

I was in prison . . . The church behind bars: The church behind bars

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [October 3, 2006](#) issue

In one of those neglected corners of scripture that must scare those brave enough to think about it, Jesus promises an unpleasant future for those who would not visit him in prison: “Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matt. 25:45). Threats aside, Lovett Weems of Wesley Theological Seminary has suggested that renewals of the church have usually been accompanied by increased care for those in prison. With well over 2 million people imprisoned in the United States—more than in any other nation at any time in world history—the church has ample opportunity for renewal.

The trouble is that the church is not much interested. Charles Colson of Prison Fellowship recently remarked offhandedly that he has been trying to get people interested in prison ministry for over 30 years, with less success than he’d like. Much of the church seems to agree with the surrounding culture that those in prison deserve to be there, and the more they suffer, the better—end of story.

Think again about the numbers: more than 2 million. Normally when the church takes note of areas of population growth, it plots how to serve the growing community. In the 1990s, the fastest growing category of housing in the U.S. was prison cells, Weems reports (in *Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit*). But we rarely see congregations or denominational bureaucrats scrambling to meet the needs of the prison community.

If we are unwilling to go to prison to meet Jesus, Jesus is willing to come from prison to meet us. Many of the 2 million are committed Christians, often with dramatic stories of a conversion that took place behind bars. They want also to serve, and often do.

Jens Soering is an up-and-coming Catholic lay theologian. He is also a convict, sentenced to life for murdering his girlfriend’s parents when he was a freshman at the University of Virginia. Imprisoned in Virginia, this son of a German diplomat

immersed himself in the riches of Catholic thought and tradition. His first book, *The Way of the Prisoner* (Lantern, 2003), deals with centering prayer and abounds with examples of how ordinary Christians can practice what ancient monks did in their cells.

Soering's prison context gives his work extraordinary moral energy. Every line matters, for this man's life is slipping away in prison. Unfortunately, his repeated discussions of his own history and conversion begin to feel like a sort of personal advocacy, as though his chief hope in writing is to gain his freedom. (Soering maintains his innocence. A former Virginia state deputy attorney general backs his case, pointing out flaws in the prosecution that Soering's lawyer, since disbarred for incompetence, failed to challenge.)

Soering's book on centering prayer has an evident wisdom about it, as when he writes on how to breathe while praying: "With each inhalation and exhalation, I connect with all of God's beautiful creation, literally taking into myself the same air that swirls through my friends' and my enemies' lungs." He also gives very practical instructions on bodily training, such as: Don't drink coffee. This sort of training is like jogging: initial euphoria, subsequent difficulty, then hard practice. Centering prayer is about divestment of self and the infusion of God's Spirit to live an other-directed life—a "reaching out to God" rather than an "emotional grasping for the divinity." Prisoners have a head start on this, he says: "God has done so much of the work already through our agony that we need only finish the job during silent inner prayer."

The most memorable portions of *Way of the Prisoner* and of Soering's second book, *An Expensive Way to Make Bad People Worse: An Essay on Prison Reform from an Insider's Perspective* (Lantern, 2004), are the descriptions of prison life. While he was jailed in England—where he had gone after the murders and from which he was extradited—Soering's wrist was broken twice by the same prison guard. On another occasion he was shot by a rubber bullet aimed at another prisoner (it was after this that he turned to centering prayer as a way to address his mental and physical pain). He was not surprised to learn that the perpetrators of abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison were reservists whose day job was in corrections.

Soering says that he was nearly raped once and that prison guards nearly always look the other way on such occasions, as though prisoners deserve whatever they get. Citing the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Soering says that the prevalence of male

rape in prison is such that more men than women are raped in this country. Given the high incidence of HIV, Soering calls this “the death penalty on the installment plan.”

Soering vividly describes a weekend that he and a bunkmate spent gasping for air in their cell in a new prison whose ventilation system had been poorly installed. He has watched as prisoners’ few amenities have been taken away by legislators, even though physical recreation, such as weight lifting, reduces fighting, and educational opportunities demonstrably reduce recidivism. Prisons are also de facto mental institutions: a sizable percentage of those behind bars are mentally ill. Soering shows the inescapable effect of the political demagoguery in this country that makes “tough on crime” speeches the cheapest way to garner votes and curry public favor. While opinion polls may show it to be popular, get-tough legislation simply is not working: “Prison does not deter crime because criminals are too crazy, too drunk, too high, too uneducated, too unintelligent and too young to fully comprehend what they were doing at the time they broke the law.”

