

# Towards Mutuality in Mission: A Case Study

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## Abstract

*Success of mission is commonly measured by the transformation it causes among those addressed. The thesis and starting point of this paper is that the missionary movement has an equally significant effect on those reaching out in a missionary movement. The paper demonstrates this thesis by studying how the visiting ministry of those in prison affects the visitors who are transformed through the missionary encounter, and how this subsequently affects church and society at large. First, prison ministry touches visitors spiritually, as the encounter with inmates' pain helps them rediscover dimensions of their life that had been buried under the dominant rationality of everyday life. Second, it affects visitors socially, as they connect to an alien social reality and, through the encounter with those in prison, learn about the social dimensions of crime and punishment and about the social conflicts in which crime happened. Third, it affects visitors politically, as they are drawn into seeing how justice is exerted in our society and how it causes harm to those on the receiving end. The visitors' socio-political learning process thus leads them to an alternative vision of justice and of the politics of punishment.*

Mission is usually perceived as a movement of outreach from Christians to non-Christians, bringing them into contact with the message of the gospel, with the reconciling love of God, or with God's socially transforming power. Prison ministry is one example of such a missionary movement that shows, as a movement from those outside prison to those inside, particularly well how Christian mission transcends human separation. The Christian ministry to those in prison is shaped and influenced by a social image of the inmates and a social construction of a dualism between inside and outside. People like Michel Foucault have described how the institution of prison is a form of so-called microphysics of power and how through the dualism the walls of imprisonment signify a form of normality that is constructed. This paper turns the perspective upside down and shows how mission to those in prison has a transforming power among visitors themselves and through them affects church and society. The paper is written from the perspective of a Hong Kong prison chaplain. It considers the following questions:

- What does Christian prison ministry contribute to visitors' spiritual growth and to the church community at large?
- What impact does the presence of Christian prison visitors have on prison administration and penal affairs?
- How do prison visitors affect penal policies in our society?

## The Church Involved in Prison Ministry: Being Church Together

Inviting church members to join the ministry in prison happens not only for the sake of inmates but also – and equally so – for the visitors themselves. The visit is not a one-way (outside to inside) event: it reverberates, revives the visitors and, through them, the church as a whole. It builds up the church and provides an opportunity for Christians' relational,

spiritual and theological growth, transcending the simple one-to-one encounter and assuming a social dimension.

The involvement of Christians and church groups in prison ministry affects the whole body of Christ in several ways, two of which begin with the individual. First and very directly, *witnessing transformations* in prison, celebrating together with people in dramatic shifts in their lives, participating in powerful revivals, 'seeing God at work' – all these are greatly reviving experiences for visitors. This is what shapes many chaplains' or prison visitors' accounts of their encounters in prison: the joy of witnessing the power of God in a place of darkness. Second, many volunteers come from professions where they find little *opportunity for reciprocity*. They find it hard to shed the attributes that are important in their professional lives – strength, domination, success – when participating in normal church life. In the context of prison, however, many visitors find it easier to admit hidden aspects of their lives. They discover that those in prison, apparently so different, are at the same time yet so close. Visitors and inmates are not as far apart as public opinion and dominant definition paint them. What makes the prison visit an event that bears so much healing power for visitors is the obvious fellowship of brokenness. The loneliness that many churchgoers experience among all neatly dressed and well-balanced people is gone, and they realize that they are not alone with their own brokenness and wounds. A visitor gave the following account of how she experienced healing through prison visits:

What first brought me to visit prison, I cannot recall. All I remember was taking Matthew 25:34 quite literally. I wanted to be the sheep, and so I took steps to give a glass of water to the thirsty, clothe those who were naked, visit the sick, and the imprisoned. Only the Lord knew that the one in imprisonment was myself, and I realized that during the first sermon I heard about forgiveness (through the story of Zacchaeus). I walked out of the prison gate having a few faces in my mind – the faces of my father, my biological brothers, and a few more people. My father was by no means 'bad.' He worked like most fathers did. He gave us food. He never had an affair. He never spanked us. But he simply was not present. We lived in the same house, but like strangers. I seemed transparent to him; all of us did. I always tried very hard to erase the resentment I felt against him, and yet I failed. Now I realize how my struggles with food have so much to do with that.

