

Spiritual Friendship: Portrait of a Prison Ministry

BY DICK ALLISON

If those on the outside are unwilling to be on the receiving end as well as the giving end of the relationship with prisoners, they cannot offer spiritual friendship. Such openness is not easy, for it rejects the assumption that those in the free world are by definition better folks than those who are locked up.

As a volunteer correspondent, receiver of numerous collect calls, and visitor with fifteen men who are currently incarcerated, I sometimes think that I am obsessed with prison ministry. If so, it is for me a magnificent obsession. I am not an expert in prison ministry. Nor do I pretend to know how to advise others in their ministries to prisoners. My one-on-one ministry with fifteen men in eight prisons in Mississippi, one in Louisiana, and one in Georgia, is best characterized as spiritual friendship. I have come to see spiritual friendship as the single most important thing about any type of prison ministry. We may be able to do practical things which are very helpful to prisoners (like teaching classes and conducting worship services, and so on) without developing spiritual friendships, but can that be called a Christian ministry?

Friendship, of course, works both ways, with its benefits extending to both parties. If those on the outside of prisons are not willing to be on the receiving end as well as the giving end of the relationship, they really have nothing to offer that is authentic spiritual friendship. But that kind of openness is not easy. We must get rid of stereotypes. We must get rid of pride that assumes that those in the free world are by definition better folks than those who are locked up. That change of attitude is not something we can

fake. Virtually all the prisoners I have ever known have experienced treatment inside and outside the prison system designed to make them feel less than human. Thus they recognize immediately whether an offer of spiritual friendship is genuine.

There are numerous avenues through which spiritual friendships can be developed, and I will briefly comment on those I have personally experienced and observed. However, none of these avenues will lead to such friendships if there is not mutual respect. Everyone involved in a spiritual friendship has “sinned and come short of the glory of God.” It is equally true that everyone involved is a person of worth, created in the image of God and the object of God’s redeeming love in Jesus Christ. Self-righteousness vitiates the possibility of genuine spiritual friendship.

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP THROUGH VISITATION

Prisons do not make visitation easy, though it is less difficult in some of them than others. Understandably, security is tight everywhere and getting the necessary permissions may take a tremendous amount of time. Visitors must to be very committed just to go through all the stuff that is required. For instance, recently a colleague and I visited a friend on death row. We had to drive about eight hours round-trip. We had to leave all our valuables in my automobile. We were frisked three times. We had to take our shoes and belts off twice. I had to leave my car keys with an officer. Our friend, in turn, had to sit and wait for forty-five minutes in the visiting area while we were going through the long processes of getting in. When we met together, a glass partition separated us from any physical contact with him. We talked to one another through a phone. For two hours he was in chains that made holding the phone uncomfortable for him. The noise in the visitation room was overwhelming, but we did not complain because we could look each other in the eye, smile and laugh, cry and pray. We prayed for him and he prayed for us. We knew that we were not just acquaintances; we were partners in a spiritual friendship.

Most of my incarcerated friends are so far away that any kind of regular visitation is impossible. Fortunately, I have been able to visit everyone at some point. Six of them I first met when they were patients in the large regional hospital where I serve as a staff chaplain. There I had considerable freedom to visit regularly and get to know them. There were guards in the rooms where they were patients, but generally speaking those guards were supportive of visits by me and other chaplains. Visiting my friends in the prisons of Mississippi is complicated because I am only allowed to be on the regular visitation list of one MDOC inmate, and that happens to be the one who is on death row. In order to visit the others, I have to go through the prison chaplains’ offices and visit strictly as an ordained minister. Some chaplains are more open to that kind of arrangement than others. In a prison ninety miles from my home where I have three inmate friends, the chaplain

has allowed me on several occasions to visit all three of them on the same afternoon, one at a time, for which I am most grateful. However, those visits are limited to about one hour each, so we have to make the most of our time. My three friends have no other outside visitors as they are virtually cut off from their families. That is also true of several of the men in other prisons in the state.

Do those visits matter? Without a doubt they matter! I am convinced that even rare visits nourish spiritual friendship.

