

Prison Ministry, by Lennie Spitale

reviewed by [Samuel K. Atchison](#) in the [June 28, 2003](#) issue

In my work as a state prison chaplain I sometimes receive phone calls from zealous, well-meaning Christians who want to come "preach to the prisoners." My usual response is to smile benignly at their naïveté and attempt to arrange a face-to-face meeting at the prison, where the would-be volunteers can tour the facility and perhaps attend one of the worship services over which I preside. In this way, I explain, they will be better able to understand the setting, scope and vision of the chaplaincy department's ministry.

It is against this background that I highly recommend Lennie Spitale's excellent book. Drawing on his experiences as both an ex-offender (he did a prison term for robbery and assault) and a full-time prison minister, Spitale provides an insider's view into that parallel universe known as prison. His purpose is to "help the reader understand the culture (from within the culture) so that those who hope to minister within its confines may be better equipped to operate, not only with compassion, but also with wisdom."

For many people prison is the most rewarding ministry venue imaginable. In my own experience--which includes service in urban and suburban churches, a homeless shelter, a county correctional facility and a maximum-security state prison--nothing has been as challenging or gratifying as ministry to the incarcerated. I've seen gangbangers, thugs and murderers truly repent of their sins and become stalwart Christian soldiers in the face of fierce resistance from fellow inmates and corrections officers alike. I've seen Christian inmates demonstrate compassion and love to a degree I've never witnessed in any other setting. And I've seen chaplaincy volunteers make heroic sacrifices, sometimes traveling hundreds of miles under icy road conditions, to ensure that the needs of the inmates were served.

Yet for all of its human miracles, heroic gestures and concomitant rewards, prison ministry is not for everyone. The challenges are formidable and can prove disheartening to potential volunteers who don't understand the vagaries of prison life and culture. Criminologist Todd Clear has defined imprisonment as the product

of a flawed life, while characterizing prisoners as social outcasts. "To be shunned by one's community is to invite a special kind of shame, the mortification that comes with undeniable public rebuke," he writes.

It is this shame which gives rise to what Spitale calls "the feeling." "Once or twice a year I still experience dreams in the night of going back to prison--dreams so vivid that I awaken with the feeling of returning to prison. I experience afresh the turmoil of emotions connected with the event: the hopelessness, the fear, the separation from my loved ones, and the awful, indomitable enemy of time that stretches out before me like a thick, steel chain that can never be broken," he writes.

Understanding the feeling, then, is crucial to understanding prison life. The hopelessness, fear and despair inmates experience are part of the penalty for violating society's rules. They are an outgrowth of being ostracized from one's family and fellow citizens. This penalty is reinforced by a predatory culture in which vulnerability is viewed as a sign of weakness and power is the currency de rigueur.

On one level, prison can be viewed as a morality play in which those who have power exploit those who don't. This pattern marks the spectrum of interactions that regularly occur behind the walls--inmate-to-inmate, corrections officer-to-inmate, corrections officer-to-civilian, inmate-to-civilian and so on. As a result, prison relationships are often utilitarian, and friendships, as Spitale notes, are approached with caution. Such is the challenge facing the person who would minister in prison.

Christian ministry is about hope, not only of eternal life in heaven but also of abundant, meaningful life here on earth. This hope is conditioned by trust. The message of the gospel is that one can only have hope by trusting in Christ as Savior. To minister in prison, therefore, is to swim against the current of a culture in which hopelessness and mistrust are the norm.

It is just this issue that is the focal point of Prison Ministry. As Spitale takes the reader on a Rod Serling-like tour of the "Prison Zone," the uninitiated learn how to navigate the culture while sharing the hope of the gospel. The reader feels the inmate's divorce from his wife, his lack of contact with his children, his abandonment by his father and the pain behind his mask. The reader also is advised of some of the mind games prisoners play, learns what pitfalls to avoid, and obtains a lexicon of new terms. He learns how to be "wise as a serpent, yet harmless as a dove."