



Behind Bars
with
Jesus Christ

Steve Highlander



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When we think about Christians in prison we usually assume that they are in for standing up for their Christian rights; abortion activists or pastors who refuse to bow to the unreasonable demands of some judge. However, the fact is that the majority of men and women in jails and prison today became Christians after they entered the system.

There is much talk today about overcrowding in prison and the most effective way to deal with lawbreakers. It is popular to paint a picture of prisons as hotels and prisoners receiving a whole spectrum of benefits, but life in prison is far from the picnic it is sometimes made out to be.

Life in prison is difficult. And anyone who really lives for Jesus Christ knows that living a consistent Christian life can be tough sometimes. Christians in prison face a lot of pressure everyday. In addition to the normal pressures of prison life and the struggle to maintain a Christian walk that we all deal with, they face many unique situations that Christians outside the fence don't face.

One difficult situation that Christians in prison must overcome is their past. The vast majority are in prison because they broke the law. Most Christian prisoners I know don't have a problem with "paying their debt to society." However, in the prison situation they are constantly reminded of their past. A past, incidentally, that God says has been totally forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ.

The guilty feelings are often compounded by a system that has a tendency to strip away self-esteem. Prisoners are suspect, just because they are prisoners. Prison employees play as many games as prisoners; and often the system pulls strings just to prove that it can.

Self-doubt plagues many. Their motives are suspect. It is not unusual for them to be accused of having a "foxhole conversion" or "jailhouse religion." The few that do try to use God to work the system make it that much harder for those who have genuinely turned their lives over to God. It is the default attitude to assume that they are playing some religious game to get out sooner. The Christian in a prison setting must have a strong belief system to overcome the daily assault on his or her faith. A belief system by the way, that usually doesn't get a lot of hands-on support.

Believers in prison face a variety of problems you and I don't face on the outside. A big one is church. On any given Sunday you probably have your choice of anywhere from five to 50 churches you could go to. Prisoners don't. They might have one service a week depending on the facility. Some county jails don't provide anything in terms of spiritual help. Some facilities do try to recruit a

variety of volunteers to provide some extra services with different flavors, but the need is great. Truly, the harvest is plenteous, but the laborers are few.

Another problem arises for chapel-goers seeking to enrich their spiritual lives. In a typical prison chapel service of 30 to 50 people you would probably find quite a few different denominations represented. Christians outside the wall have the advantage of worshipping with people who believe and worship in the same manner they do; not so in a prison setting.

Unfortunately, division is a major problem in the church at large today. While many of the denominations of Christianity have the same basic beliefs, we still are a very fragmented group as a whole. The problem is compounded in the prison setting. Since believers live in close confines and have a limited scope of Christian fellowship, doctrinal differences become major issues.

Providing Christian instruction for a diverse group is difficult to say the least. Rev. Robert Pollan (who has since left the prison system) served as a Kansas Department of Corrections Chaplain for many years. He worked at the Norton Correctional Facility in Norton, KS and at the Lansing Correctional Facility outside Leavenworth, KS. He would be the first to tell you that being both spiritual counselor and prison employee isn't easy. He got to see the best and the worst as God dealt in the lives of prisoners. There's the joy of seeing lives really change. Then there is the heartache watching tremendous potential in people destroyed, often for no good reason.

Caught between observing a myriad of rules and security issues and providing spiritual care for prisoners creates a lot of pressure.

"I emphasize the need for unity in the body of Christ," Pollan said. "Most prisoners don't have a lot of religious background, but what they do have they tend to emphasize. So I try to de-emphasize differences and emphasize Jesus Christ,"

Division is a primary problem for the church behind bars. Many times zealous Christians are more concerned about being "right" than they are about overall unity and the testimony of Jesus Christ. This can cause more harm than good. Those seeking answers or the newly converted are confused and discouraged with the division and religious bickering. But before judging the situation too harshly, consider what your church might be like if you had 20 doctrinal opinions all vying for attention every day.

Chaplain Pollan relates that the intense concentration of interaction is a key problem. The men eat, sleep, work and hang out together everyday. As one prisoner aptly pointed out, "You try living with 500 guys with an attitude problem." Our petty differences in church committee meetings start to pale in comparison, don't they?

More tension is created when everyone wears the same thing, eats the same thing and carries on pretty much the same schedule every day. According to Pollan, "The need to be 'special' has a lot more to do with the exclusiveness than doctrinal differences."

Another major problem concerning the "church behind bars" is a lack of leadership and role models. In a normal church setting a person commits their life the Jesus Christ and immediately finds he or she has a church that more or less helps them in their Christian life. There's Sunday school, two or three services a week, home fellowship groups, mentors and the ever-present pastor or two to check up on you. Most churches have elders or deacons and the faithful brothers and sisters who act as role models for the Christian life. For the most part this isn't the case in prison.

Since a large number of men and women turn to God after they enter the system, contact with spiritual leadership is infrequent. The role of mentor or discipler is almost nonexistent. For the most part men and women in prison are left to the sterile instruction of tapes or correspondence courses. Often the knowledge without the benefit of relationship adds to the problem of division.

While many volunteers from different churches provide Bible studies or services, these are extremely limited in time and personal interaction.

