

Prison Ministry

Spring 2019



Sharing Jesus with those impacted by incarceration



A Devotional Thought

Freedom!

By Pastor Darren Green, Prison Committee Chairman

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free."

Luke 4:18 (NIV)

Freedom! It is a word that describes all kinds of situations, cherished liberties, and emotions. However, the freedom we find in Jesus is one of the greatest gifts our God brings to us. Jesus came "to proclaim good news." Guilt is one of the heaviest burdens that humans carry. I think of Doug, a man oppressed by his past. He had done his time and put his life together. Yet, as we talked about standing before God, Doug was troubled. I got the impression of him dragging a ball and chain of guilt along through his life. As we looked at Jesus' words and promises, the good news, namely that Jesus came to "proclaim freedom for the prisoners" and "set the oppressed free," became clear to Doug. His burden was lifted. With a smile on his face and a tingle up his spine, Doug heard Jesus free him and give him the peace that he needed. It almost seemed like Doug was floating on air. It gave me a renewed appreciation of the peace that only our Lord can give.

Take note of how often God speaks of taking away our guilt. The Lord said to Isaiah, "your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for" (Isaiah 6:7). As you read Psalm 32, you can hear David's struggle following his sin of adultery and murder. He bottled it up inside and it about destroyed him. After the Lord sought David out through



Nathan, David breaths this freedom he finds from God:
"Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.' And you forgave the guilt of my sin" (Psalm 32:5).

What a compassionate and loving God we have that reaches down to us to make sure we hear that not only are our sins forgiven, but the guilt taken away. What a privilege we have to lead those imprisoned by their guilt to hear the voice of Jesus our Lord. Tell them they are freed in him! It is God's Word and so God is speaking! Our God, the one we must stand before in judgment, says, "FREE!" The same Jesus that lived among us saw the oppression that sin and guilt brings. He desires that we live free as "new creations" and "ambassadors" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Joining Jesus on His Prison Mission

News about our efforts to share Jesus going forward

A recent book about sharing Jesus is titled "Joining Jesus on His Mission." I like the emphasis on Jesus and the joy and blessings we receive by joining him in his work. Sharing Jesus is something we get to do as opposed to some duty. The senior citizens that started our prison ministry effort 25 years ago certainly had that attitude. They wanted to send the gospel where they couldn't go. Since then WELS Prison Ministry focused primarily on that publication ministry, distributing well over a million copies of God's Word to inmates, either in Bibles or Bible studies. This effort has been a great blessing to both inmates and volunteers, who helped with mailing, test correcting, or being pen pals.

At a strategic planning session last November, the Prison Ministry Committee (PMC) met to plan our efforts under the Holy Spirit's guidance. The session produced many exciting ideas that we are asking God's people to support with their time as volunteers, their financial gifts, or both. Here are some of the plans in which we'd like you to play a part.

Rebuilding the foundation

Usage of our publication ministry, housed in New Ulm, Minn., has slowed compared to years past. The PMC identified several steps needed to revitalize this foundational element of our efforts to share Jesus. Among these steps are tasks such as:

- Release a new Bible study on dealing with depression and anxiety



- Publicize this new study with both current and former users (chaplains and facilities)
- Evaluate historic usage patterns and target key facilities for personal contact
- Pray that the Holy Spirit opens both new and formerly open doors for our material

Publication Subcommittee lead Pastor David Rosenbaum emphasized the key role of this effort: "Bible self-study courses have been the centerpiece of Prison Ministry. We are adding new titles and editing those that need to be reprinted. Inmates have lots of time available, and we can provide an excellent way to fill their time and their souls simultaneously."

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Promoting more visits to personally share God's Word

As a nationwide church body, many laypeople and called workers currently visit jails and prisons to share Jesus in person. In addition, there are many more who desire to take Jesus behind bars. We have helped with jail ministry training in the past, but the effort lacked long-term coordination and support. To enhance the efforts of God's people, the PMC identified several tasks to undertake, including:

- Identify and track current jail and prison ministry efforts
- Identify and encourage Word and Sacrament ministry to all incarcerated WELS members
- Find ways to train people across the country for this ministry
- Build a support network so these efforts can benefit from each other's experiences
- Find ways to encourage one another in our efforts.

PMC member Leon Brands, who is leading aspects of this effort, comments: "We are compiling information from congregations that have an active jail or prison ministry, so the PMC can support the volunteers with training and additional resources for ministering to inmates. We also want to identify all WELS members who are in jail or prison, so they can be served in person or given meaningful materials to remind them of their Savior's boundless love."



Assisting released inmates and their families

One of the greater needs that the PMC wishes to address is for assistance to inmates upon their release from jail or prison. Faith that is new or recently rekindled while serving time can be subjected to severe tests and powerful temptations not experienced behind bars. Returning citizens also have great earthly needs, such as finding housing, transportation, and employment when the deck is often stacked against them. Their families often need help adjusting to the former inmate's return, including dealing with forgiveness and trust issues. Our efforts to meet this crying need with trained mentors include:

- Use a successful mentor program in New Ulm as a pilot program for similar efforts elsewhere
- Update mentor training material based on recent experience
- Develop reentry resources that can help mentors serve returning citizens better
- Develop resources to help congregations welcome and integrate these returning citizens.

