

UM MEN

The magazine of United Methodist Men

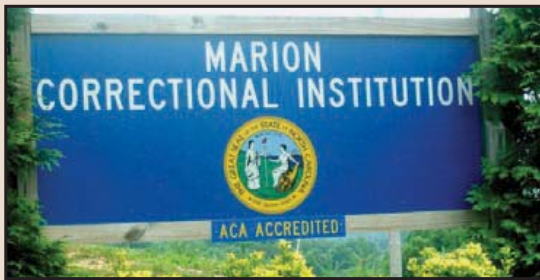


**My ministry
in a maximum
security prison**

My ministry in a maximum-security prison

By Neil Brown

MARION, N.C. —“I intended to kill him but he just wouldn’t die,” was the matter-of-fact answer I got from Allen, the gang banger to my immediate right. He was responding to my question about shooting a cop when he was 12 years old.



The names have been changed to protect the privacy of the guilty.

That eye-opening answer and others like it were common as maximum-security inmates revealed their past lives during a Kairos prison ministry event. The fourth semi-annual event unfolded at the Marion (N.C.) Correctional Institution. Based on the Walk to Emmaus model of a Thursday evening followed by 13 hour sessions on Friday and Saturday, it culminates in an eight-hour day on Sunday.

Like Emmaus, there are a series of talks, chapel visits, forgiveness and reconciliation opportunities, and poster making. Unlike Emmaus where the participants called pilgrims are usually Christian who desire a closer walk with Christ, the prison version accommodates 42 inmates called participants—out of respect for their personhood—who are generally unbelievers with some being Muslim, Wiccan, atheist and agnostic, not to mention many carrying a huge burden of guilt and unforgiveness

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toward witnesses and prosecutors who were instrumental in putting them behind bars.

Ministry with the worst of the worst

I initially became involved with this Kairos ministry after attending an Emmaus event where an Emmaus leader appealed for volunteers for an upcoming Kairos event.

It takes approximately one volunteer team member for each inmate. Team members undergo a minimum of 36 hours of training in order to understand the dynamics of being behind bars for an extended period of time as well as preparing us to understand and follow the strict rules and regulations of the state prison system. We were, after all, preparing to enter a maximum-security facility housing the worst-of-the-worst — those convicted of murder, rape, child molesting, and other unspeakable crimes. Training covers all details of the event, down to the ingredients of home-baked cookies since excess sugar, nuts and fruits can be fermented into “hooch” (prisoner-made wine).

In addition to the crimes perpetrated while in society, inmates here face a prison culture of illicit drugs, alcohol, homosexual acts, and violence. Inmates trust no one. Many haven’t had a visitor in decades and they feel like caged animals.

Eight hundred and six inmates are locked away in five-by-eight-foot steel and concrete cells with 36 cells to a cell block. Each cell contains two bunks, a toilet, sink, and a small writing table, all shiny stainless steel. Many inmates—those able to behave themselves—have jobs in the kitchen, as janitors, and grounds maintenance paying 40 cents to a dollar a day. Others are enrolled in GED or community college classes while inmates with violent tendencies or who are unwilling to follow the rules are locked away in “seg” (segregation) for 23 hours a day.



Preparation

Prior to the Kairos event, volunteers bake 4,000 dozen prayed-over cookies. A bag of a dozen cookies is handed out daily for the three-day event to every inmate and every employee. Funds are raised at participating churches. Church members also provide expressions of agape (God’s unconditional love) to the inmates including placemats decorated by Sunday school children, posters signed by members of a congregation, and hand-written letters to the participants. Care is taken to ensure that nothing going into the prison could be remade into a “shank” (a cutting or stabbing device) or contraband.

The team visiting the prison includes a table leader, assistant leader, and



a table clergy for each of the seven tables combined with 6 participants per table. Tables are named after male Bible characters and are called “families” to encourage the bonding of team members with inmates. Team members come from churches that are Baptist, United Methodist, Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian and a few non-denominational members.

An outside team is assembled, both male and female, who staff a local Baptist church that serves as headquarters. Here home-cooked meals are prepared, team meetings are held and cookies are processed for delivery to the prison two miles away. Runners deliver the meals and supplies to the prison.

Many inmates haven’t had a home-cooked meal in years and gorge on the hot food along with cookies and abundant snacks. Inmates are waited on hand and foot by “table servants,” who serve meals and snacks. All this is proof of a loving God’s unconditional love shown through the love and care of team members.

Around the table

Thursday evening starts the event with individual participants teamed up with a team member “sponsor.” They sit together munching cookies, getting to know one another. Team members and participants introduce themselves

with brief answers to questions about hometown and leisure interests. Inmates are nervous and wary, not knowing what to expect.

