

Changing Lives... By Faith-Based Mentoring

*What you have done for the least among you..
...you have done for me...*

Mathew 25: 40



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Changing Lives... With Faith-Based Mentoring...

As hundreds of thousands of inmates head home from prison each year, many state and federal officials are launching faith based programs to help keep ex-offenders from committing new crimes.

Over two million individuals are incarcerated in the United States, the highest number in our history. The prison system is bursting at the seams in each state, including the State of West Virginia, with over 6000 adults in WV DOC prisons, 985 juveniles in detention centers, and fluid number over 3000 plus adults in the WV Regional Jail system. When considering those individuals incarcerated in the five federal prisons in WV, these figures can conceivably be doubled.

At least 95% of all state prison inmates will eventually be freed. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, throughout the US, inmates released from prison have traditionally been given little more than a few dollars and ride to the bus station in a few cases. Often, they don't even have a valid state identification cards, a resume, transportation, nor in some cases, even a roof over their head, or any kind of support system. Any single one of these issues will most likely hinder them when they try to find work. People who are coming out of incarceration need a lot of support or they are going to re-offend.

Nationally, the average rate of recidivism for all offenders is over 50%. Reports for WV's recidivism have a range from 50% to 75% depending on the sources of information available. The recidivism for juveniles is at best 50% in WV. Prisoner re-entry initiative programs, such as that of Michigan State Department of Corrections, have proven to be very effective. In the Michigan program's two years, 14% of the 8000 released inmates who have received help have gone back to prison, a far lower rate than 50% of former inmates who return to state prison with in three years, without being involved in re-entry programs. Some residents would believe the state was coddling prisoners by focusing on their re-integration into society. However it is just a simple philosophy. They are coming home, coming back to where we all live. Helping them is helping everyone in the community.

Showing that you care about individuals can become contagious. If authorities care and show they care, the community will also care. We are challenged to take a look at ourselves, our Church; What do we do? What do we have to offer? The way we treat prisoners indicates how much love is in our hearts as individuals and as a society.

Just because a person has offended does not mean that person doesn't need and deserve our attention. These folks are all around us to begin with whether we are aware of it or not. So, why not assist them.

Mentors are not the "solve all", however mentors certainly do make a difference. Mentors keeping an individual interested in a positive way can cause crime rates to flat line or even drop.

After spending several months incarcerated in an institution, many individuals experience a difficult time in making the simplest of decisions most of us take for granted. This problem is even worse for those individuals who have been in a prison system for several years. When entering the prison system, an individual gives up most all of their options, and many of their rights.

Upon entering a prison system, the inmate will be told by someone they have never met before, what time to get up in the morning and what time to go to bed in the evening. Their meals are selected for them and also the time the meals are to be eaten. They will have little input into basic classes or work projects that fill the day, and most likely will be told how to spend what little free time is available. During recreational time, choices may also be limited. Situations can vary depending on the security level of the facility and/or the inmate's mental and physical ability.

When a former offender has completed their court ordered sentence and re-enter society, making these simple decisions can cause great anxiety in the individual. For the first time in a long while, they must make the decisions for themselves that had been made for them while incarcerated. Often, those decisions they make are ones not in their best interest, or the best interest of others. Without little doubt, poor decision making skills are what lead to an individual's offense and running a foul of the law to begin with.

Everyone is a work in progress, and success comes in changing attitudes toward becoming better stewards of time, talents, and treasures, through at least a five step process of vocation rehabilitation to allow the individual to re-enter the work force.

Those five steps are as follows:

1. Treatments: This is for all aspects of life, both physical and mental.
2. Education: Improve on the individual's education base, GED, etc.
3. Housing: Adequate and safe housing which includes responsibilities.
4. Employment: Gainful employment with possibilities of advancement.
5. Mentoring: Leisure time can be key to an individual's success.

More often than not, offenders and repeat offenders fail to use their leisure time in a proper or productive fashion. Leisure time becomes their avenue toward finding or creating trouble not only for themselves but also for others. Better decisions are often made by these individuals when guided by the influence of a mentor.

The largest grouping of offenders that would benefit from mentoring is those 20 to 29 years of age. Characteristically, this generation can be called the "me generation". They want it all right now, do not use reason, know it all, and usually not future orientated. Many of these individuals are still dependent on their parents for their basic needs; however the parents are tuned out. Status in the community of peers is very important to these individuals, and often the number one reason for becoming an offender is because it is a "right of passage". For some individuals, the criminal is their role model.

