

PRISON MINISTRY

SHARING JESUS WITH PEOPLE IMPACTED BY INCARCERATION

WINTER 2022 NEWSLETTER



"WHEN THEY'RE DOWN IN THE GUTTER, STOMP ON 'EM!"

Tom Koepsell, Prison Ministry Committee member

I loved my football coach. At first I feared his tough exterior, but it didn't take this young high school kid long to discover the warm caring heart underneath. On the grid iron, that expression (We knew it was tongue-in-cheek.) promoted the toughness it takes to play the game. In this sinful world, things go wrong. So a certain toughness can be a real virtue. (I think the biblical term is "endurance.")

"Indeed, whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction, so that, through patient endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we would have hope." [Romans 15:4]

Let's consider how we, the body of Christ, can potentially foster or discourage such endurance. It was the last incarceration for her. She had learned her lesson. She was in jail; her baby girl was with foster parents. She cried. I shed tears with her. "I want my baby."

Incarceration separates parents from their families. It's not pretty. Shall we say they should have thought of that before they got themselves into this fix? Shall we say they made their bed so now they can sleep in it? When they're "down in the gutter" shall we "stomp on 'em?"

Sin corrupts; sin produces dysfunction. You and I are dysfunctional because of sin. Enter: the one who associates with "tax collectors and sinners." Enter: Jesus.

When Jesus said the fields are ripe, he didn't say we should let it rot in the field. There is a ripe field behind bars. The consequences of sin and the accompanying guilt produce a crop ready for harvest.

Getting out and getting back together will not solve the problem. The parent needs Jesus to deal with the sin and guilt; they need Godly wisdom and guidance to learn parenting skills they never had. The whole family needs healing that only the Great Physician can bring.

Penal systems have realized that any rehabilitation they can provide falls short. Many have seen "faith-based" organizations as more capable of providing what is needed. To know the love of Jesus and the unconditional love and forgiveness provides the healing families need. Learning the patience, kindness, selflessness, and humility it takes comes from knowing Jesus. That is a major goal of your WELS Prison Ministry Committee. We want to provide God's people with the training to carry out this mission of love.

What was written in the past can help all of us develop the patient endurance required to cope in this dysfunctional world.

PARENTS BEHIND BARS

Parenting is a tough job! It looks easy from afar, but not so much when you have to make the decisions and solve the problems in real life.

Imagine being a parent long distance. You have very limited and irregular contact with your children, who are being raised by someone else. Because of your separation, your kids view you with suspicion or anger, or doubt your love for them. You live with regrets and guilt and bouts of depression, all complicated by legal difficulties.

"VERY EXCELLENT BOOK . . . YOU COVERED ALL THE BASES AND IN THE GRAY AREAS YOU GAVE IT TO GOD. THIS STUDY BROUGHT TEARS TO MY EYES."

— THOMAS, INMATE

This could, in part, describe a military family with a parent on deployment, or a family broken by divorce. But only a parent who is incarcerated faces all the above challenges.

WELS Prison Ministry has added a new booklet, *Parenting from Prison*, to the 23 other titles in its Level 1 Self-Study series. Inmates can request a Bible study, complete a final test, return it for correction, and then are sent another booklet.

Parenting from Prison revisits the root of the problem: the first sin by our first parents. That transgression separated them from their Heavenly Father, leaving them in a prison of pain and regret for having ruined the relationship. But God was determined to restore the father-child trust, which he achieved by sending his only Son.

Incarcerated parents are directed throughout the volume to focus on Jesus and his grace. They are also advised to be honest about their feelings; to be realistic about the challenges; to address their stress by talking with others; and to be patient, trusting God to accomplish what they cannot.

Simple suggestions are offered for communicating with children, such as weaving God's Word into letters and phone calls; being truthful about mistakes that were made; consistently expressing their love for their

sons and daughters; inquiring about events in their lives; and using positive words in all their interactions.

A chapter is devoted to what happens upon release and reunion. The parent in custody will have to readjust to freedom and responsibility, but the entire family will need to readjust their thinking, their behavior, and their priorities when mom or dad returns home. That calls for patience, love, wisdom, and forgiveness by everyone involved.

The study closes with a look at what the Bible says about parenting, including a study of Moses's mother, Jochebed, and what we can learn from her.

Do you know any parents who are incarcerated? You can submit their contact information to WELS Prison Ministry at wels.net/refer. Please ask the Lord to bless this new resource, helping mothers and fathers to do what is possible in a task that seems impossible: parenting from prison.

Editor's Note: By Pastor David Rosenbaum, Prison Ministry publications editor. Originally published in the His Hands blog from WELS Special Ministries, January 26, 2022. If you would like to receive His Hands in your e-mail every two weeks, go to the form at wels.net/subscribe and subscribe to "His Hands."

PRISON MINISTRY MEETS THE 21ST CENTURY

At one time nearly every inmate in the country could receive mail, cards, books, and other encouraging material sent by our ministry via U.S. Mail. Unfortunately, this is changing. More and more facilities are changing the way they serve inmates and the requirements for messages and material sent to them. To continue to serve inmates with the life-saving and life-changing gospel, our ministry is adapting to the new situation.

What's driving the changes?

There are many factors, but two are prominent. One is the influx of contraband into jails and prison via mail. Drugs and other items are sent in very sophisticated ways, including as liquid drops applied to letters, which the inmate can consume to get high. Departments of Correction, along with prison and jail staff, are seeking to interrupt this process by entering into contracts with companies that photocopy each piece

CORRECTORS CORNER AND PEN PAL PIPELINE

Thanks to all our current test correctors and pen pals for your patience and dedication as we seek to support your ministry efforts. We apologize for any difficulties in your ministry that are caused by the disruption in mail procedures that we are experiencing. Some of you may have pen pal letters delayed; others may have fewer tests to correct because of the difficulties in delivering booklets to inmates; others may not be affected by the changes, depending on where the inmates you serve reside.