Since my first visit, the question of forgiveness has not quite left me. And if I had to come up with one thing I am most thankful for since visiting prison, it would be the forgiveness God has given me – it is this that allows me to be free from resentment I have held for years. He has taught me to forgive people who have hurt me deeply, and to forgive myself. The moment I made a decision to forgive, the manipulative force of food just vanished.

When walking into the prison chapel for the first time, I had no idea that I was so broken, withholding so many things. My years of experience with males, guys at home and guys I wilfully squandered my youth with, made me fear them more than anything else. Strangely there I was, in a male prison. Perhaps that's the irony. In that group of male prisoners, I discovered gentleness I am not familiar with, acceptance, joy, humility, and simply love. Perhaps the very fact that they are all 'locked' up gave me more assurance: 'Don't be afraid, they won't hurt you.' So

prison has been a place of healing, a place of love, a place of search and a place of encountering God.

In prison, I find no pressure to be anyone but myself. Why? Perhaps the love, the brokenness, the redemption, the resurrected life and the humanity of the fellowship are the very elements that create a place to feel safe. With my middle-class professional church friends heading a life of marital and monetary prosperity, and with my other friends rolling in the mud of a vicious cycle of sin-confession-sin-confession, I find the little chapel in prison the place where I don't have to pretend to be strong *or* weak. Together, we love and learn to be loved. Together, we let God's healing love and forgiveness fall. Together, from the little love we have, we see hope, and with little hope, faith becomes possible.

This is an account of an individual. But prison ministry has implications that go beyond the individual visitor and shape the church at large. First, it *makes the church more inclusive*, breaking the narrow bonds of social adjustment and including people at the fringes of society. Many churches are aware of how much they have become a social club for the well-adjusted and relatively successful middle-class, but they don't know how to transcend those social boundaries. Becoming a church *with* those in prison makes the church more whole and more inclusive. A church that partners with prison inmates will be enriched and find itself more fully reflecting the diversity of God's children.

Second, prison ministry *changes the image of church*, projecting less the image of a victorious communion of the saintly, and more that of a fellowship of sinners standing under the cross. Understanding the church as the former is not wrong, but may create problems. Many ordinary people do not feel qualified enough to be part of such a fellowship; they think church is only for those who *are already* sufficiently transformed, not for those still bound in sin and brokenness. In contrast, understanding the church in prison as fellowship of sinners turns it into a *low-threshold church* that welcomes people at different points of their spiritual journeys who communicate their wounds and their needs for healing quite visibly.

Finally, a church that includes those in prison will experience an *atmospheric change*. The visitor quoted above felt safe enough to admit her own need for healing only when she entered a place of broken dreams and broken hopes. Where the church participates in the suffering and hopelessness of inmates, there it is about more than the other people's suffering – it turns into a joint experience. Others' and one's own suffering are no more hidden and suppressed but more easily admitted and jointly addressed. We are a fellowship that groans with the whole creation (Romans 8:22f) and that partakes of the pain of those who wait in hope for their wounds to be healed.

## Public Involvement in Penal Matters: Uncovering Inmates' Invisibility

Prisons are social institutions that evoke plenty of images. Ever since the public spectacle of corporal punishment gave way to imprisonment,<sup>1</sup> punishment has been largely removed from public view and hidden behind thick walls. While inmates' privacy was safeguarded, prisons turned into objects of imagination and, naturally, public anxiety grew around what was unseen. 'Prison' became a metaphor with a broad range of meanings, attracting images of moral evil, social marginality, educational failure, and plenty of other negative connotations.<sup>2</sup> People are at once repelled and fascinated by the reality of a counter-culture where other rules are thought to apply. Prison visitors frequently experience how eager people are to hear stories from behind these walls of exclusion and to learn what kind of dreadful figures are confined there. The reality of prison has turned into something invisible that many traditional cultures associate with negative spiritual energies or, in superstitious faiths, believe to be a source of bad luck.

A young participant in an evangelistic meeting recounted how he was worried about being late for prison ministry because of not waking up on time and not being supported by his mother, as she strongly discouraged him to join. Even though knowing that he was part of a church group she was sure that a visit to prison would bring him bad luck.

