

# Religion in Corrections: Yesterday and Today

.....And when the debt is paid.....



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

Matthew 25:40

## Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston Office of Prison Ministry

108 Third Street, Suite 24, Elkins WV 26241

Office Phone 304-636-7767 E-mail [ruethompson@hotmail.com](mailto:ruethompson@hotmail.com)

[www.dwc.org](http://www.dwc.org)

## **A Brief History of Religion in Corrections**

### **Where Did It All Begin**

The influence of religion in corrections is as old as jails and prisons themselves. Most likely, religion entered into the system by those imprisoned. Biblical texts include: Joseph, Micah, and Jeremiah, to mention a few from the Old Testament, and John the Baptist, Peter, James, John, and Paul from the New Testament. Of course we can not forget that Jesus was also in a jail or prison. He was investigated, arrested, charged with a crime, went before the court and judge, was convicted and sentenced, and the sentence was carried out to the fullest extent of execution.

### **What About The Middle Ages**

During the Middle Ages, criminals who would have been mutilated or killed, were often granted asylum and placed in “Church Prisons”. These Church Prisons were special rooms, usually called cells, built within monasteries or abbeys.

### **America During The Colonial Period Of The 1600 And Early 1700’s**

Most Colonial Americans lived under the laws and punishment that came with them from England. Punishment for crimes during this period was based on the philosophy of Puritanism, which equated crime with sin. Those who committed a crime were evil and acting directly against God, thus severe punishment was due. The early colonial jails were only designed for holding those awaiting punishment or trial. This was also for those who could not pay their debts.

The most common forms of punishment were fines, for those who could pay them, usually the elite by profession. However, for those who could not pay the fine, they would receive corporal punishment, such as the various forms of the stocks or whipping post. Some of these individuals could choose the form of punishment they would receive.

For those committing more serious offences, the punishment could be banishment, being sent to foreign lands, islands or wilderness territories. Then of course the ultimate punishment, that of Capital punishment, or death.

### **Quaker Influence On Corrections**

During the mid 1700's, the Quakers of Pennsylvania rejected the Puritan form of punishment and replaced it with incarceration, thus the American penitentiary emerged.

William Penn, a Quaker and the first Governor of Pennsylvania, was persecuted and imprisoned several times for his religion. Because of his experiences, he developed and implemented ideas about prison reform including:

- 1- Capital punishment only for those guilty of murder
- 2- Food and housing provided for the inmate by the government
- 3- Requiring the inmates to perform useful work

As a direct result of William Penn's ideas, the City Fathers of Philadelphia commissioned the construction of the Walnut Street Jail. Its design reflected the Quaker belief in man's ability to reform through reflection and remorse. Inmates of the Walnut Street Jail were required to attend Sunday services and encouraged to read religious materials. During confinement, prisoners were supposed to think about their offenses, thus become penitent or sorry for their sins. Repentance would lead to correcting their character flaws and becoming law abiding citizens. Thus they would be reformed.

Eventually, the conditions of the Walnut Street Jail became poor. As a result, the "Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisoners" was formed. This society comprised other religious denominations, including the Quakers and an Englishman by the name of John Howard. Howard was an international figure, known for prison reform. The society believed long term incarceration was more humane than corporal punishment. They also advocated for the following reforms:

- 1- clean prisons, adequate clothing, and proper health care
- 2- separation of inmates due to sex, age, and nature of offense

- 3- access to their religious chaplains
- 4- work to avoid the sin of idleness
- 5- and other efforts to degrade the inmates

With these reforms in place, Walnut Street Jail became America's first true prison, and a model for the rest of the Country.

Although corporal punishment was limited or replaced with incarceration, this did not prove to end the miseries of inmates, who were locked in their cells at all times, and required to perform hard labor. In these systems, inmates were subjected to harsh treatment. Critics claim the problems of solitary confinement led to its failure. Some inmates became psychologically depressed and others insane.

Many people in different religious communities were outraged over the harsh treatment and abuse of inmates. They wanted something healthier and more constructive. This led to a new system of corrections called "Reformatory". The reformatory idea was unique because they provided for the individuals needs. These needs included medical, social, and psychological attention. It was believed each inmate was unique and each individual's behavior was determined by a variety of sociological, biological, and economical "Forces". To negate these forces they implemented numerous programs to create a balanced individual. These included: Academics, Vocational, Religious, and Recreational. This was an effort to "Correct" the inmates and eliminate the roots of their crimes. Officials often stated it was their intention to persuade the inmates to act like "Christian Gentlemen". Participating in prison programs or good behavior could earn points for an inmate, and they could qualify for an early release if he reformed. However, most jails and prisons remained over crowded and punishment oriented.

### **Religion In Corrections At The Present Time**

The practice of religion as a correctional program is commonplace in most jails and prisons in the United States. Most all facilities have a religious program coordinator or a chaplain on their staff. For the most part, these individuals are paid, full time employees of the facility. However, many of the jail systems utilize a part time volunteer chaplain. In either case, they are to make certain that inmates' spiritual needs are filled through the assistance of volunteers representing their particular faith denomination.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons has reported at least 35% of inmates participate in some religious programs after admission to the prison system. This can be a new found faith for some individuals, and for others, they may be returning to their faith roots.

