3-day prison immersion
Focuses on U.S.'s unjust mass incarceration

by Leigh Finnegan on July 22, 2014

Clergy and laity from across the country gathered this month in Chillicothe, Ohio, for a three-day prison immersion. The immersion was led by the General Board of Church & Society (GBCS) in cooperation with the Horizon Prison Initiative, Columbus.

The event was designed to address the U.S.'s unjust system of mass incarceration, and to brainstorm as to how the Church can be an agent for change. Bill Mefford, GBCS director of Civil & Human Rights, Kristin Kumpf and Rebecca Cole of the agency's Grassroots Organizing program, led several workshops. They attempted to facilitate brainstorming as to how the Church can be an agent for change.

The General Board of Church & Society teamed with the Horizon Prison Initiative to create a three-day prison immersion program at Chillicothe (Ohio) Correctional Institution that involved persons in prison ministry interacting with prisoners.
Participants, many of whom have been in prison ministry for years, expressed gratitude for the chance to talk about mass incarceration with those directly affected by the system. Nearly 20 inmates, graduates of the Horizon Prison Initiative, participated in the event.

Sadly, the men we met last week are only a small fraction of America’s imprisoned populace. The United States incarcerates more citizens than any other Western nation, including China, which has four times our population.

To put this figure another way: “The United States has less than 5% of the world’s population, but it has almost 25% of the world’s prisoners.”

Only the beginning

As we learned, a prison sentence is sometimes only the beginning of the marginalization offenders experience. For instance, ex-offenders often lose their right to vote, are excluded from the job market, and face more prison time if they fail to pay back hefty debts that accumulate during their sentences. Moreover, African-American men are disproportionately affected by this system, causing further racial disenfranchisement.

Horizon Prison Initiative is a year-long program that works to break the cycle of recidivism by addressing root causes of criminal behavior. Participants in the immersion program were able to talk about these issues with inmates from the Chillicothe Correctional Institution. After only a brief time of interaction, it was apparent that transformation and rehabilitation are possible given the right environment.

I did not ask the inmates who had participated in the Horizon Prison Initiative why they were incarcerated. During the three days, though, I eventually found out when they shared deeply personal stories of abuse and regret. As their lives and mistakes unfolded before us, we too began to share our stories.

A state of mind
It became quite clear in these times of sharing that imprisonment can be a state of mind. I think most of my peers would agree that in prison we met some of the most radically free people on the planet.

I asked Horizon’s program coordinator, Dr. Richard Boone, how he is able to reach the hearts of convicted murderers, rapists and pedophiles. “I create a safe space for them to be vulnerable,” he responded. “That’s it. For some, it is the only safe space they have ever known.”

One of the inmates told me he began to open up when he saw how Dr. Boone listened to them without judgment and with eyes unaverted.

In the Book of Genesis there is a story about Abram, Sarai and Sarai’s Egyptian slave-girl, Hagar. Sarai cannot have children, so she gives Hagar to Abram in her place. Hagar conceives a son, but the text says Sarai’s jealousy leads her to “deal harshly” with Hagar. Frightened and abused, Hagar runs away into the wilderness.

**The wilderness**

In the Bible, the wilderness is a place of isolation and testing. It is a place on the margins, symbolic for all that is out of our control. Nevertheless, in the biblical narrative God continually appears to people as they journey through the wilderness.

Sometimes God hovers over the people to assure them of the Creator’s presence; other times, God wrestles with them and they are sent away both limping and transformed.

Hagar is in the wilderness when an angel of the Lord appears to her and announces that God has great plans for her son, whom the angel instructs her to call “Ishmael,” meaning “God hears.” In return, Hagar calls God “El-Roi,” the God who sees.

The good news is that we have a God who hears and sees us in our loneliness, our brokenness, and our — sometimes literal — captivity.

**A safe space**

For the men at Horizon, the wilderness has become a safe space. I’m guessing that space sometimes feels like a comforting presence and sometimes like a wrestling match. By their
continued vulnerability with one another, and the encouragement of the staff, God’s spirit can work in redemptive, transformative ways.

Yet God sees more than just the individual alienation of our hearts; God sees the widespread oppression caused by mass incarceration and calls it sin.

As God’s Church, we are called to publicly witness against such unjust systems, and to advocate for our brothers and sisters being crushed in the name of big profits. As we build relationships with people directly affected by mass incarceration, we become partners both in their inward and outward journey towards liberation.

**Editor’s note:** Leigh Finnegans is an intern at the General Board of Church & Society, working with the Grassroots Organizing department. Originally from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., she is a student at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. She is passionate about encouraging faith communities to engage with justice issues, foster beloved community and grow discipleship.

You can read more about the experience at [Listening to the ‘Blues Brothers’](http://umc-gbcs.org/faith-in-action/3-day-prison-immersion).