PMC Treasurer Tom Koepsell, a current mentor, notes that "Inmates are often brought closer to their Savior behind bars and are enthusiastic to continue their journey upon release. With the spiritual guidance we can offer, and the love of Jesus we can show them, they can become valuable assets to our congregations and to their communities. Working one-on-one, my experience has been the stigma of being an ex-con goes away and a close Christian friendship takes its place. It can be a very rewarding experience."

Finding your role

While all these plans are exciting, they only become a reality through the support and efforts of God's people. Director

of Special Ministries Jim Behringer reminds us: "Our Prison Ministry is an economical outreach ministry. We use many volunteers. Our books are inexpensive to print. Love for Jesus has moved hundreds of donors to have a huge impact! Yet our efforts to spread the gospel need generous financial support to train men and women to bring the gospel to those affected by incarceration." About seventy percent of our budget comes from direct gifts from individual donors. Hand in hand with financial support is the ministry of hundreds of volunteers around the country. These gifts of treasure and time truly make a difference in the amount of work we can carry out. Without them, the ministry doesn't happen. Come join Jesus on his mission to reach those impacted by incarceration.

For information on supporting this ministry with financial gifts or volunteer efforts, see "Remember us..." on page 4.

Sixty Minutes Can Change a Life

I reached the third floor at the jail and was ushered into the room where our weekly session with the women took place. Filing into the room, two of the women asked rather disdainfully, "Are you going to talk to us about God?" Thankfully, the facilitator from the preceding week had informed me about these women. Even though I was surprised by their tone of voice, the Holy Spirit guided my thoughts, words, and actions during the next 60 minutes. I did not enter the jail that day to feel good about myself. I came to share Jesus. So how did I respond? "Yes, we are going to talk about how much Jesus loves you."

The two women expressed doubt that God cared about them because of the many tragedies that had occurred in their lives. So I shared how God had sustained my husband and me during the loss of our first child, a stillborn. Suddenly they began to listen, and the Holy Spirit went to work. One of the two women returned for several more sessions. During the third session she confided that she had been reading about Jesus in the booklets we distributed and that she wanted to learn more. God's Word had opened her heart.

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Jesus challenges and stretches us. He presents us with opportunities to serve him by serving others. He commands us to love, welcome, and embrace one another even when the individuals we serve may be difficult, ungrateful, or unable to

reciprocate. It's true—much of even our Christian service can be self-centered and gravitate toward individuals who can assist, uplift, or give us something in return. But Jesus lovingly reminds us, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35).



Where do we go with this self-centered attitude? The answer is to the cross. There we discover a Savior who loved us for what he could give to us—not for what he could get from us. What we do by faith in Jesus to help others (without thoughts of looking good or gaining glory for ourselves) is a blessing. Our lives have been transformed through Jesus life, death, and resurrection. Our motivation to thank Jesus is rooted in his love for us.

I witness it week after week. These women enter the room with questioning and skeptical attitudes. Sometimes they are resolute or reticent. Yet by the end of the session, their body language, facial expressions, and comments display hope and peace. Just as the prophet Isaiah wrote, ". . . so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." The word changes hearts and lives.

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Why do I look forward to facilitating sessions at the jail? Psalm 71:15 expresses it best: "My mouth will tell of your righteous deeds and your saving acts all day long—though I do not know how to relate them all" (Psalm 71:15). Doing so has challenged and stretched me. My faith has blossomed

and grown through this opportunity to serve other women who are facing challenges with addictions, relationships, guilt, and forgiveness. What a blessing and a privilege it is to meet with these women and share truths from the Bible. My Savior rescued me, and now I get double the joy by sharing that unfathomable love with others.

Mary Hochmuth leads Facing Freedom at Dane County Women's Jail, Madison, Wis., for our partner Institutional Ministries

Remember us with prayers, service, and gifts

We trust that God will move the hearts of His people to support our ministry in any way possible. Please pray that Prison Ministry would continue to share Jesus with more people impacted by incarceration. To volunteer as a pen pal or a test corrector, please contact us at pmsec@wels.net or 507-354-3130. To explore visitation or mentoring opportunities, e-mail dave.hochmuth@wels.net or call 414-256-3243.

WELS Prison Ministry now receives a small subsidy from our synod. We continue to write grant requests in hopes of receiving money for funding operational costs, printing books, and traveling to promote and train new volunteers for visitation or mentoring ministry. But most of our financial support comes from people like you. If you desire to support this work, please send your gift to:

WELS Prison Ministry
N16W23377 Stone Ridge Drive
Waukesha, WI 53188-1088

Or donate online at wels.net/sm-donation, click on "Designation" and choose: "Prison Ministry."

Important note for Thrivent members: Anyone who is a member of Thrivent Financial can direct personal Choice Dollars to WELS Prison Ministry. If you need assistance with this designation, contact Thrivent Member Care Services at 800-847-4836. The designation for 2018 must be made by March 31, 2019.

May the Lord continue to bless you as you serve Him.

In Christ,
WELS Prison Ministry Staff