform prisons and laws, and toward an emphasis on religious conversion and reform of individual prisoners.

With the shift in emphasis, evangelical churches are coming to the fore in prison ministries, while mainline denominations are pulling back. The United Church of Christ recently underwent a restructuring and scaled back the people and resources it commits to prison programs. Similarly, the Disciples of Christ Church is committing fewer resources to prison programs than it did before. The Disciples’ “Church Action for Safe and Just Communities” (CASJC) project, which supported criminal-justice reform advocacy groups, had its funding cut three years ago, and the reform network it nurtured has essentially dissolved.

Gerald Cunningham, director of racial justice ministries in the Disciples’ national headquarters, says the network grew out of the activism of the 1960s, when many mainline congregations joined civil rights leaders to protest the inequities of the criminal justice system and advocate for reform. Today, he says, mainline denominations are shying away from projects that might stir controversy.

“Frankly, as denominations restructure, they’re bending over backwards to not be divisive, to not deal with controversial issues, because that’s not what builds churches,” Cunningham says. “You have a general public that tends to be much more keen on punishment than on rehabilitation. And that’s true in the churches, because you’re talking about the same people. Rehabilitation is passé; punishment is in.”

CONVERSION AS REHABILITATION

The purpose of incarceration, according to Indiana's state constitution, "is to attempt to reform persons and not to punish them vindictively." The word "penitentiary" derives from the notion of prison as a place where the imprisoned may reflect on their misdeeds and repent of them—i.e., be penitent. This dovetails neatly with the religious concept of changing one's life through conversion.

The conversion experience is stressed most emphatically in evangelical Christianity. Not surprisingly, then, in recent years prison ministry has become primarily the domain of evangelical Christians. Today's prison ministries tend to seek reform of individual prisoners, not the criminal justice system.

These ministries reflect a general movement in American political thought toward support for faith-based solutions to intractable social problems. The Republican candidate for president, Gov. George W. Bush of Texas, has lent his support to a faith-based prison program called InnerChange.

Prison Fellowship Ministries

Charles Colson, an aide to former president Nixon, founded Prison Fellowship Ministries (PFM) in 1976 after spending seven months in prison for his role in the Watergate affair. PFM is now an international organization with offices in 80 countries. The organization has an ambitious agenda of converting large numbers of convicts into Christians.

Prison Fellowship Ministries founded the first chapter of InnerChange at the Texas state prison in Huntsville. One hundred fifty inmates voluntarily participate in the program, spending from dawn to 10 p. m. immersed in Bible study and an intense schedule of "character-building" activities. PFM staffs the program, while the state provides guards and other operating expenses.

The crucial question is whether InnerChange or any faith-based prison program can lower the rate of recidivism—the percentage of prisoners who return to prison after release. Little research has been conducted on the success of such programs. A 1987 study of Prison Fellowship Ministries found that, overall, the likelihood of re-arrest after one year was the same for PFM participants as for non-participants. However, those prisoners who were most actively involved in PFM's programs did have a lower rate of recidivism.

Texas' prison system is the second largest in the nation, and half of all the inmates who serve time in it eventually return to prison. If InnerChange, now in its third year, succeeds in reducing recidivism substantially, the program will likely be widely adopted. Even without strong evidence of success, Iowa and Kansas are preparing to open a chapter of the program, and several other states are considering it.

PFM in Indiana

For now, there are no plans to implement InnerChange in Indiana prisons, but there are active chapters of Prison Fellowship Ministries in Indianapolis and Fort Wayne. The Indianapolis chapter is housed in a small, nondescript set of offices near the airport. Locally and nationally, PFM is a highly influential presence in the field of prison work. Its partners include churches from virtually all Christian denominations.

PFM is funded primarily through gifts. It employs a small staff whose principal role is recruiting and training large numbers of volunteers. A recent report on PFM's 1999 activity in Indiana estimated that the organization had the support of more than 1,400 volunteers. It made contact with an estimated 18,000 inmates in Indiana last year, and did so with a paid staff of five.

PFM sponsors one-day seminars in prisons, including the popular "Life Plan Seminar," at which instructors help inmates work on basic life skills such as setting goals, finding employment, and dealing with problems that they will face after release.

