

Changing Lives: A Look at Prison Ministries

New documentary focuses on Louisiana's Angola State Penitentiary

Statistics show that the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Approximately 2.1 million men and women are behind bars. Furthermore, the number of women in prison has tripled, making them the fastest growing segment of the prison population. This translates into an estimated 1.5 million children living without a parent or parents in the home.

Pastoral care in these contexts is the work of prison chaplains across the Episcopal Church. These ministries provide mentors, recreational programs, and spiritual guidance for both the incarcerated and those left to live life without them.

The Episcopal Church has seen the importance of prison ministry for many years. In 1994, the General Convention declared support for prison ministry as a priority.

Guiding the way in these ministries is the Rev. Jacqueline A. Means, criminal justice officer in the Episcopal Church's Office of Peace and Justice Ministries. It was Means who suggested producing the documentary "Changing Lives: Behind the Walls at Angola" (to order DVD, visit www.episcopalbookstore.org, 800.903.5544).

This feature-length documentary follows Deacon Charles DeGravelles, an Episcopal chaplain, as he ministers to the men inside the Louisiana State Penitentiary, located in Angola, Louisiana. Known simply as "Angola," the penitentiary was once considered the bloodiest in America (more information is online at http://www.corrections.state.la.us/lsp/mission_statement.htm).

With an inmate population of 5,108, some 86 percent are violent offenders and 52 percent are serving life sentences. There are currently 84 male inmates and one woman inmate (at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women) on Louisiana's Death Row.



Chaplains gather at Angola State Penitentiary.



Smiles at summer camp.

Means has also pioneered an innovative summer camp experience for children whose parents are in prison, and developed a clown ministry for women prisoners which encourages creativity, strengthens self-esteem, and allows the women to use their talents to enrich their family life outside of prison.

She founded Craine House for Women, a facility which began as a half-way house for women transitioning from prison, and continues as a facility where women serving prison time can keep their pre-school children with them.

Knowing that education and action are the keys, Means has programmed and implemented several national prison ministry conferences sponsored by the Office of the Bishop Suffragan for Chaplaincies. She cites mentoring,

tutoring, visiting the prisons and writing letters as ways of being involved along with programs like Angel Tree, Kairos, and more.

"The Episcopal Church's participation in Angel Tree is a beginning stage of exposure to the criminal justice system and the repercussions and the fallout from incarceration," said Means. "It is a chance for us to reach out to the children of those incarcerated and let them know that they are not forgotten though they too are living in a prison."

Kairos' mission is to bring Christ's love and forgiveness to all incarcerated individuals, their families and those who work with them, and to assist in the transition of becoming a productive citizen. It involves a three-day course on Christianity. It sprang from the Cursillo movement and is supported by volunteers from Cursillo and those other movements that consider Cursillo as their root.

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