

PRISON FELLOWSHIP: SAVING MORE LIVES

By William Nicoson

The rehabilitation record of U.S. prisons has been so poor that many law-enforcement officials think of prisons merely as holding tanks for hazardous cargo. Other observers regard them as schools for crime. The U.S. re-arrest rate is 68%. And of course not all crimes result in arrests.

Reston's Prison Fellowship Ministries, with more than 50 U.S. field offices and some 76 affiliates abroad, has undertaken the daunting task of leading inmates toward a positive and productive future both in and out of prison. PF administers a variety of programs based in large part on religious inspiration.

The value of this work to our society can't be overstated.

Independent evaluations of PF's programs have yielded startling results. A 1997 review published in "Justice Quarterly" of PF's bible studies program in New York state concluded that inmates who attended at least 10 PF sessions in a year were nearly 3 times less likely to be rearrested during 12 months after release; only 14% of them were in fact rearrested, compared to 41% of other inmates. A PF program offered in 1997 to released prisoners in Detroit churches is credited with reducing reincarcerations to 25%, just half the average local rate of recidivism.

In April 1997 PF opened an integrated program called the InnerChange Freedom Initiative designed to strengthen the spiritual and moral foundations of inmates for productive growth, to prepare inmates for release through day-time off-sight work and evening prison classes, and, after release, to facilitate assimilation of former inmates into community, family, church and workplace. A pilot program initially serving 25 inmate volunteers in a minimum-security prison near Houston grew to 100 inmates by the end of the first year and 200 by the end of the second. Plans call for expansion of the program to Kansas and Iowa.

This year PF put in place a "Starting Line" program which brings into prisons charismatic entertainment (pop vocalists, gutsy guitarists, swashbuckling motorcyclists, decorated warriors) to focus the attention of inmates upon an effective evangelical message by personal or video-taped invitation to make a new spiritual start. The record of conversions has prompted a dramatic expansion of the program now underway. PF emphasizes that, as the program name indicates, program objectives position the inmate at the starting line of a race to redemption through Jesus, rather than rehabilitation in the sense of a return to the status quo ante.

PF is now active in 90% of U.S. correctional facilities. Its programs benefit more than 200,000 prisoners. It has recruited more than 46,000 volunteers to augment its paid staff of about 350 employees nationwide. Its Reston headquarters will more than double its existing space to support its programmatic growth.

Of course there are many reasons why U.S. crime rates have declined over the last seven years, but one of them is surely the work of spiritual ministries for prisoners, among which Prison Fellowship is preeminent. In that sense PF ministers not just to prisoners but to all of us.

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