The invisibility of what happens in prison is in many cultures – and possibly most strongly in Asian cultures, with their strong sense of 'face' – exacerbated by a psychological effect of imprisonment that surrounds it with shame. The condemnation of the evildoer extends to the family, who are equally shunned. The invisibility cloak<sup>3</sup> that surrounds prisoners is achieved by various means: the remoteness of most prisons; security fences that create or support a negative image of those inside and present them as wild animals who need to be locked up for the protection of society; thick walls projecting an image of danger; difficult entry procedures that underline the separation of inside and outside. Establishing contact with those in prison is, as such, a basic step that contradicts the public strategies of shunning them. It *uncovers their invisibility* and breaks through the isolating walls that buried them under imaginary negative metaphors. Or, more simply, it makes prisoners real, demythologizes them and makes it possible to see them for what they are.

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<sup>1</sup> The best description of this shift can be found in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). It has become a classic in the history of justice and punishment and still offers highly rewarding reading about the shift from punishment focused on the offender's body to a prison-based punishment system. A good summary and discussion of Foucault's thesis can be found in David Garland: *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), 131-175. From a Christian perspective, Lee Griffith's *The Fall of the Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans, 1993), provides many insights about churches' participation in prison and justice. His history offers interesting information about the dissident and prophetic tradition of the church.

<sup>2</sup> See Randall McGowen, "The Well-Ordered Prison: England, 1780-1865", in Norval Morris and David J. Rothman, eds., *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995), 98.

<sup>3</sup> See the presentation given by Neal Youngquist: Youth and the Criminal Justice System. Context and Practices within Asia (a paper presented at the VIVA Asia Cutting Edge Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, on 19-23 November 2007), 4ff.

This uncovering process has several dimensions that turn the prison ministry into a social ministry. First, for many visitors, the encounter with the reality of prison is an eye-opener. The encounter with real people – and the discovery that they are not monsters but merely other human beings who happened to respond to individual, familial, or social problems with wrong decisions or destructive impulses – makes visitors recognize how not only people but, together with them, their social problems have been hidden behind thick walls. The growing sensibility for the inmates’ lives and social reality of inmates naturally broadens visitors’ perspectives and sharpens their awareness for the social context of crime and punishment. They begin to see the crime-producing factors in our society: the dominant culture of getting rich quickly and of playful material obsessions – be it in casinos or stock markets – that inevitably turn serious; a sexist culture that presents women as readily available and subordinate to male authority; unemployment and an economy that allows hard-working people to remain poor; and, as in the case of Hong Kong, the extreme scarcity of living space that easily leads to family violence. Listening to the stories of inmates helps visitors understand that crime does not happen in a vacuum, as the choice of a lone individual who considers how to satisfy greed or other evil impulses. Visitors instead recognize crime as one element in a social conflict where individual decisions and social factors intersect. The visit leads to a deeper understanding of this social conflict and raises visitors’ awareness for the healing needs not only of individuals, but also of society as a whole.

Second, visitors learn to balance the tension between individual and communal responsibility. A crime is always a personal act: not everyone in hardship turns to crime. By treating offenders as responsible moral agents, we uphold a positive image of humans and assume that each individual is able to make moral choices. At the same time, standing in the biblical tradition that emphasizes communal responsibility as part of Israel’s covenantal relationship with God,<sup>4</sup> we regard the individual as part of a social network that has failed, and we seek to redress those shortcomings.<sup>5</sup> Recent theology, influenced mainly by theologies of liberation, recognizes how the Christian tradition has overemphasized the individual dimension of sin. Christian participation in prison and justice, in turn, expresses awareness for the corporate dimension of sin. Visitors who reached a deeper understanding of the inmates, and of what caused them to be what they are, will perceive them not only as sinners, but also as those *sinned against*.<sup>6</sup> To balance individual and communal responsibility lays the ground for a social response to crime

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher D. Marshall: *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 120-129, especially p. 124. Marshall discusses the retributive theories and shows how the obvious retributive elements are to be understood as part of Israel’s covenantal relationship. Punishment thus happened with the goal of restoring the community. See also J. Arthur Hoyles: *Punishment in the Bible* (London: Epworth Press, 1986), 99ff.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Haney, *Reforming Punishment: Psychological Limits to the Pains of Imprisonment* (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 133ff, discusses childhood events and developmental contexts, or what he calls social historical factors, increasing the likelihood of adult criminal behaviour.

