

Partners in the gospel: The church behind bars

by [Troy Rienstra](#) in the [October 3, 2006](#) issue

For 16 years I have lived under the jurisdiction of the Michigan Department of Corrections. I know firsthand what behaviors are being bred within prisons. I entered the system when I was 18 years old. I spent five years learning from seasoned veterans how to be a better criminal. I was paroled in 1993, and a year and a half later I returned to prison with a life sentence for attempted murder and robbery.

I cannot name any person who has been rehabilitated by the efforts of the correctional system. If there is any change in behavior, it is often for the worse. The system of prison controls and punishments represses hostility and, at best, holds people in a state of suspended animation until their sentences are completed. Even the most idealistic corrections officers appear to consider the main purpose of incarceration to be warehousing the dregs of society. They see little hope for the majority of prisoners. Most rehabilitation programs do not address the root causes of crime—the sinful nature of humankind in need of conversion, not just correction.

In the 13th year of my imprisonment I experienced a conversion. I met a Puerto Rican man, a former leader in a national gang, who shared with me how Jesus the Christ had changed his life and how Jesus would do the same for me. Later that night I tearfully asked Jesus Christ to be my Lord and Savior. The redeeming power of the Holy Spirit raised me to a new standard of living and brought my life of crime to an end.

Jesus Christ gave me a vision and purpose for my life, which is to establish bonds between free churches and prison churches so as to reach both prisoners and “free” people with the message that serving a life sentence in the kingdom of God is the only life worth living.

The body of Christ can use the prison church as an ally in spreading the gospel. But the prison church needs to be nurtured through church discipline and the sacraments in order to grow and influence the surrounding culture. The reverse of

John Calvin's observations are evident within most prisons: where there is no discipline, immorality is prevalent, and where there is no observance of the memorial, the church is ineffective.

What can be done to mobilize the church behind bars to be an effective partner in ministry with the free church? With the help of my home church, I formed an organization, [Christians for Prisoners—Prisoners for Christ](#). Its aim is to build bridges between the free church and the "bond" church. Committed Christians need to work with Christian prisoners to advance the church-planting process and mentor the church behind bars. Believers on both sides of the prison walls need to move from complacency to living out their divine appointment to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel."

There are four major concerns that CFPPFC seeks to address: adoption, discipleship, mission and social programs.

1) *Adoption*: The prison church has been severed from the free church by skepticism, prejudice, neglect and lack of forgiveness. Healthy development in both the church behind bars and the free church begins with adoption of one another—full acceptance of the gifts of the other and dependence on one another. Christians must support prison outreach ministries, work in partnership with the prison church, and embrace the prison church as an equal and essential part of the ministry of the body of Christ.

2) *Discipleship*: Just like the free church, the prison church is gifted with leaders called to build up members. Prison church leaders (pastors, elders, deacons) must be identified, appointed and mentored, with the support of their sponsoring church.

3) *Missions*: In order for Christian prisoners to develop a sense of being a significant part of the body of Christ, they must know that they can give back. By providing training and opportunities for service, the free church can empower the church behind bars to serve the prison population, the local community and victims of crime.

4) *Social programs*: Introduction of more restorative-justice initiatives, such as victim-offender reconciliation and rehabilitative programs operated jointly by free and prison churches, would benefit inmates both before and after release from prison.

God is at work in America's prisons. On behalf of the church behind bars, I beseech the body of Christ to seize the opportunity to reach our nation's prisoners. The prison church has been raised up for the saving of many lives, and we who are members of that band ask for your partnership.