## **Rationales For Sentencing Those Convicted Of Committed Crimes**

**1-Incapacitation** means depriving offenders of the opportunity to commit crimes against society by detaining them in correctional facilities. By locking up or executing criminals, society can avert crimes that criminals would commit if free in society. Incapacitation is only a temporary means of protecting society because most of those confined will eventually be released.

**2-Retribution** is the oldest justification for punishment. It focuses on the person's past behavior and the offense committed, with no concern for future acts or rehabilitation. Those who commit crimes are held accountable for the results of their actions, and they should pay their debt to society. Advocates for retribution often quote the Bible, and more directly, the Old Testament, "an eye for an eye" or "a tooth for a tooth". Many people believe retribution is what justice demands.

**3-Deterrence** is based on the concept that punishment will have an effect on persons who are prone to criminal activity. There are two types of deterrence, specific and general. Specific supposedly will deter a person from committing a crime again, or being a repeat offender. General supposedly occurs when others see the consequences of the other person's criminal behavior. This consequence sets an example and deters an individual from committing similar crimes in the future.

**4-Rehabilitation** is a process of reforming an offender through some form of programs, such as vocation, education, and/or therapeutic treatment. Rehabilitation seeks to reduce crime by changing the offenders need or desire to commit crimes. The philosophy behind rehabilitation is the idea people have reasons for committing crimes. Those reasons can be identified and eventually changed.

Rationales for corrections have a clear historical connection with religion and religious values. Deterrence and retribution are directly

linked the strict punish ideas of the Puritans. Incapacitation and rehabilitation stem from the ideas of the Quakers.

### **How Many Are In West Virginia Jails And Prisons?**

It could be successfully argued that jails and prisons have become “***Big Business***” in the State of WV. General population of the State has remained relatively static, the average age perhaps increased to a higher number, and the crime rate has either remained the same or even declined a small percent. During this same period of time, beginning in the 1980’s, the prison population has more than doubled in the State of West Virginia.

Research indicates nearly 6,000 prisoners were in the custody of WV’s Division Of Corrections by July 1<sup>st</sup> 2007, nearly 3500 more than those of the early 80’s. WV’s DOC Officials predict 7000 plus inmates will be incarcerated by 2010 if not before. Talk has already begun to build another two hundred million dollar plus facility to ease the current over crowding of the current thirteen facilities owned by the State of WV. Thus the total prisons would be fourteen and two work release centers.

In addition to the current thirteen prisons, the ten Regional Jails located throughout the State will usually have 4500 or more individuals pass through their doors each year. This would represent over three thousand inmates housed in the facilities at any given time. The Regional Jail Authority reports each facility has anywhere for 50 to 100 more inmates than the facility been designed to hold. To add to these staggering numbers, approximately 950 juveniles enter the Juvenile Detention Centers with a median stay of nine months or more.

When we take into account the Federal Government has constructed five facilities in WV, each capable of housing approximately 1200 or more, the real possibility is more then twelve thousand individuals are currently being held in both State and Federal prisons in WV. The Federal Government has announced plans for yet another Federal facility, to be opened in McDowell County in 2009, and the State of WV has broken ground on another juvenile facility with discussions of the need for another adult facility, each costing over two hundred million dollars to build. The Regional Jail Authority are also looking at their options of limiting the overcrowding of the jail system.

### **When The Debt is Paid ... What Now?**

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.

### **Community Restorative Justice ...**

Without little doubt, poor decision making skills are what lead to an individual's offense and running afoul of the law. Depending on how serious the offense, some must go to prison, especially those who are dangerous, others, the non-violent, may restore their relationship, to the community and society at large, by participating in a local correctional facility commonly known as a "Day Report Center". As a rule, the offenders of these centers are lower level offenders without violence in their background, and the need to serve time in the prison systems is much too harsh a punishment for their offence. For the most part, their learning of life skills taught through the Day Report Centers better serves justice, the community, and certainly their families.

## **What About Those On Early Release ... Or Parole?**

Probation, or early release with supervision, may be something an inmate could earn with good behavior while incarcerated in a prison system. Usually, there will be a certain amount of time an individual is required to serve of the sentence they earned by their offense before they will be eligible for this early release. An example of this situation is: the sentence earned might be a two to ten year period of time incarcerated in prison. Therefore, the individual must spend, at the very least, the two years of that sentence before even being eligible to apply for parole. If the Parole Board reviews the individual's files, and recognizes a great difference in the individual and their attitude to improve their life, perhaps the individual will be granted parole with supervision. This individual may be required to report to a probation office, and or a "Day Report Center", and also must be working at gainful employment. There are always conditions that must be met for the individual to enjoy this limited freedom versus the incarceration.

