Ecclesia Behind the Razor Wire

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Church communities are on the rise inside America’s prisons… and so is their indigenous leadership

by Harold Dean Trulear

http://prismmagazine.org/ecclesia-behind-the-razor-wire/
The sun shone brightly overhead in a high, cloudless sky as we entered the Joseph Harp Correctional facility in Lexington, Okla. Our goal was to connect the ministry at the prison with the Oklahoma League of Healing Communities, a network of congregations involved in ministry to prisoners, formerly incarcerated persons, crime victims, and their families in a statewide restorative justice effort.

Accompanied by prison staff and Oklahoma Department of Corrections’ Victim Services Coordinator Rev. Ilinda Jackson, we made our way through the prison yard to the chapel. As inmates trickled into the simple space where the Church on the Yard met for worship, Bible study, and fellowship, Jackson told me we would meet the pastor shortly.

“Here comes the pastor,” she finally announced. I looked for the chaplain—or at least some volunteer preacher who would fit the title. I was still looking over the shoulder of the inmate now standing in front of me when he thrust out his hand and announced,

“Welcome to Church on the Yard. I’m one of the pastors.”

I missed his name, my attention fixed on his prison uniform while worrying what this preacher had done to get himself locked up. I knew ministers who had done time—I was one of them. So my speculation on his transgression eclipsed any initial connection. All I saw was this clean-cut inmate in prison browns. What had the pastor done?

His voice pulled me back into the moment. He was telling me his story—of his biker days and how that lifestyle resulted in him taking another man’s life. Sentenced to life in prison, he had come to faith in Christ while at Joseph Harp.

“Jesus saved me and cleaned me up,” he said, no doubt reading my mind as I tried to picture him with a scruffier appearance. “And now I am an ordained pastor at this church.”

Having my full attention now, he continued: “The chaplain views himself as someone with an apostolic ministry. As an apostle, he comes from the outside to plant indigenous congregations. And indigenous congregations should have indigenous leaders.” I marveled at how this basic principle of missions made perfect sense in the prison context. “So that is what we are—the chaplain discipled me, had me ordained a deacon, then an elder, and now a pastor.”

Indeed, it turns out that the chaplain had brought in duly constituted ministerial authorities to perform actual ordinations. While maintaining his administrative and spiritual leadership role as chaplain of the facility, he offered inmates the opportunity for empowerment and accountability within the prison. Discipled, they grew into leaders.

**Sustained discipleship on the inside**

The idea of a prison-based congregation, as opposed to a traditional arrangement of chaplain as pastor, volunteers as preachers, and inmates as members, has grown over the past 30 years. In fact, the organization [Prison Congregations of America](http://prismmagazine.org/ecclesia-behind-the-razor-wire/) lists over a dozen denominational churches planted behind prison walls by traditions as diverse as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and the General Baptist Convention. Additionally, six of the congregations, including the two United Methodist churches, serve women’s correctional facilities.

The critical components of prison-based congregations include developing inmate leadership, building real relationships between congregations and members outside the walls with those inside the
walls, and heightening awareness of issues concerning incarceration, crime, victimization, and restoration as central to the churches’ mission.

Traditional prison ministry involving volunteers heading in rotation to correctional facilities to provide worship services and Bible studies has its place. But proponents of the prison-based congregation see the building of relationships and leadership as vital to ministry in prisons. One pastor lamented, “I always thought we were doing something in just sending volunteers to preach, until I realized that those were persons that I would not have preach to my congregation on Sunday.” Another offered, “Prisoners and sick folk are on the same list in Matthew 25, but one gets the whole church while the other gets three volunteers from someone else’s church.”

Mary Mortenson currently leads Prison Congregations of America. In her role as a mission planter, she works with denominational and correctional officials to establish congregations behind bars. When asked about the need for such congregations, she replies that they exist “for the same reasons that anyone would attend a congregation.” Mortenson notes that prison congregations provide a “sense of community, opportunities for service, and leadership, hospitality, and a venue for healthy problem-solving. Our congregations get involved in real service: CROP Hunger Walks, collecting money for outside projects like digging wells in poor countries, and adopting overseas children.”

Mortenson’s passion for the work contributes to its growing edges, as more congregations are planned for other prisons and formal reentry training develops for “outside” churches that partner with prison congregations.

“We do not replace traditional prison ministry,” she says, “but supplement and complement it with the capacity to do sustained discipleship on the inside.” With trained denominational ministers as pastors, as well as denominational and other outside financial support, correctional facilities can enhance their ability to provide faith services at little cost to the prison itself.

**Roots of the movement**

Interestingly, pre-dating the efforts of the denominations in Prison Congregations of America, the late Chaplain William Barrett established the Reconciliation Church of Christ as a full-fledged member of the Progressive Baptist Convention a few years after his arrival in 1976 as chaplain at Rahway State Prison in New Jersey.

Two months after his appointment as chaplain at the maximum security facility, Barrett lamented to a reporter from the Lawrence Journal-World that though inmates came to worship services, they did not form a Christian community. He saw upwards of 50 people coming to services seeking faith but no form of organization or accountability among these men, most of whom had not attended church while on the outside.

Barrett organized the worshiping faithful into a church, with deacons and other officers, and even discipled one formerly violent inmate into the role of pastor.

In the mid-’80s, a local minister was sentenced to the prison following a violent confrontation and became the cellmate of the inmate pastor. He helped prepare “his cellie” for ministry on the outside, while the inmate pastor prepared him for pastoral ministry within the walls.