<sup>6</sup> I became aware of the expression of the ‘sinned against’ through Raymond Fung who uses it in his account of an evangelism to the workers, see Raymond W.M. Fung, *The Gospel is not for Sale: The Story of Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee* (Hong Kong: HKCIC, 2005), 113-121. The term has also been used by others and in penal discussion, see, e.g., Karl Menninger, *The Crime of Punishment* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), 19. Of course, the expression goes ultimately back to the Lord’s Prayer.

that insists on morality but transcends the narrow, individualized scapegoating of people who have made wrong choices.

Third, Christian visitors break through the isolation not only of inmates, but equally of prison staff. Many unhealthy and destructive dynamics stem from the joint isolation of inmates and frontline staff, who both establish a corporate identity in contrast to the other. A classic psychological test, the Stanford Prison Experiment of 1971, showed how good people can turn bad when placed in an environment designed to elicit mistreatment and how the prison environment creates specific and oppressive behaviour patterns.<sup>7</sup> Visitors break through this harmful dualism – a collective *folie à deux* – and normalize the prison reality. They help both inmates and the administration *dissolve the black-and-white construction of their reality*.

Fourth, the presence of people from outside – not only in the visiting room, but also in the chapel, the core of many prison buildings – is a natural form of *community involvement in a sensitive area of society*. Visitors are able to see what the wider society does not. They acquire basic knowledge of an otherwise invisible area of society. This applies even more to the chaplain, who is not part of the prison administration and who can walk through all prison wards. This special insight – some may call it a supervisory function – does not need to become explicit and should remain low-key. Prison visitors hardly have the means to directly address problems of the prison system, but their mere presence has a reconciling effect. A total institution that is left on its own and without community involvement tends to foster abuse. Too often, prisons are seen as sovereign territory of those in charge where the administration even controls the official supervisory channels. Volunteer participation in prison ministry counters such temptations and moves the closed area of a total institution into the public realm, where it belongs. It reminds administrators that prisons are part of the social and communal realm.

Finally, the prison experience equips visitors to become an important resource for community involvement in rehabilitation and care for ex-offenders. In addition, prison visitors also become low-key, lay experts in matters of prison and criminal justice. They prepare the ground for a more community-based punishment, to which we now turn.

### **Prison Ministry and Penal Reform: Seeing Justice from the Inside of Prison**

The ministry of presence and of communion with the inmates, the compassion and empathic listening, all lead to a *growing ability to see the world from the perspective of those behind bars*, the recipients of punishment.<sup>8</sup> Visitors will discover that justice is obviously a central issue

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<sup>7</sup> See C. Haney, C. Banks, and P. Zimbardo, "Interpersonal Dynamics in a Simulated Prison", *International Journal of Criminology and Penology* 69, no. 1 (1973); Craig Haney and Philip Zimbardo, "The Socialization Into Criminality: On Becoming a Prisoner and a Guard", in *Law, Justice, and the Individual in Society: Psychological and Legal Issues*, eds. June Tapp and Felice Levine (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1977). The Stanford Prison Experiment has gained new relevance in the wake of the abuses at Abu Ghraib.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Pattison, *Pastoral Care and Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 235, comes, based on experiences in the UK, to the same conclusion for a socio-politically aware pastoral care in the context of the mental health sector.

in the life of inmates, and they will recognize the need to face issues of justice in the larger context of social justice.<sup>9</sup> With the inmates, they experience how prison-based punishment, in its attempt to repair the harm caused by crime, fails to repair it and instead causes new and more harm.<sup>10</sup> It leaves many inmates with anger, self-centredness, and distorted personalities, which easily lead them to renewed crime, and it destroys the social network on which they depended for a life without crime. Removing people from their community – keeping them in special places of punishment – hinders their later reintroduction into society, not for the inability of the ex-convicts but for the negative attitude of society towards them. According to Nacro, a British NGO that supports the rehabilitation of prisoners, 60 percent of ex-offenders in the UK find their work applications rejected specifically because they have been in prison.<sup>11</sup> It also harms the families of those in prison although they are innocent of the crimes committed: children who lose father or mother, spouses who are left as single parent, or parents who lose the support of a son or daughter. Prisons are a huge expense of public funds with little positive return, and finally, they fail to repair the harm done to the victims of crime.

