

Changing Faces – Hope & Grace in Prison Ministry

In America we have a peculiar acceptance for what is justice. “You do the crime, you do the time” may temporarily take a destructive person off the streets, saving lives and heartache, but it really has nothing to do with justice. The word justice being defined as “the quality of being fair and reasonable.” Anyone who has been victimized by crime knows that even when justice is served and the guilty are put away, there still remains no fairness, and nothing is reasonable. And does “justice” mean we continue to build prisons and warehouse all offenders? Did you know that for the last 20 years California’s inmate population has grown 554%. We have the third largest penal system in the world! Somehow “justice” was supposed to feel better.

Changing Faces: Fall 2006 Jail and Prison Ministries Symposium sponsored by Episcopal Charities, Oct. 14th, allowed us to meet and hear from paroled inmates of capital crimes who had spent time in prisons at San Quentin, Solano, Folsom and Vacaville. These men had participated in various victim-offender programs that helped them turn their life around. At first we watched a video that explained the prisoners’ situations and a sampling of VORP (Victim-Offender Reconciliation Process). Then we met the men. They were big men. Men with strong bodies built out of years of fear while in prison. Each had been serving life terms. Now out on parole. A rare group. Most parolees spend the rest of their lives hiding their past trying to create a new life. These men were willing to share all of themselves – their history, their experiences, their feelings. They offered insight into their emotional lives in a way we all need to hear. Thank you Rashad Hanson, Sterling Scott, Jim Harris, and The Rev. James Tramel.

Here are some the messages that I took away from my time with them:

- 1) The “programs” that work are programs created by the prisoners themselves. These guys were frustrated with the programs that didn’t understand them, or speak their language. They had the desire and decided to change themselves from the inside out. They didn’t now how to do it but kind of knew what was missing. Back when Oprah & Phil Donahue were new to the airwaves, they began there and started reflecting with each other what they were hearing and how they felt. Years of different kinds of programs, help from key facilitators, experiences ‘in their language’ came about and has been effective. And, every little bit (every program, conversation, and experience) that tries to melt the emotional barriers helped to restore them to their right mind.
- 2) Every man’s moment of conviction, moment of grace, comes differently. For Rashad it was facing his demons in solitary confinement. For James, it was a confronting question from a fellow prisoner who was dying of AIDS. For

Sterling, he had an epiphany of his life's possibility in a conversation with Rashad.

3) These guys are told they are toxic waste and believe they are. They have been trapped in a lifelong emotional prison with no way to exit. Everything about prison life reinforces the emotional prison that got them there in the first place.

4) The prison industry is starting to look more like legalized slavery than a solution to crime. The profits made in the prison industry are growing tyrannical. As we continue to outsource prisons to corporations, there is no incentive to rehabilitate any prisoners. The only possibility for rehabilitating prisoners will come from outside influences and successful programs such as VORP, IMPACT, Inside/Out, Breaking Barriers, and Changing Faces.

5) We all need to learn about the nature of anger, violence, and the way our emotions can grip us towards behavior that is destructive towards one another. I now understand how redemption for one person can be redemption for everyone. Investing in rehabilitation, real rehabilitation, will be very worthwhile for all of us.

6) It is important for us to distinguish between punishment, justice, restitution, reconciliation, and restoration. We need to be clear when we are asking for each action and when we are trying to bring about each distinct action.

I invite you to do your homework on this issue. Attend the next *Changing Faces* offered by Episcopal Charities. Don't be afraid. Don't be in denial. Don't be in despair. Rehabilitation is a process and it does start from the inside, but we need to be smarter about how as a people we create a climate for change... change for those on the inside and for those on the outside.