If that were all he had to say, Soering’s writings would be educational, but hardly hopeful. Yet an air of hope hangs over them—not least because of his extraordinary conversion story, due largely to the prison ministry of Beverly Cosby. Soering’s most recent book, *The Convict Christ: What the Gospel Says About Criminal Justice* (Orbis, 2006), makes this hope most explicit. This is essentially a christological primer along the lines of Irenaeus’s dictum that “what he has not assumed has not been saved.” Soering makes clear that Christians are people saved by a death-row convict. He points out that the first apostle to the gentiles—the healed Gerasene demoniac—was a mentally ill ex-con. For Soering, incarceration raises anthropological questions: it has to do with what we think a human being is. Is a “bad” one unredeemable, beyond repair? Or can such a one be renewed? He tells of many a trite prison sermon based on Ephesians 4:28, with its appeal to former thieves not to steal. Prisoners hear this verse differently, however: early Christians took ex-cons into their midst, in marked contrast with most churches now.

Soering also has salient words about race. He points out that whereas blacks constituted only 21 percent of prison admissions in 1926, in 1996 they made up 50 percent. His description of the pride with which many of his African-American fellow prisoners (not “friends”—the word means lover in prison parlance) graduate from high school while behind bars is moving. He recommends a constructive “tough on crime” policy: require every prisoner to work toward a high school degree.

Only one who speaks from within could so clearly describe what American society has done with millions of prisoners. That he writes with a hopeful tone is nothing short of a marvel.

Christine Money has a different set of prison stories that offer another kind of hope. She was warden at a female correctional facility before being appointed to run an all-male prison in Marion, Ohio, that was in such poor condition that it had been under federal court monitoring for decades. One of the first things that Money, a United Methodist, did was invite Kairos Ministries into the prison.

Kairos sends several dozen volunteers into a prison for a long weekend. Each volunteer is matched with an inmate, and small groups of prisoners and sponsors meet around a table with a clergyperson to listen to one another's stories and learn about Jesus. Kairos offers concrete signs of unconditional love. Each inmate, upon first walking into the meeting room, is applauded—no questions asked or lectures given about what they've done. Homemade food is provided throughout the weekend. Each prisoner is given dozens of encouraging letters written by volunteers from the outside. In some cases, the prisoner has not received any mail for a long time. Graduation from the program is attended by friends and loved ones—another occasion for “showering them with love,” as Money put it in an interview with the Century.

Paul McGlone, director of Kairos in Florida's prisons, describes its ministry this way: “They come for the food and meet Jesus.” Kairos operates in 33 states and several foreign countries.

Kairos is much like other successful prison ministries, such as Colson's Prison Fellowship, that seek to offer love to those starved for it. Like Prison Fellowship, Kairos practices a holistic ministry, but with a greater sacramental emphasis. It also sticks around. Money contrasts it with well-intentioned efforts of churchpeople who come to the prison once or twice, then leave. Kairos “doesn't ever go away. ” It sponsors ongoing monthly reunions and continuous follow-up ministries.

Money also supports Kairos Outside, which ministers to the families of those incarcerated. Wives and mothers and other relatives can attend a Kairos weekend. “You can see whole families start to change,” Money said.

The effects of Kairos on the Marion prison were measurable, Money contends. By her fourth year as warden, the number of grievances filed monthly by prisoners had

dropped from over 100 to single-digit figures. In 2000 Marion's federal consent decree was lifted. "The culture began to change. People liked coming to work. Visitors came from other prisons because they heard of this 'miracle.' Kairos can have a great effect," Money explained.

Kairos boasts on its Web site that a study of Florida prisoners showed that the recidivism rate was 15.7 percent among those who had participated in one Kairos session, and 10 percent in those who had been in two or more—as opposed to 23.4 percent for those who had not participated at all. While such figures do not fully prove Kairos's effectiveness in rehabilitation (inmates less likely to reoffend may be more likely to attend religious services in the first place), success stories like Money's are hard to discount.

Accounts of state officials turning to ministries for help in shaping prison life often worry staunch advocates of the separation of church and state. A federal judge in Iowa recently ruled that a branch of Colson's Prison Fellowship, the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI), should not have been receiving government money to help rehabilitate prisoners because it is a religious ministry.