One of the frustrating things for our ministry team was the lack of quality time. Trying to fit worship, preaching, prayer, ministry and personal interaction into an hour is hard. Even though we've were doing two services every Monday night for over three and a half years, our team of five or six couldn't give everyone the personal attention that is so desperately needed. Yet it is this personal contact that prisoners need as much as the other elements of the faith.

Jesus said, "I was in prison and you didn't visit me." The Christians in prison are no less a part of the body of Christ than you or I. They have unique needs and situations that require the prayers and concerns of the rest of the Church. Many of the things that you and I take for granted simply are not available to the Christian behind bars. These problems make developing a strong, balanced Christian life harder. And that translates to more difficulty when an inmate is released.

After several years of observation I find that it is almost as difficult for prisoners to make the transition from prison life to society, as it is to live in prison. Prisoners live for the day they are released. Yet that day may create special problems for them that they are not prepared for.

Transitioning back into society is hard. Family relationships have to be re-established. Marriages, and the problems caused by lengthy prison sentences have to be worked on. Jobs have to be found, and kept. Job applications ask if

you have ever been in prison. Bills have to be paid. The stigma of being in prison is difficult to accept and overcome. No matter how hard a person tries or how much their life has changed some people simply won't give them a chance.

Another unique problem occurs on release from prison. According to Pollan, "Released prisoners usually want to get rid of anything that reminds them of their prison experience, unfortunately this sometime includes their religious experiences."

Many ex-offenders who found a way to walk close to God in the prison setting find it difficult to maintain that walk outside the fence. Old friends and habits force their way back into their life. The freedom to choose again is very powerful, and often leads to bad choices. Christians who have been released from prison need a tremendous amount of support and encouragement from the church. They have some unique needs that often go unmet. Some statistics show that the first 72 hours of a prisoner's freedom is critical in determining if that person will end up back in jail. The church needs to be aware of this problem and respond to it.

Maybe you are asking yourself how you can make a difference. There are a number of ways.

Statistics and personal experience show that most men and women who become Christians in the system do so sometime shortly after their arrest and incarceration in the county jail. Usually they realize that they have lost control of their lives and are willing to turn to God. A ministry to the county or city jail can be fruitful and well within the scope of any local church or ministry. If there isn't a local ministry – you can start one.

Letters mean the world to prisoners. Some never get mail. Writing to one or two prisoners can be an effective way to make a difference in someone's life. One very good friend of mine wrote a poem, which in part said, "To my friends I wasn't worth the price of a stamp."

Maybe getting directly involved with prisoners isn't for you. Prison ministry teams have tremendous need for resources like Bibles and study materials. As with any ministry some are called to go and some are called to make it possible for them to go. If you find yourself "convicted" by the Holy Spirit to help your Christian brothers and sisters in prison, perhaps you can find a good ministry and support them with prayer and resources.

Why not see if your church has a prison and/or jail outreach. Or contact a local prison ministry to see how you might help. Check with your local Gideons chapter, they usually have a local jail ministry team.

In addition to more traditional, church-based ministries, some state correctional systems have developed a program called M-2, (Match Two). They train

volunteers to be a friend to prisoners. The M-2 sponsor visits the inmate on a one-to-one basis as often as they want to, but at least once a month. M-2 sponsors are particularly matched with a prisoner of similar age, background and interests to give a common place to start. The need is great. While not particularly Christian in scope, you can be a Christian friend to your designated inmate and minister to them that way.

While jail and prison ministry is vitally important, ministry to the inmate and his or her family upon release is just as vital. Too often churches do not know how to adequately minister to the ex-offender. They don't understand the needs and often have to overcome prejudices. The job usually falls to the overworked pastor to be friend and counselor. There is a tremendous need for churches to develop ministries to help those Christians who have paid their debt to society and are trying to establish a Christian life and family outside the fence. Nearly every inmate we worked with who was about to be released asked us the same question, "Can you recommend a church in the town I am going to live in." Too many times it is a lack of Christian fellowship and support that causes the offender to wind up back in jail. Sadly we've even seen churches that fought to keep ex-offenders out of the church. Christians need to be a part of the Body of Christ to live and grow; the needed is even greater with ex-offenders because their spiritual experience in prison was probably askew.

Prison ministry is both rewarding and difficult. The victories are usually pretty dramatic and the losses frustrating, but all in all there is the satisfaction (and spiritual reward) for helping people with unique needs to find and fulfill their potential in Jesus Christ.

Have you considered visiting Jesus Christ in prison?

About the Author: Dr. Steve Highlander is an ordained minister who has been actively involved in prison and jail ministry for many years. In December 1993, while pastor of Oberlin Christian Fellowship, Oberlin, Kansas. Rev. Highlander founded DOOR OF HOPE Prison Ministries. He, along with his team, conducted hundreds of services inside prison walls. Currently Steve, who has a doctorate in Pastoral Theology and his wife Brooke, who holds a doctorate in Scriptural Psychology, operate C3M Ministries, focusing on helping the Church return to New Testament principles of faith and practice. The Highlanders spent several years working with at-risk teens in state and private mental health facilities and served as chaplains of the ShowMe Challenge Program, for at-risk teens, sponsored by the Missouri National Guard. They have served the Body of Christ as pastors, teachers, and missionaries and in extensive internet ministry; you can reach the Highlanders or find more resources at www.c3ministries.com