

Sown in Peace

Encouraged to Transform

Setting Captives Free

🕒 April 28, 2014 📁 Abundant Life, Compassion, Correctional Facility, Domestic Violence, Incarceration, Mission, New People, New Places, Prison, Social Action, Social Justice, Solidarity, The Great Commission, Transforming the World, Whole Community, Women ✍️ Doug Walker, United Methodist Church

Doug Walker works for the General Board of Church and Society establishing **Healing Communities**, a framework for ministry to persons returning from or at risk of incarceration, their families, and the larger community. He works 15 hours a week on behalf of the wider church trying to bridge the gap between local church life and the lives of its families who are bearing the weight of incarceration.



Lee Schott, pastor of **Women at the Well United Methodist Church** inside the Mitchelville Women's Prison, wonders how the Iowa Annual Conference can continue to connect with women once they leave the prison and return to life outside its walls.

"Bronson Blessington: Testimony from my prison cell" by publik15

Dave Hobbs and the Iowa United Methodist Camps have been developing a specialized camp ministry for the children of people who are or have been incarcerated in Iowa. It is called **Camp Hope**, and Dave and the camp directors are looking to expand this ministry.

At one level, it seems like we shouldn't need institutional support or significant technical education to be in vital ministry with people entangled with the criminal justice system (and it *is* an entanglement; guards, administrators, and others on the law-abiding side of the system are as deeply in need of specialized ministry as those they are employed to keep). Yet, clearly we in the local church are not entangled enough.

As great as Doug, Lee and Dave's programs and ministry areas are, they cannot be the sole presence of the United Methodist Church when it comes to our call to be in ministry with those Jesus has given us. Despite the fact that practically every Iowa town has at least one United Methodist Church, not every town has a flourishing jail visitation ministry. Not every person who needs a ride to visit their loved one in jail can get one. Not every person leaving incarceration has a congregation waiting to receive them. Not every prison guard has a group with which to share the depths of human depravity she has witnessed. This is a place where the deep needs of people are not being met.

You can see that in the violence we inflict on our children, our spouses, our parents and ourselves. It is visible in the thriving methamphetamine industry and the number of bars a community can support. Distrust and disconnectedness, increased weapons permits, pernicious bullying, and the spread of harmful propaganda

designed to alienate us from our neighbors are all signs that we are not shining enough light on the darkness which invades peoples' lives.

And it seems to me that we are not doing this work because it is dangerous. We can't be assured of the other person's innocence. There is the possibility that the relationship can become toxic as the other's addictions and ways of making decisions invade our carefully controlled apartments. We might have to set boundaries or let go of our own aesthetic tastes to make room for the new people in our lives. Frankly, there are people out there who would not hesitate to do us serious harm. Last, I sense that we are afraid our own lights-our faith, our witness, our Christ, our own souls -are not actually strong enough to make headway against the dark.

I asked Doug Walker how a person crosses the threshold. How do we go out the door of our church sanctuaries? How do we go in the visitor's entrance of the prison, the hospital, or the social services building? He laughed and said it is a lot easier when you know someone there.

I asked Lee Schott why we don't know the women who leave Mitchelville after serving their sentence. She didn't know, but thought it had something to do with an idea that once someone has gone behind bars, they become this thing we call "a criminal" rather than a person we can know by name. She becomes effectively invisible to us because we in the church might distrust or judge her if we learned her past. She either enters into relationship with us hiding her past or chooses easier relationships with people who already know her name.

So what is going on with us that we are not teaching, preaching, and reaching into the lives of people such that we can show them that other name they have: the name they take on in Christ? Why are we so ashamed of shame? What makes us so afraid to shake hands with people we have never met? Is there something real we stand to lose by opening ourselves to rejection?

I believe that changing the world is as simple as going out and shaking hands with it. And if you are looking for Biblical language to help you gather the courage to do so, I suggest spending a bit of time with Paul. He seems to have a good vocabulary for that kind of thing.

Oh, and you can always contact Doug, Lee or Dave as well, because I know they would love to hear from you. They would love to share their experience, expertise and doubts about how the church can best be about this work of setting captives free.

Doug Walker: dwalker@umc-gbcs.org

Rev. Lee Schott: revlas333@gmail.com

Rev. Dave Hobbs: david.hobbs@iaumc.org