One of the major problems an inmate can encounter when applying for parole is that of an acceptable home plan. The home plan does not only include employment issues, it also includes where the individual plans to live. Often, the individual may not have family willing to permit the person to live with them. On the other hand, those family members may have been the forgiving victims; however the Courts will not permit the parolee to have contact with those family members, especially due to the nature of some crimes.

Residential Housing is very limited for ex-offenders in West Virginia. Most all of those that exist require the individual applying for residence be a recovering addict of drug or alcohol abuse. If an individual is not recognized as being in recovery, usually this form of housing is not even an option. As a result, many individuals are granted early parole, only to remain in prison for the lack of a home plan being approved.

When an inmate has served the entire sentence received, often called discharged their time, that individual will be released at that moment regardless of plans or the lack thereof. This can mean the individual may be escorted to the main gate of the facility and put back outside the fence with no place to go or transportation to even reach the closest town or



community. As one can clearly imagine, with out support from someone, and the lack of employment, housing, money and transportation, the ex-offender has much to overcome.

### **Will They Make Good Choices And Stay Out This Time?**

National research tells us that one in four of those released will return to the prison system within three years. West Virginia experiences a much higher average of 75% of adults re-offend. For juveniles, the numbers are also even higher than National numbers, as the average is two out of three youthful offenders will return to crime and prison within three years.

These individuals will usually re-offend or be difficult to manage, then return to the system for the same reasons they first came to the criminal justice system. Whether adult or juvenile, the major contributing static factors are:

- prior criminal history, either juvenile or adult
- relationship with family of origin
- employment
- criminal association (gangs)
- substance abuse
- psychological
- anti-social

Many offenders experience a combination of several of those factors.

### **Is This a Hopeless Situation?**

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 workforce. Those five steps are as follows:

- Treatments: this is for all aspects of life, both physical and mental.
- Education: improve on the individual's education base. GED, etc.
- Housing: adequate and safe housing which include responsibilities
- Employment: gainful employment with possibilities of advancement

- 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.

### **What Does A Successful Mentoring Program Consist Of ?**

Mentors are a positive role model or guide, 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 be remembered a mentor's job is not to 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 it focuses on the problem.

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 prisons.

## **How Can the Average Person Become Involved With Prison Ministry?**

Several different avenues exist for those wanting to become involved in prison ministry. First and foremost, an individual can offer prayers for those incarcerated, their families, for those who minister both inside and outside the prisons and jails. Other individuals to include in prayer are; correctional officers and their families, all staff of jails and prisons, and their families, along with the administration of the WVDOC, and of course the victims of crime should not be over looked when offering prayer.

Assisting inmates with better decision making and improving their life skills actually begins while the inmate is still incarcerated. Reflecting on Sacred Scripture in Bible study groups and applying the lesson to our daily lives can start the process of change in one's life. Catholic volunteers conduct Catholic Services in most all adult facilities, and ecumenical services in others when no Catholics are present. Therefore, the Catholic inmate has the opportunity to live a full Sacramental and Spiritual life while incarcerated.

Ecumenical prison ministries exist through several different ministries: Kairos Prison Ministry, Prison Fellowship, Yoke Fellowship just to mention a few. These forms of ministry are not limited to the inmates only, but include the spouse on the outside. These ministries are usually on the format of weekend retreats three or four times of the year, and for larger groups than weekly Bible studies. A few of the prisons do however have follow up groups weekly for those who attended a retreat of Kairos and other similar ministries.

Mentoring programs have already been mentioned earlier in this booklet, however it is worth bringing to attention some of the different ways an individual could become involved with at least one of the numerous mentoring programs available, if they so desired.

WV Division of Corrections has begun a new mentoring program with the assistance of the faith community. The name of this program is "Third Base Coaching", which has enjoyed much success in Florida's prison system. This program matches inmates with mentors from the faith community at least six months before an inmate is scheduled to leave a facility. Mentoring will continue for one year after their release. Currently, this mentoring is for the inmates returning to the Greater Kanawha Valley. However, the hope is

for the success of this program and the expansion to include other major areas or regions of the State.

A mentoring program developing from Wheeling Jesuit University is also a pilot program with the hopes of expanding throughout the State. Currently the five Northern most counties are involved. The mentees are children ages 5 to 17 with at least one of their parents incarcerated. Research has shown these children to represent a group at very high risk, as much as 70%, of those entering the criminal justice system as offender. The same research has proven that intervention with mentors spending time with these children will reduce their risks dramatically.

Organizations such as Literacy Volunteers, city shelters and soup kitchens, to mention a few, often assist ex-offenders with a hand up. These groups are always in need of willing volunteers who can give an hour or two a week.

More information can be obtained by contacting:

Catholic Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston  
Office of Prison Ministry  
108 Third Street, Suite 24  
Elkins WN 26241  
304-636-7767 e-mail [ruethompson@hotmail.com](mailto:ruethompson@hotmail.com)  
Webpage: [www.dwc.org/prisonministry](http://www.dwc.org/prisonministry)