

Why do we do prison ministry? We do it because it is one specifically mentioned by Jesus: I was in prison and you came to visit me. (Matthew 25:36) In our baptismal covenant we are called among other things, first, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and second, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. Those baptismal directives and Jesus' instructions to us do not exclude anyone, even people who have committed crimes serious enough to be incarcerated for a time or for life. I see my role as bearing the image of God so that others, including drug dealers, robbers, extortionists, rapists, murderers, can become the image of God for themselves and others in their lives.

The second reason we do prison ministry is a much more pragmatic one. Most people who are put into prison, at some time in the future, become our neighbors again. I don't know about you but I would prefer that people who come out of prison to live in my town have gotten a better self-concept and have gained some skills so they do not have to return to crime in order to support themselves. The idea of "lock 'em up and throw away the key" is not just unchristian, it doesn't really happen that often. Most inmates are released. Unfortunately, however, because of the current shut them away and forget about them ethos, very little education or job training is available beyond a high school education.

Here are a few odd facts. While Iowa's general population has increased about 3.5% in the last thirty years, its inmate population has increased 426.5% during that time. Are Iowans of today that much worse than 30 years ago? Further, of those in prison, more than half of Iowa's prisoners are serving time for nonviolent crimes, largely drug and alcohol related. Iowa has built three new prisons since 1996 and another one is being built, yet we are currently operating at 120% of design capacity. Iowa continues to put people into prison faster than it is letting them out. Additionally, inmates with special needs (mental illness, mental retardation, borderline intellectual functioning, and social inadequacy) are expected to increase 49%. Minority groups continue to be greatly over represented in the prison population as compared with their representation in the general population.

Jail and prison ministry can have many faces. Actually going into facilities is only a fraction of what needs to be done. The Rev. Jacqueline Means, retired Director of Prison Ministries in the office of the Bishop for the Armed Services, Healthcare and Prison Ministries for the Episcopal Church in the United States says that the more crucial aspects of prison or justice ministries are done outside of the walls. Many of those ministries are advocacy oriented. For instance, advocating for more community mental health and drug treatment programming rather than sending people to jail who need treatment. Since the mental health programs in local communities were drastically cut back 20-30 years ago, those who had benefitted from those services often and over time end up in prison. Another area related to prison ministry is working in community reconciliation programs, that work with the perpetrators and the victims to come to a community-based resolution. Other justice-based ministries involve work with either victims or the families of inmates. Often the families of someone in jail become "unseen victims."

What kinds of jail/prison ministries are quietly happening in Iowa, carried on by Episcopalians because they have felt called to do these things? In Ames, Don Payer has

been going into the county jail for years to work with inmates and about five years ago, was instrumental in founding a half-way house for men coming out of prison called Matthew House. Chuck Lane has been doing similar ministries in Waterloo. The half-way house there is called Jeremiah House. In Cedar Rapids, Maridee Dugger has worked in the Linn County jail system to coordinate volunteers. In Storm Lake, Don Keeler has worked with troubled youth for years. In Anamosa, Dan Rockwell goes in once a week to tutor with men working on their GED. Melody Rockwell and Anne Williams work with the inmates at Anamosa State Penitentiary doing various kinds of Bible study. Plus, all over the Diocese our members work with homeless shelters, food banks, affordable housing, human trafficking, and the list goes on and on. The most important ministry at the basis of each and every one of those specific ministries, however, is the ministry of presence – just showing up and meeting face to face with people who often are shunted to the edges of our society, looking them in the eye and letting them know that they do matter to God.

Diocesan Convention meeting in 2009, urged Iowa Episcopalians to observe Prison Ministry Sunday on the third Sunday in Lent each year; encouraged each congregation to include prayers for those in their community whose lives are affected by the incarceration of family members, and to focus on ways to minister to God's children behind bars, those returning to the community and their families and victims. (see also 76th General Convention Resolution D095 - Prison Ministry Sunday)

Recognizing Iowa's diocesan Lenten focus on the Haiti Appeal in 2011, congregations are asked to:

- *set the third Sunday in Lent* -- or another date during the year--for a time to observe Prison Ministry Sunday
- *consider engaging in partnerships* with people in prison and their families, and those who minister to those in prison, and help ex-offenders return to society in productive ways by working with reentry programs.

Ways we as individuals can offer ourselves in ministry, include:

- *working with the children and families of prisoners*
- *writing letters*
- *visiting inmates*
- *leading Bible studies*
- *mentoring ex-offenders*
- *advocating repeal of the death penalty*
- *supporting reentry programs, better prison conditions and lower telephone rates.*

Whatever the day, congregations are encouraged to recognize Prison Ministry Sunday sometime within each year. Additional information and supportive resources are available at: [//www.episcopalchurch.org/page/prison-ministries](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/prison-ministries)