

Why Prison Ministry?

By: Steven W. Hamilton, D. D.

Matthew 25:31-46; John 15:7; Rev. 21:26

1. Prison ministry is America's largest spiritual harvest field.

- a. There are more than a million inmates, many of whom are genuinely seeking change, stability, and love in their lives.
- b. Many inmates acknowledge that coming to prison was "the best thing that ever happened to me" because they encountered Christ.

2. Prison ministry does wonders for revitalizing the spiritual lives of volunteers (and subsequently their churches).

("I wasn't arrested I was rescued.")

- a. There's nothing like sharing the gospel to open ears, teaching the Word to thirsty minds, and praying for people with broken hearts to "rev up" one's spiritual life and commitment.
- b. And his or her newfound spiritual enthusiasm of a prison volunteer is infectious, quickly spreading throughout his or her church and friendship network.

3. Prison ministry breathes new life into church evangelism and outreach programs. (God heals the gangrene shin)

- a. Unfortunately many evangelism and outreach programs are either dead or incompetent.
- b. Because charged up church members experience so few genuine opportunities to share their faith and see God reap the harvest.
- c. Doors are shut in their face, invitations rejected, and the same prospect cards or whatever you use endlessly recycled.
- d. In prison ministry, by contrast, spiritually hungry inmates come to the Christian volunteer, often in bountiful numbers--and all under the careful supervision and organization of the chaplain's office!

4. Prison work can be a real shot in the arm to the Sunday school ministry.

- a. Church members can pray for inmates on a personal level, participate in "pen pal" correspondence with recently converted inmates, and pray for and encourage those who actually represent the souls "behind the walls".
- b. Inmates are invariably deeply moved to know that a whole church is regularly praying for them.
- c. This is the first time many inmates have ever experienced genuine love from anyone. Some Sunday school classes even "adopt" an inmate's family in their local church, opening up the vital new arena of compassion ministry. You may be the only God they see (not that you are God, but through your witness they hear and see God)

5. Prison ministry enhances worship. (The day they came running)

- a. Many prison volunteers receive a renewed vision for worship through the Holy Ghost while attending church services behind the walls.
- b. Then repentant Christians of all color meet together to express their love for Christ and joy in being spiritual brothers and sisters, things happen.

- c. Prison worship is never characterized by stale routine or manufactured emotion--inmates definitely see themselves as God's chosen people, not God's frozen people! And through the Holy Ghost they receive the fire of God's spirit.

6. Prison ministry enhances the church training effort by preparing volunteers to minister to the unique needs of incarcerated Christians.

- a. What they learn about sharing their faith, counseling, Bible study, and follow-up is equally applicable in "free world" ministry.
- b. Knowing they will actually utilize these skills upon entering prison makes volunteers attentive, serious learners.
- c. The necessary training can be supplied by a prison chaplain, a veteran volunteer, or a prison ministry such as Christian Prisoner Ministry Volunteer Chaplains or their local Church.

7. Prison ministry gets church members off the pews and outside church walls.

- a. Christians of all backgrounds, education levels, and varieties of spiritual gifts participate in prison/jail ministry.
- b. Men and women, young and old, new Christian and "senior saint" all have a place chosen by God to serve.
- c. And prison work is never very far away: city and county jails, juvenile detention centers, state and federal prisons, and "halfway houses."

8. Prison ministry teaches deep spiritual lessons.

- a. Such as how to forgive, how to restore, and how to really pray (reminding that God does all the work in prison ministry).
- b. It also teaches very practical lessons about listening, patience, cross-cultural communication, and theological diversity among Christians.

9. Prison ministry promotes cooperation and goodwill among diverse Christians

- a. From different denominations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and theological points of view.
- b. Paul's admonition to keep our eyes upon Christ was never truer than in prison ministry.

10. Prison ministry produces new church members and ministry volunteers.

- a. Contrary to the worry of some myopic pastors that prison ministry will "steal away" their volunteers, Christians who become active in the spiritual basics of witnessing, spiritual teaching/counseling, and prayer gain a renewed desire to serve their local churches.
- b. Many times it is the pastor or staff member who is most revived by contact or personal involvement with prison ministry.
- c. Just listen to the testimony of pastors and lay people actively engaged in prison work—there's always an unmistakable spark of joy and enthusiasm when they share their experiences before the local church.

11. Appeal

- a. Is Jesus calling you to prison ministry, I promise you will never be the same.