Much of today's pop culture derives from prison culture. For example, the low riding baggy pants fashion worn without a belt. Usually the individual's under garment or anatomy will be plainly visible as if this were to be considered normal and hip. In this slang term of "sagging", the individual is also showing their wares, so to speak, in an attempt to attract other interested individual's. The pop culture is modeled on the prison culture caused by prison clothes being issued to large regardless of the individual's size. Usually for security reasons, belts would not be issued, thus the much too large of pants would sag down as the individual moved about. This gave way to the term of "sagging" adopted by pop culture.

Often these individuals come from such a dysfunctional background they think and believe that anything and everything is normal and acceptable behavior. Perhaps the best reason for this attitude has been the lack of a positive role model in their lives.

The new form of slavery today is color blind. Today's slavery is physiological and has created at least a couple generations that are in prison both physically and physiologically. Many of these individuals do not respect themselves. They have no pride in their history, culture, family or community. When an individual does not respect their own heritage it is usually asking way too much of them to respect other people's rights, property, beliefs and so-forth. This sad fact of reality usually begins relatively early on in the offenders life. In the past couple of generations, children are no longer afraid to have to visit the school principle's office because the school can do nothing to discipline them and the parents no longer will. So it is fair to ask the question: "is it any wonder why so many young people are not afraid to go to prison"?

Offenders that are about 30 years old and about to re-enter society have lost years of their 20's and perhaps much of their childhood. If you would choose to compare their teenage and early 20's to that of a wild horse, they are still that wild horse when released at 30 something years of age. Most have not grownup, have not receive an education; have never held down a regular job. When we couple this with the fact that someone has always provided for them, their parents or the state, they often feel entitled to everything without working for anything.

As important as these life skills are for everyone, offenders must grapple with even more complex issues. Because of the fragmentation of family and family issues, many individuals are not able to form and maintain relationships. Many have not experienced the positive role model of a father figure in their life and do not know how to be a Father to their child. Sadly enough, the same can be said for young women and motherhood. Studies have revealed that on the average 70% of children who have at least one parent incarcerated will follow in their parents footsteps, if that cycle is not interrupted by mentoring and community support.

Even with our greatest efforts, it is safe to say; unless the individual wants to change we will never get to the area of the individual that needs changed, needs adjusted. Therefore, mentors need to be prepared for some failures. Unfortunately, some individuals have become so damaged change will be vary difficult.

On the other hand, when an individual signs up for a mentoring program, this is a giant step for them. Not only have the individuals recognized they could benefit from some assistance. They are actually saying, "I need help". This step in their lives takes courage and this fact should be acknowledged with them.

Many employers have begun to acknowledge the positive aspects of an ex-offender being in a mentoring program. Employers indicate that can make a difference in the decision to hire an individual or not. So mentors can and do make a great difference to ex-offenders and to the community. Mentors are perhaps giving an individual an opportunity they have never experienced before. So something that is good for all of us to remember is: We are more like God, we are better disciples of Jesus, when we learn to give of ourselves. Therefore, be a cheerful giver; look at how we can be a blessing to others. Actions speak louder than words.

Mentors are a positive role model, usually described as friends. Mentors encourage an individual and assist them in building self esteem. Those in the correction systems have usually received enough negative comments about their behavior and life style, now they need a mentor to encourage and recognize the

individual's positive aspects. This is best accomplished, not by being an authority figure or preaching about values, acting like a parent, or by judging, but by building a relationship on trust.

A trusting relationship can be accomplished through activities designed to become a source of conversation, being respectful of their privacy zone. Establishing boundaries, realistic goals and expectations are also a major role of a mentor. However, it should change a person's life. That can and will happen with the mentor's influence.

The most important thing a mentor can do is "listen". Listening gives the individual a chance to vent frustrations before they build up to the boiling point causing the individual to act out of anger, which will be of regret later. The mentor is not there to give advice, but to listen as a friend and confidant. A good mentor reassures the individual they will be there for support. However, if advice must be given, it is given sparingly, making sure to focus on the problems.

A mentor is responsible for building a relationship and perhaps with an individual who has experienced difficulty maintaining relationships, and difficulty trusting others. However, mentoring programs are proven to work and be effective in reducing the numbers of those who return to prison.

Mentoring programs for ex-offenders have been developed in several areas in an effort to assist those individuals re-entering society.

For more information about these programs and others, please contact:

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