As WELS Prison Ministry seeks to adapt to the changing landscape, it will be helpful to know which of our volunteers may be willing to explore using digital communication methods, like e-mail, to carry out ministry tasks. We are working toward establishing clear and safe procedures and will at some point need test correcting and pen pal volunteers to do some or all their ministry correspondence digitally. If you would be willing to explore becoming involved in this aspect of Prison Ministry, please notify us (prisonministry@wels.net).

of mail and deliver the copy to the inmate. Alternatively, some inmates have access to either a tablet or a kiosk in the facility where they can receive, display, and read a file with the scanned letter.

A second factor is facility staffing. Hiring correctional officers and staff to work in correctional facilities has been difficult, especially during the pandemic. Sorting, inspecting, and delivering the mail for inmates is time consuming and labor intensive. The companies that scan the mail also sort it and organize it for inmate delivery, which greatly reduces the workload. The third party mail service allows facility staff to focus on other tasks and hire fewer people.

What are the impacts of the changes?

The impacts affect various aspects of our ministry:

- Delivery of Bibles and Bible studies. Many locations now require physical books to be sent directly from the publisher or online retailer. Bibles and

Bible study booklets we send are rejected by some facilities. Others that still accept them indicate their acceptance may be temporary. Others indicate that original material, like our Bible studies, will have to be reformatted in electronic format to be sent to inmates chapter by chapter.

- Delivery of pen pal letters, corrected tests, and other items. Some pen pal letters have been returned because they come from an organization (WELS Special Ministry) rather than a friend or family member. We are finding corrected tests don't fit the third-party mail vendor requirements for a maximum size of 8.5x11 inches. Page limits reduce the number of encouragement items (cards or bookmarks) we can send with corrected tests.

Unfortunately, there is little consistency on guidelines and requirements from one vendor to the next and even from one DOC or facility to the next using the same vendor. This creates a great deal of confusion and extra work for both staff and volunteers in our mailing center. (continued on p.4)

CURRENT MINISTRY NEEDS

Because of the stricter policies for what can be sent to an inmate, we are unable to use the normal quantity of "extras" that we often send to inmates, including greeting cards. For the time being we have an abundance in stock and do not need new donations of cards. We still welcome donations of *Meditations* that are less than a year old, in good shape (not curled up), and no stickers or writing on or in them. Call the New Ulm office for further details.

At this time we can accommodate a few more pen pals, but we currently have enough test correctors. In the future as our digital outreach effort matures, our need for test correctors and pen pal volunteers may increase, especially those willing to communicate digitally. If you would like to be put on a waiting list for future digital volunteers, send us an e-mail with your contact information (prisonministry@wels.net).

PRISON MINISTRY MEETS THE 21ST CENTURY (CONTINUED)

Hope for the future

The WELS Prison Ministry staff and Prison Ministry Committee members are working hard to find both short- and long-term solutions to these challenges. Several approaches appear worth pursuing. It is obvious that eventually a significant portion of the correctional facilities in the U.S. will have some form of electronic service for their inmates to deliver messages and material. A portion, especially county jails and other smaller facilities, will also likely retain the direct

use of U.S. Mail for their inmates. As a result, in the relatively near future we may need both volunteers who support our historic ministry-by-mail approach as well as volunteers that enable us to supply our Bible studies and pen pal letters to inmates electronically. Our ultimate hope is that the electronic delivery options provide the opportunity to reach many more inmates, especially if the electronic delivery costs are lower than the costs for printing, envelopes, postage, and the other ministry-by-mail costs. We will keep everyone posted on our progress both in this newsletter and on our website—wels.net/pm.

To get WELS Prison Ministry news and updates delivered straight to your inbox, subscribe at wels.net/subscribe.

THREE WAYS TO SUPPORT OUR MINISTRY

- 1. Pray** – As God’s redeemed children, our prayers are powerful and effective. Current prayer requests: guidance for efforts to communicate with inmates digitally; for continued improvement in the pandemic situation so that personal visits to correctional facilities become commonplace; for blessings on the mentor training; for continued designated gifts to fund all our ministry activities.
 - 1. Serve** – All our ministry efforts are driven by volunteers motivated by Christ’s love. To volunteer as a pen pal, please contact us at prisonministry@wels.net or 507-354-3130.

To explore jail visitation or post-release mentoring opportunities, call 414-256-3243 or send an e-mail to dave.hochmuth@wels.net.
 - 2. Give** – We thank our Lord and you for your helpful special offerings to Prison Ministry, which support our efforts to share Jesus with people impacted by incarceration!
- To provide additional gifts for Christ’s work through Prison Ministry:

**WELS, Attn. Gift Processing
N16W23377 Stone Ridge Drive
Waukesha, WI, 53188**
(Make checks payable to WELS and list Prison Ministry in the memo line.)
 - Donate online at wels.net/donate-prison-ministry.
 - Give through your IRA charitable distribution, appreciated assets, or your will or estate plan. Contact WELS Ministry of Christian Giving at 800-827-5482 for assistance.
 - Direct your Thrivent Choice dollars (if you are a Thrivent member) to WELS Prison Ministry. Contact Thrivent Member Care Services at 800-847-4836 for assistance. Your 2021 designation is due by March 31, 2022.