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP THROUGH PHONE CONVERSATIONS

Thank God for telephones! How I wish the prisoners could call free of charge, but that is not how it works. Collect calls from prisons are expensive, so for the most part I have to limit calls to one call a month from each inmate, and the men understand that limitation. But telephone conversations really are an aid to deepening spiritual friendship. We are able to pray together and for each other. Several of these men constantly ask me to pray about specific issues in their lives, but they also want to know what is going on with me and my family, and how they can be supportive in prayer. In all honesty, I share things with them that I do not share with lots of folks on the outside, because as I have already mentioned, spiritual friendship works both ways.

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP THROUGH CORRESPONDENCE

Probably my biggest single investment of time in this ministry is through correspondence. I write at least six or seven letters a week. It is extremely important that each letter be personal. I try very hard to address the “up-against” issues that each person has told me about, as well as sharing the celebrations in each of their lives. We talk about our hopes and fears, faith and doubts, victories and defeats. We are Christian friends and we write about things that matter in our lives.

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP THROUGH NEWSLETTERS

The University Baptist Church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, publishes a monthly prison newsletter. The eight of us on the Prison Ministry Support Team take turns writing brief articles, poems, prayers, and sometimes jokes. Just as importantly, the prisoners take turns writing for the newsletter. They share their testimonies, prayer requests, and so on. One man is an accomplished writer who wrote an intriguing short story a few months ago; other men have written poetry. While the majority of pieces that have been submitted are specifically Christian testimonies, we encourage the men to write about anything they want to share. Obviously, we retain the right to editorial control, but so far that has only amounted to grammatical and spelling corrections. The newsletters are distributed to all members of our church who attend Wednesday night services, so many members are becoming aware of a vital spiritual friendship that is growing between the congregation and the prisoners.

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP THROUGH CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Six of the fifteen men who participate in our prison ministry are members of University Baptist Church. Two of them were members here before they were incarcerated, one of them having grown up here. Four have been received into the membership since their imprisonment. I had the privilege of baptizing three of those men in prison horse troughs following their declarations of faith. The other one, who is in prison in Georgia, will be baptized as soon as it can be arranged. He is utterly serious about his commitment to Christ and to the Church. Knowing that I have baptized the others during their imprisonment, he says, "I want to become a member of the Horse Trough Fraternity of Baptized Believers."

There are two other men in the group who are not members of University Baptist Church, but who have had connections with the congregation through the years preceding their incarceration. They too have been blessed by the church's concern. There are different levels of spiritual friendship, but it is fair to say that being a part of a body of believers has a profound influence on those who ask for membership. One of the men that I baptized four years ago talked about it again in a letter just a few days ago. And all of them have expressed on numerous occasions what a joy it is to them to feel like they "belong to a real church." One says that it is the first time he ever belonged to anything except a "gang of skinheads."

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP THROUGH ADVOCACY

From time to time, we are asked to be a voice on behalf of prisoners' rights. Currently, there are two situations with which we are involved.

One of the men fell in the shower room recently and broke his hip. He was taken to the regional hospital in same city where he is incarcerated. Following the surgery and a couple of days of recuperation, he was returned to the prison with the promise that he would receive rehabilitation there. As of the day of this writing, he has been

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back at the prison for two months and received no such help. I have been making calls to personal injury attorneys in that area, but thus far have not found one who can or will help.

Another man is in a federal prison on a computer-based sex offense charge. He is serving a ten-year sentence, which is longer than some who have been directly involved in sex acts with underage children. The United

States Sentencing Commission, the group responsible for presenting information on sentencing standards and guidelines to Congress, is currently accepting letters asking for changes in this unjust policy. Several members of our congregation, along with others in the community, have written letters.

It remains to be seen what we can accomplish, but I am convinced that Christians speaking up on their behalf are acts of spiritual friendship that the prisoners recognize and appreciate.

CONCLUSION

I asked one of my incarcerated friends to offer his perspective on prison ministries. He shared a list of constructive but pointed criticisms. First, most prison ministers do not spend the time required to really listen to a man and get to know what that man's needs are. Second, he noted that in Jesus' ministry his procedure was different in each individual case. This should remind a prison minister that no two cases of conversion are exactly alike. Third, the "once a month" preacher rarely preaches the simple gospel and then leaves it to soak in; rather, it is followed by a forced request to say the salvation prayer. This is selfish beyond belief. Fourth, prison ministers should spend time equipping men on the inside to do the real work of evangelism. And, finally, it is important for the prison minister to care about the wide range of personal needs of inmates.

My friend did not use the term "spiritual friendship," but is he not in fact asking for true spiritual friends who care for and respect those to whom they minister?



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