Money did not face any legal challenge regarding Kairos. She said the key to religious ministry at her prison was that "everyone got to practice"—the prison observed all religious holidays with enthusiasm. "We had high-profile Christian programs, but at the same time minority faiths felt fully supported and respected," she said.

Money now works with Ohio's Department of Youth Services to promote similar change elsewhere in the state's prisons. "The church can solve crime," she says. "As healthy lives intersect with broken lives, healing happens."

While Money has worked within the corrections system to change lives, Howard Zehr's work has been dedicated to articulating an alternative to punitive justice. His groundbreaking book *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Herald, 1990; third edition, 2005) helped lead a movement for restorative justice. Three thousand Victim-Offender Reconciliation (or Mediation) Programs (VORP or VOMP) have become part of the criminal-justice system in dozens of states and several foreign countries. VORP was designed with burglary and assault cases in mind, but a new version of it, Defense-Based Victim Outreach, is becoming common in murder cases.

Zehr wrote *Changing Lenses* while he was head of the Mennonite Central Committee's U.S. Office of Criminal Justice. (He now teaches at Eastern Mennonite University.) The book reflects a Mennonite understanding of the church as a community of reconciliation, as stressed in scriptural texts such as Matthew 18 and John 20, wherein Jesus explicitly ties God's forgiveness of people to their forgiveness of others, especially in the Lord's Prayer. What seems like simple biblical teaching has become, with Zehr's guidance, a concrete civic practice.

Zehr begins by observing that victims are routinely ignored in the criminal-justice system. Fines are paid to the state, and criminals are placed in jail with little reference to victims, who often lack basic information about the outcome of their cases. Zehr tells the story of one crime victim complaining about lack of access to information—and she worked in the district attorney's office!

VORP trains intermediaries to preside over a meeting between offender and victim. This allows the victim to learn about the trespass itself—Why my house? My spouse? It also requires the offender to face the person he or she has hurt. Often a recompense of some sort is sought; the offender may work for the victim or perform a service to a third party as a form of penance.

Participants indicate a high level of satisfaction with the process, even as offenders indicate that it can be much more difficult for them than dealing with the courts or jail. Most important, the decided-upon penance is almost always performed, unlike judicially or civilly ordered sentences. This is not a case of political liberals or conservatives proposing a policy that the church supports, but a case of the church leading the way—and society seeing the wisdom of it and following.

Even with such signs of the power of the gospel in dark places, America's "prison-industrial complex" may crumble for a simple reason: money. The yearly cost of \$60 billion is quite a price tag for a policy in which two-thirds of those released reoffend within three years. In California, home of the get-tough three-strikes-and-you're-out law, it's estimated that by 2020, \$5 billion a year will be spent on health care for aging inmates—the amount of the state's entire prison budget for 2002. In Michigan, the prison system gobbles up 20 percent of the state's general fund; 20 years ago it used only 7 percent. It costs \$25,000 to house a prisoner for a year, twice as much for a juvenile, and three times as much for a maximum-security prisoner. VORP may be needed not just to make our justice system more humane, but to keep state and federal governments solvent.

Renewed attention to prisoners' lives might also help erase some ideological divisions in society and the church. No one is likely to accuse Chuck Colson of being a liberal or "soft on crime," but his organization is actively involved on behalf of prison reform. A recent report from a blue-ribbon panel, the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons, suggests sweeping changes to reduce violence behind bars and improve health care so that when prisoners are released—600,000 each year—they will be better citizens. The proposals were backed by liberals like Senator Richard Durbin (D., Ill.) and conservatives like Senator Tom Coburn (R., Okla.). President Bush has pushed for the Second Chance Act now before Congress, which would help ex-convicts "reintegrate" into society (conservatives prefer that word to "rehabilitate"). Right-wing columnist Cal Thomas has written in favor of the sort of restorative justice proposed by Zehr. Reforming the way prisoners and victims are treated should be an issue that fosters broad agreement in church and society.

A church practiced in recognizing Jesus in surprising guise will not be shocked by these developments. A friend of mine was a minister at a large black suburban church in North Carolina that has an active prison ministry. One of the prisoners approached him with a query: Can Christians in jail watch television? At first my friend bristled at the question—what a legalistic approach. Then he learned that during a usual prison day, the time allotted for prisoners to watch TV is also the only time Christians have for fellowship with one another. So the question was really a deep one about how to form Christian identity and community. My friend, a preacher to prisoners, realized that he was being ministered to by those in prison. That will happen whenever the church places itself in solidarity with those behind bars.