

A prisoner for every church

By [Chris Hoke](#)

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I was telling a room full of retired volunteers about mystical experiences that my friend Neaners had when he was in solitary confinement in a maximum-security prison. I told how he and I—a Mexican gang member and a dorky white church guy of about the same age—had exchanged weekly handwritten letters for nearly seven years, and how it had changed both of us.

It turned me into a jail chaplain, and gang pastor.

In that isolation cell my friend Neaners had his own visions of becoming a pastor and ministering to other gang members and lost youth in our hometown when he got out. He wrote raw, tender descriptions of a mysterious love that would sometimes wash through his veins. It led him to nights of sweet and unstoppable tears as he lay alone in the bathroom-sized cell, where he existed 23 hours a day with no natural light.

I told the small audience how dozens of my friends and family members began exchanging letters with Neaners, and how those letters changed him, ignited his faith, and prepared him for life on the outside. And of how the exchange affected my friends and family. They confessed things to Neaners that he says he'll take to the grave.

Standing in front of this gathering, I suggested that prayerful, personal letters sent to inmates like Neaners can be a subversive act, moving deep inside the human disposal system that is the prison system. The act of outreach, of making contact with the dead, was stirring new life inside a mass social grave.

We're an epistolary faith, I reminded them. Much of the New Testament, what we now call holy scripture, was letters. A good number of them were prison letters. "This is how the church grows."

Then I told them that that such letters passing in and out of prison walls had the power to transform inmates' cruel lockdown cells into something entirely different. Like Molotov cocktails. "Love," I said, quoting Saint John of the Cross from his tiny dirt cell, "is ever throwing out sparks."

As Christians writing letters to inmates, I went on, we could help light and toss mystical fires—to burn through the belly of the beast of the American prison system today. We could burn the whole thing down, with mercy, from the inside out. I saw nods, big eyes, and smiles around the room, from the frail lady in a wheelchair to the businessman type in a crisp Oxford shirt.

I'd feared such talk might sound scandalous. But this was Crossroad Bible Institute, and those in my audience were a few of the 5,500 volunteers who are already writing letters to incarcerated men and women.

This is what happens when church people exchange letters with those in hell. They fall in loved with the damned. They learn their names. They hear their cries. And they start questioning the system of gates that's keeping them inside.

Each of the 5,500 volunteers out there—writing from their kitchen tables and studies—belongs to a larger church. It struck me that I could be seeing the tipping point for churches joining the anti-mass-incarceration groundswell in America.

### **A Proposal: One Parish, One Prisoner**

Someone told me last year that, here in Washington State, there is roughly the same number of churches as there are prisoners. That statistic has haunted me every since.

It's had me thinking: *If every church wrote to, adopted, and received just one prisoner . . . . Two things would happen. We would empty the prison system, and every church would be changed.*

A church has just about everything someone just out of prison needs: rides, friends, prayer, childcare, employment connections, lawyer references, teachers, rental opportunities, lawnmowers, people to stand alongside you at custody court and neighborly misunderstandings, and a used car that runs. We could call the movement "One Parish, One Prisoner."

*Look for an expanded treatment of this topic by Chris Hoke in an upcoming issue of the Christian Century.*