The Saint Dismas prison ministry, an effort of the Episcopal Church at the Graterford Prison in Pennsylvania, began even earlier, in 1970. However, it did not become a formal mission congregation of the Diocese of Pennsylvania until 1991, when it discovered the denominational congregation model
being used in other prisons. In its early years, it received much energy from clergy, but also from one inmate, Vaughan Booker, serving time for killing his wife in a domestic dispute. Booker, who tells his story of addiction, violence, incarceration, repentance, and transformation in his autobiography, *From Prison to Pulpit*, received training for leadership, and ultimately ordination as a deacon, while an inmate at Graterford. He both attended college and worked in a church while on a work-release program, and he eventually attended Virginia Seminary upon release and was ordained a priest in the denomination.

Fr. George Master currently serves as vicar of St. Dismas, going out every Tuesday to provide what he calls “a sacramental, Protestant presence.” As with most of the congregations listed on the Prison Congregations of America website, Master serves as a pastor from outside the walls. This does not negate the reality of inmate leadership, however. Master notes that a number of the men have completed the Education for Ministry program, originated at the University of the South’s Sewanee School of Theology. This program of theological discipline and discipleship finds lodging in many congregations and diocese of the Episcopal Church. Master builds relationships of accountability with those who have taken the courses, “because they need to put their training into practice and not just make their [record] look good for the parole board.”

Partly because services are on Tuesdays when many inmates have jobs, and also because of the smaller number of sacramental Protestants (Episcopalian and Lutherans) in this facility, attendance hovers at around 10 for worship, half that for Bible study. But Master spends significant time ministering with “lifers” at the prison as well.

Masters is white and wonders why it has been difficult to attract black volunteers to work with him on his Tuesdays at the prison. “I do this because I believe it fulfills the biblical requirements of justice. It does not make sense that the majority of people who live in Pennsylvania look like me, while the majority of residents at Graterford are black and brown. This is an evil system, and when I make the 100-mile round trip between my Philadelphia parish and my prison congregation, I return with a sense that God is at work on behalf of the voiceless in that facility.”

**Sisters on the inside**

Women at the Well, a United Methodist church, was launched in July 2006, with the combined efforts of Prison Congregations of America, the Iowa Annual Conference restorative justice committee, Bishop Gregory Palmer, and, interestingly, the prayers of the prison congregation in Fort Dodge, Iowa. Located at the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women (ICIW), the church has a detailed website covering all aspects of an outside congregation’s visit from arrival through departure, demonstrating their sense of hospitality: “Choose to join us within the razor wire as a weekly witness that the love of Christ knows no boundaries or limitations, and that in Christ we are all truly one in the Spirit.”

Pastor Lee Schott deems her work “clearly a divine appointment.” She had previously served on the “outside council,” which shared lay governance with an “inside council” consisting of inmates at ICIW, but she saw her primary calling “outside” until she began to discern a call “inside.”

“By the time I was appointed, I knew this was what God wanted, and once I got here I discovered I loved it.” Like Barrett and Mortenson, she points to the sense of community. “I am with them four days a week—when their father dies, when there are tensions with roommates, when parole says no, when they can’t find work…” Pastor Lee spends her Sundays preaching in other congregations, raising awareness and money for Women at the Well. She preaches at the prison congregation’s Thursday night services. Once, while Lee was away, an inmate preached as part of discerning her own
call to ministry. Inmates led most of the service. The planning process was tense, but the presence of community gave them the opportunity to work things through—what church functions without tension?—and hold a Spirit-filled worship service.

**Ecclesia behind bars**
The Celebration Fellowship at the Ionia Correctional Facility in Michigan is a congregation of the Christian Reformed Church. The Rev. Rich Rienstra and his wife, Carol, work closely with the pastor and congregation; she leads a book club within the prison congregation, and he supports the creative worship efforts of the congregation. The congregation has benefited from support by the denomination (including the CRC’s “Sea-to-Sea” cycling fundraiser), Calvin Seminary, a Lilly grant, and other resources that develop a strong worship presence in the facility. They use a variety of worship materials, including a worship guide for families of inmates prepared by ForeverFamily, a longstanding agency ministering to children of the incarcerated in Atlanta, Ga.

Rienstra sees the congregation as a response to a “Troas call”—a reference to the Apostle Paul’s vision in which he heard a call to come to Macedonia and help struggling saints (Acts 16) —“affirming that the men behind bars can have church.” Like the other prison congregations, a strong relationship exists between the church on the inside and on the outside. Additionally, the outside churches provide a support network for those coming home. However, as is the case in the other congregations, a good number will find their “outside” church home in another tradition upon release.

Prison congregations exist because of the vision and will of people like Mortenson, Rienstra, Barrett, Schott, and Master. But they also exist because they fulfill the basic requirements of the “ecclesia”—the congregation called out to be an assembly of accountable believers. In this era of mass incarceration, we clearly need policies that provide alternatives to incarceration for many. But in the meantime, preparation for accountable living, discipleship, and service find embodiment in prison-based congregational life. Would that we had more.

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**One Response to “Ecclesia Behind the Razor Wire”**

1.  
   ![User Avatar] **Robert Otte** says:  
   **October 8, 2013 at 1:26 pm**  

   Celebration Fellowship, referenced toward the end of this fine article, continues to provide a quality Bible-study and worship experience at Bellamy Creek prison in Ionia, MI, every Tuesday night. It is now led by Rev. Andy Hanson who also works with the leadership team of
“brothers” to plan the Bible study and worship. Rev. Hanson also conducts a worship service at Handlon prison, across the street from Bellamy Creek.