This is where *restorative justice* sets in. As doubts grow about current policies of punishment, penologists and penal practitioners have started to focus on alternative approaches to crime and punishment. Restorative justice has become one of the key answers to this search and a central concern of NGOs like Prison Fellowship International. A growing number of penal practitioners and academics, frustrated about the dead ends in the present justice system, are devising ways to reform the present penal system. Among them are: judges who have no choice but to impose harsh sentences even though they may be expensive and counterproductive; lawmakers who, during their annual budget debates, are confronted with rising costs of the penal apparatus (even as crime rates are falling<sup>12</sup>), and prison administrators who face the high number of re-offenders returning to their supervision. The 2001 retirement speech of the British Chief Inspector of Prisons, Sir David Ramsbotham, gives us a glimpse of how deep the awareness of the system's failure is among those running prisons, even if this has not yet materialized in thorough reforms:

- If prison worked, there would be work or education for every prisoner.
- If prison worked, we would be shutting prisons, not opening more.
- If prison worked, judges would not be seeing in the dock the same people over and over again.
- If prison worked, we would not be imprisoning more people than any other European country except Turkey.
- If prison worked, fewer mothers would be in prison and fewer children would be in care.

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<sup>9</sup> See also Michael Welch: *Ironies of Imprisonment* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2005), 23.

<sup>10</sup> See the more extensive description in Jim Consedine, *Restorative Justice: Healing the Effects of Crime* (Lyttleton, New Zealand: Ploughshares Publications, 1995), chapter I, 'Retribution: a Dead-end Street'.

<sup>11</sup> See Beverley Thompson and Paul Cavadino, *The Role of Non-Governmental Agencies and the Resettlement of Prisoners* (Nacro, November 2000), <http://www.isrcl.org/Papers/Thompson%20Cavadino.pdf>, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Todd R. Clear, a professor in criminal justice, in a foreword to Consedine (1995), ix, clearly states that since 1975, there has been almost the same number of years of declining crime rates as years of increasing crime rates in the U.S. However, prison populations have gone up every year.

- If prison worked, we would be saving billions of pounds with fewer prisons, fewer care homes and fewer court cases.<sup>13</sup>

Restorative justice has several *key characteristics*. First, it places *victims* at the centre of justice. Victims are of course those who have been harmed by a crime, yet in the current retributive system, they receive no compensation and experience no healing. Restorative justice takes the concerns of the victims seriously. It is a common but wrong assumption of retributive justice that victims are helped most by toughness against offenders. To be sure, a tough punishment can give a certain satisfaction to a victim. However, what victims need more is transparency in the legal process, channels for their voices to be heard, assistance in healing the wounds of crime, and, where applicable, compensation. Restorative justice aims at healing the harm done to victims while at the same time restraining them from unlimited personal revenge.

Second, it is *community-based* instead of state-based. Most traditional societies regard crime as a violation of communal relationships requiring restoration.<sup>14</sup> An understanding of crime as a violation of an abstract code of law and of the state's authority is a later development, happening in medieval Europe.<sup>15</sup> Restorative justice recovers this communal dimension by including all affected parties: victim, offender, families, the community, police and judicial representatives. Government and local communities work together to make sure that the interests of all involved are dealt with appropriately.

Third, it *involves the offender by placing responsibility* for an offence in his or her hands. In a traditional judicial process the offender faces judge, jury, and witness as passive recipient of punishment. In a community-based judicial setting the offender faces the pain of victims and families more directly. This can prompt offenders to recognise the harm done and prepare them to become actively involved in finding ways to repair it.

Fourth, and particularly important for us, restorative justice is *biblical*. This is the overwhelming consensus of both biblical and restorative-justice scholars.<sup>16</sup> The biblical justice tradition seeks restoration of just relationships, a *shalom* justice, rather than simple punishment. It aims at reconciliation between victim and offender and regards sanctions as simply one (rather than the most important) part in the process of healing the wounds of crime.