PFM also sponsors regularly scheduled Bible studies, where inmates discuss scriptures and work through a series of booklets such as the *Prison Survival Guide*, which includes advice on how to overcome fear,

worry, depression, and boredom. Its teaching materials are an important reason for PFM's influence in the field of prison ministry. The *Survival Guide* and its companion volumes are widely used by congregations with no other connection to PFM.

The regular Bible studies enable volunteers to cultivate a level of trust and friendship far deeper than can be achieved in the one-day events and seminars. However, Bible studies attract far fewer inmates—and volunteers—than do the one-day events.

PFM does not keep records regarding conversions, but dramatic conversion experiences are central to PFM's ministry. Last fall, Indiana's PFM chapters cooperated on a 10-day "blitz" of all the prisons and jails statewide—about 50 facilities, requiring a volunteer force of 500 people. The project was part of a national, five-year PFM plan to reach every prisoner in every correctional facility in America. Using stand-up comedians and singers to attract inmates to the one-day events, PFM delivered a gospel message to thousands of inmates, inviting them to become Christians by placing their faith in Jesus Christ.

PFM's leadership is conservative in theology, and volunteers in its InnerChange program must sign a statement affirming their belief that "Jesus Christ, God's Son, was conceived by the Holy Spirit" and that "the Bible is God's authoritative and inspired Word and without error in all its teachings." At the same time, PFM knows it cannot be stridently sectarian and still attract sufficient volunteer help, or gain the wide access that it now enjoys within the prison system.

"Individuals bring their own understanding of the scriptures," says local program coordinator, Dan Berlin. "Do you have to be baptized, immersed, or sprinkled? We don't get into those things." Volunteers who get involved in PFM, he says, "know we're ecumenical."

CONGREGATION-BASED MINISTRIES

Victory Memorial United Methodist Church in Fountain Square conducts one of the more active congregation-based prison ministries in Indianapolis. Jim Mulholland, pastor of Victory Memorial, became involved in prison ministry four years ago, when two local men of his acquaintance were put in jail. He started with a monthly worship service at the Marion County Jail on Alabama Street. Later, he and several members of his church took Prison Fellowship Ministries' training course. Now they conduct a Friday-night Bible study at Jail 2, a facility on East Washington Street. They also conduct a Sunday-evening worship service at Jail 2, and a bi-monthly worship service at the Marion County Jail.

Victory Memorial's assistant pastor, Adrienne Holmes, conducts a Tuesday-evening Bible study at the Indiana Women's Prison and does individual counseling sessions at the prison on Thursday afternoons. Holmes is also attempting to establish a shelter for released women prisoners trying to adjust to living in the outside world.

Though Mulholland took the Prison Fellowship Ministries training course and uses its materials in his ministry, he is at odds with PFM in his understanding of the conversion experience.

"I definitely believe in conversion," Mulholland says, "but I think instantaneous conversion is rare. For most people, conversion is a much slower thing. Christians who see it as instantaneous are going to go in and conduct a revival service, with the idea that lives are going to be miraculously changed. My experience is that the journey to God is a long, complicated thing with moments of doubt and question. It's a journey."

Mulholland goes against the grain of the historical trend—and differs from nearly everyone doing prison ministry locally—in that he actively advocates for reform of the entire sentencing system. He has written a brief treatise, titled "A Simple Plan," outlining his ideas for reform. His basic message is that the prison system has strayed from its stated purpose of rehabilitating and has become nothing more than an instrument of punishment.

Mulholland's proposal would make a convicted offender responsible for designing his or her own plan of rehabilitation. The plan would necessarily include some sort of restitution to any victims involved. It would also reverse the parole procedure: offenders who commit non-violent crimes would first be placed on parole and would be incarcerated only if they violated the terms of their rehabilitation plan. Parolees would be cleared

by the parole panel once they completed their plan.

Mulholland has passed this proposal around to lawyers, judges, politicians—“a lot of significant people,” he says. Their usual reaction is indifference or skepticism about its workability.

“I don’t know that everything in it is realistic, but I do know that we have a serious problem that we have to address,” Mulholland says. “Our state constitution says that our purpose is to rehabilitate, not to punish. Then why is the system not being held accountable for the high recidivism rate? If a child goes through third grade three times, then maybe that child has a problem—but maybe there’s something significantly wrong with his school. A logical question would be, what’s going on in prison that keeps prisoners coming back? That’s the question we’re not asking.”