At 7:45 on Friday morning, table assignments are made. I am the table/family leader of the "Family of Luke" with Duane, a Presbyterian, as assistant and Anthony, a non-denominational pastor as table clergy. Between talks, we banter back and forth, getting to know one another. Some inmates matter-of-factly reveal their sordid past. Others—we're told later, may be sexual offenders.

Allen

To my right is Allen who joined a gang on the streets of Chicago at the tender age of four, shot a cop at age 12, and is serving time for murder of a rival gang member. He hints that he was involved in other killings but was never implicated. He confesses that he has only one childhood friend left alive; he and the friend survive because they are incarcerated.

Charles

Next to Allen sits Charles, a short white guy with a beard and shaved head. Charles grew up in a normal family, went to church every Sunday but got into the wrong crowd, dealing and using drugs. Charles is the intellectual at this table, friendly and talkative.

Kenneth

To my left is Kenneth, a white man in his 40s from a broken home, his alcoholic father rained violence down on the family while the mother often disappeared. Kenneth became a drug dealer at age 9 after running away from home. By age 12, his pockets bulging with cash, he makes the fatal mistake of trying the drugs he's been selling. At age 13, he discovers while under the influence of drugs, it is a



bigger high than the drugs to stick a gun in someone's face and rob him. Money is not the object, only the adrenaline-fueled ecstasy. Kenneth is on his third prison term.

Raul

Next to Kenneth sits Raul, a native Haitian, brought up in extreme poverty. Through sheer brainpower he was granted a full five-year scholarship to the University of Miami. Upon entering the university, he became envious of a fellow student who seemed to have everything, purchased with drug-dealing cash. Raul decided to pursue the American dream and became a drug dealer. On a drug run to North Carolina, he gets nabbed. Raul worries about his family in Haiti in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake. He's not heard from them and hasn't had a visitor in his 10-year stay behind bars. His family is too poor to travel to the U.S. He weeps uncontrollable at the table, knowing that we love and care enough to obey Matthew 25:36- "...I was in prison and you visited me."

Mark

Across the table is Mark, a handsome young man who blew his unfaithful wife away with a 12-gauge shotgun, then put the barrel to his stomach and pulled the trigger with his toe. The suicide attempt

failed and Mark tells me that he went off the colostomy bag a month ago after his shredded gut finally healed. Mark later reveals a Satan tattoo on his upper arm when he decides to give Jesus a try since his Wiccan tradition has done nothing for him.

Stanley

Next to Mark is Stanley, a young black man whom we suspect is a sex offender. Stanley says little about his history and we don't ask. The motto of Kairos is, "Listen, listen, love, love." We are cautioned never to inquire about an inmate's criminal history or the terms of his sentence. If the inmate volunteers the information, we listen.

Transformation

Transformation by the Holy Spirit begins.

On Thursday evening, we shake hands with strangers, by the end of the Friday, participants embrace us as they start to "get it." By Saturday evening, participants weep with joy, proclaim Christ as Lord, and love fills the air. Even veteran team members are speechless as the Holy Spirit works in overdrive. We are also overcome with emotion as hugs, tears, and "high fives" become common place. Participants have "the glow," an inmate term that describes a Kairos participant's unexplainable demeanor.

The transformation taking place doesn't go unnoticed by the Evil One. Every day we are in the prison, there is a "Code Four" (an act of violence) somewhere in the prison, more Code Fours in three days than in all of this year; six are taken to the hospital on Thursday.

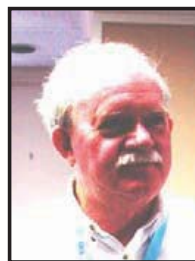
Throat slit by box cutter

Sunday morning begins with Terry, one of our inmate helpers, having his throat slit with a box cutter wielded by a jealous inmate while on his way from the cell block to the gym where our sessions are held. Fortunately, the jugular is missed; he is airlifted to a trauma center where he is stitched up. Terry survives.

The entire prison goes on lock down, the chaplain is sure that our event will be cancelled. We form a prayer circle begging God for a miracle; the miracle is delivered two minutes later when the administration allows our event to continue, a testimony to the value placed on Kairos.

Our event culminates on Sunday afternoon with the closing ceremony attended by our outside team and Kairos community friends where participants are encouraged to step to the microphone and tell of their experience. Tears flow as Jesus is praised, lives are transformed before our very eyes, there's not a dry eye in the place.

We serve an awesome God who forgives even the most heinous of acts and restores dignity and peace to the most hardened of criminals. We look forward to seeing our new brothers at an upcoming reunion visit, confident that God's mercy reigns. 



Neil Brown is a men's ministry specialist and coordinator of Understanding Men's Ministry.