Restorative justice has *two important consequences*. First, punishment becomes *less prison-based*. The widespread dependence on prison-based punishment is like a doctor

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<sup>13</sup> David Ramsbotham, "Prisongate: The Shocking State of Britain's Prisons and the Need for Visionary Change," *The Free Press*, 2003, quoted in The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *A Place of Redemption: A Christian Approach to Punishment and Prison* (London: Burns & Oates, 2004), 1. The words actually came from the Chief Inspector's wife who had watched her husband struggle with the lamentable state of Britain's prisons.

<sup>14</sup> Consedine shows this with reference to the Maori tradition of Aotearoa (New Zealand), see Consedine (1995), 161; Daniel W. Van Ness, *Crime and Its Victims* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 64f and chapter 10, shows it with reference to Ancient Law and the tradition of the Old Testament.

<sup>15</sup> Van Ness (1986), 66f.

<sup>16</sup> See Hoyles (1986), 28ff; Marshall (2001), 45-59; Consedine (1995), 147-156; Van Ness (1986), 103-139.

prescribing the same medication for every kind of bodily pain. Restorative justice does not reject prison-based punishment, but reduces its dominance in the justice system and reserves it for offenders who are unwilling to participate in or fail to positively respond to restorative justice forms, as well as for recidivists and for the minority who, due to their violence, pose a danger to the community. It thus reacts against the trend of increasing imprisonment that is particularly acute in the U.S., where by the beginning of 2008 the incarceration number for the first time crossed the critical threshold of one in 100 adult U.S. Americans.<sup>17</sup> However, a trend towards higher rates of incarceration and more prison construction can equally be observed in Asia.

Second, it aims at *normalizing the prison context* and advocates reforms that reduce the harm emerging from imprisonment.<sup>18</sup> It is in favour of making prison environments as much like the free world as possible and removing unnecessary hardships. Restorative justice can achieve this goal by introducing elements of therapeutic communities into the correctional context.

The ministry of visitation, the real encounter with those in prison, supports the penal and judicial movement towards restorative justice. Christians who have experienced the transforming and reconciling power of forgiveness will carry this experience from the realm of the individual into the corporate realm and call for a justice that moves beyond retributive punishment to one that fosters reconciliation. They will naturally apply faith-based principles in their quest for a judicial and penal system that allows true healing and change. They will join attempts to move away from mere punishment and toward the restoration of broken relationships.

## **Conclusion**

Missionary outreach and visiting ministry to those in prison goes beyond individual encounters and turns into a social and political ministry. Visitors go through a *socio-political learning* process that leads them to a growing understanding of the social role of prison and criminal justice and to an empathy towards what it means to be at the receiving end of penal policies. They discover the prison as an institution at a social intersection, the values of a society set in stones, in law codes and in penal practices – or, as Fyodor Dostoyevsky put it: “The degree of civilisation in a society is revealed by entering its prisons.” By entering prison neither in captivity nor as part of the paid staff, visitors learn about strategies and policies of punishment, about structures of social control and about the values defined by the politically, socially, economically, or culturally dominant elements in a society. Through this process visitors learn about how our society works, how it punishes, how it excludes and includes, how it distinguishes about right and wrong – and it is as basic to Christian education as to know the Bible. Visiting those in prison is, for those who are willing to see, a simple education in the values and the functioning of our society and, as such, an integral part of Christian learning.

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<sup>17</sup> See the report published by the Pew Center on the States, *One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008*, <http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/One%20in%20100.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Haney (2006), 308ff.

Experiencing the perspective of recipients of punishment equips Christian citizens to critically face politicians who call for tougher punishment or to wisely inform people ignorant about the length, the reality, and the pain of imprisonment. They will point to contradictions in penal practices and will emphasize that penal practices – the questions of what is a crime (and what is not), how crime is punished, and how people are treated during punishment – are not God-given, but are changing through history and mirror the dominant values of a society at any given time.

Building bridges between inside and outside of prison equips visitors to understand that prisons do not survive because they were effective, but because they have successfully linked contradictory social roles and justifications for punishment – deterrence, incapacitation, retribution, and rehabilitation – and because the socially established dichotomy of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the law (and inside and outside prison) remains an instrument of social control. The visiting ministry rejects this logic and negates, through its very action, the great divide.

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