He is unsure how—or whether—he will revise his plan and promote it further. His efforts have generated little interest, much less any momentum for reform. “For this plan to get a real hearing would take a tremendous amount of my energy,” he says. “Do I really want to give that, knowing that it goes against the stream and that a lot of people won’t like it for all sorts of reasons?”

“The general public just wants criminals put away—warehoused,” he says. “Whether they are ever released is almost irrelevant.”

Mulholland’s is one of relatively few voices today, locally or nationally, willing to challenge the premises of the justice and prison systems. (A branch of Prison Fellowship Ministries, called Justice Fellowship, does lobby on behalf of certain prison reforms.)

Quakers were famous for their efforts to reform prison conditions in England and America in the 19th century. Today, members of the Society of Friends tend to concentrate on ministry to individuals, rather than taking on the system. First Friends Church on Kessler Boulevard, for example, sponsors a summer camp for the children of prisoners. Now in its second summer, the program serves 20 children. Members of the prison ministries committee plan to remain in touch with the children throughout the year and to organize special activities for them, such as cookouts and trips to local parks. However, Sid Crane, the member who organized the congregation’s prison ministries committee, has tried without success to have the committee take a more activist stance toward prison reform.

If there is no energy for that sort of activism, so-called “after-care” programs seem to be growing in popularity. Eastern Star Church on East 30th Street has about 70 members involved in prison ministry, making its program one of the more ambitious in the city. The church has a five-year plan to implement a multi-faceted transitional program for released prisoners. The goal is to provide them temporary housing, teach them job and life skills, and help them find employment.

SHOWING THAT SOMEONE CARES

One reason perhaps that prison inmates garner little sympathy from the general public is that they are, as a group, unrepresentative of that public. By and large, the incarcerated are poorer and less educated than the general population, and suffer disproportionately from a variety of social and health problems, including mental illness.

Activism aimed at reforming the prison system inevitably brings up divisive issues of race and class. By far, the population most affected by the American prison system is the African-American community. Nationally, almost one-third of black men ages 20 to 29 are in jail, in prison, on probation, or on parole. In Indiana, 40 percent of inmates in the state’s prisons are African-American. Only 8 percent of Indiana residents are African-American.

Help and sympathy for prisoners comes largely from the religious community. The Indiana Department of Correction estimates that volunteers spent more than 92,000 hours working with inmates in the state system last year. The majority of these hours were donated by Christians, particularly evangelical Christians, but there were also Buddhist, Jewish, Islamic, and Native American volunteers who reached out to the state’s prisoners.

According to Doris J. Woodruff, the Department of Correction's director of religious services and community involvement, the department contracts with two imams to provide religious services for Islamic prisoners. When a prisoner requests the services of a rabbi, prison officials call on volunteers such as Lew Weiss, a chaplain for Methodist Hospital.

Prisoners who are Jewish or Islamic, or who adhere to other non-Christian religions, face the problem of unfamiliarity. Special needs related to their religious observances—such as holidays and dietary laws—may or may not be accommodated gladly, according to Imam Mikal Sahir.

Sahir worked with Islamic prisoners in the state and federal prison systems for 20 years before retiring recently. The federal system is usually sensitive to the needs of Islamic prisoners, he says; the state system accommodates Muslims according to the inclinations of the prison chaplain.

"Islam is still trying to find its place in American society," Sahir says. "At the state level, it was difficult. We had to go through a lot of unnecessary gymnastics. We get tired of grinding away for recognition of a religious right."

A major problem, Sahir says, was that communicating the needs of Islamic prisoners required close contact with chaplains; but just when a good working relationship was established, a new chaplain would be appointed and the whole education process would begin again.

Recently, the Indiana DOC acted to improve the quality of religious services for prisoners by implementing the Religious Services Master Design: "an effort to be intentional in the delivery of spiritual care and religious programs to the adults and juveniles confined in our facilities."

The Master Design sets standards for acceptable programming and the criteria by which programs will be judged—notably, by how much inmate participation they attract and whether they have a positive influence on inmate behavior. The Master Design is intended to both recognize the religious diversity of the prison population and to weed out programs that do not work.

It is not intended to discourage volunteers who want to help provide religious services. With its limited resources, the state not only welcomes volunteers but depends heavily on them.

"We consider volunteers vital to the delivery of religious services and to having a viable ministry," Woodruff says. "It's important that the broader faith community knows that there is an active faith community behind the walls, and that they receive released offenders into their congregations and help them continue to grow in their faith."

POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- Despite falling crime rates, the prison population in the United States today is about 2 million—the highest in the nation's history.
- America's rate of incarceration, driven largely by drug-related convictions, is far higher than most industrialized nations. The effects are disproportionately felt in African-American communities.
- Advocacy programs aimed at reforming the criminal justice system were popular among congregations during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, but have nearly disappeared.
- Prison ministries are dominated by evangelical Christians whose primary purpose is to bring prisoners to a conversion experience.
- Religious minorities in prison sometimes feel neglected or under-served by the system.

CONTACTS & RESOURCES:

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Homeland Ministries
130 E. Washington St.
Indianapolis, IN 46204
(317) 713-2636

Eastern Star Church
5750 E. 30th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46218
(317) 591-5050

First Friends Meeting
3030 E. Kessler Blvd.
Indianapolis, IN 46220
(317) 255-2485

Indiana Department of Correction
E334 Indiana Government Center South
302 W. Washington St.
Indianapolis, IN 46204
(317) 232-5715
www.state.in.us/indcorrection

Prison Fellowship Ministries
P.O. Box 51135
Indianapolis, IN 46251
(317) 248-8443

Victory Memorial United Methodist Church
1928 Woodlawn Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46203
(317) 637-2684

Other:

Justice Works Community
1012 Eighth Ave.
Brooklyn, NY 11215
(718) 499-6704
www.justiceworks.org

Justice Works, founded by a congregation in New York, sponsors the Mothers in Prison, Children in Crisis program, which describes itself as “the first and only organizing campaign that seeks to establish alternatives to incarceration as the sentencing norm for women with dependent children.” It hopes to organize local groups across the nation who will join it in lobbying for reform.

Offender Aid and Restoration of Marion County, Inc.
701 N. Delaware St.
Indianapolis, IN 46204
(317) 635-4973

OAR is a not-for-profit, community-based agency that provides counseling, adult tutoring, and support services to offenders in the Marion County Jail. It has a director and staff but relies primarily on a corps of volunteers, many of them from local congregations.

Public Action in Correctional Effort
17 W. Market St.
Suite 730

Indianapolis, IN 46204
(317) 684-2401

PACE helps released prisoners find employment, housing, and with other personal needs. PACE welcomes volunteers.

United Methodist Jail Ministries
Faith United Methodist Church
3096 W. 62nd St.
Indianapolis, IN 46268
(317) 253-1785

UMJM is a network of local churches that have worship services with, and donate gifts to, inmates in the Marion County Jail. The ministry's organizer, Jane Ann Lemen, works in cooperation with the jail's chaplain to schedule worship services and to distribute Bibles, devotional materials, and toiletries to prisoners.

Use What You've Got Ministry
207 W. 34th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46208
(317) 924-4124

Use What You've Got Ministry, part of Church on the Rock, Inc., operates a shuttle bus service that travels to and from nine prison facilities across Indiana. Its purpose is "to reach the inner city families and friends who have no means of transportation to visit the inmates." During the rides, the ministry's leaders also hope to provide the children and families with "moral support, a shoulder to cry on, and spiritual counseling."

Internet:

The Bureau of Justice Statistics, a division of the U.S. Department of Justice, keeps detailed information about trends in crime and the prison population in the United States. Its online address is www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs.

Indiana Students Against Racism in Prisons is an activist group affiliated with the Center for Peace and Justice at DePauw University. The group's purpose is to call attention to reports of endemic racism in Indiana's state prison system. Its site is at www.prisonjustice.org.

The November 27, 1999, issue of the *Washington Post* contains a lengthy article on Charles Colson's InnerChange program. The text is available for a fee from the *Post's* online archive, www.washingtonpost.com.

Author: Ted Slutz