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Mennonites in Pennsylvania Prison Ministry and Reform

Kristin Lombardi

Messiah College
Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore Mennonite involvement in prison ministry and reform in Pennsylvania. Historically, Mennonites have emphasized church-state separation, creating their own organizations for social change rather than becoming involved in existing government institutions. This is true with hospitals, schools, and ministries around the globe. But very little research exists on Mennonite involvement in the United States prison system. Based on the other aforementioned areas, it seems logical to assume Mennonites are not active in politically reforming correctional facilities; but they would minister to prisoners and their families, seeking whole and healthy communities. Is that assumption true? To the extent it is false, why is the reality different than expected?

Assessing Mennonite involvement in prison ministry and reform requires first understanding the federal and state prison systems. The criminal justice picture includes prison officials, politicians, advocacy organizations, and ministers. United States prison systems are complicated and ineffective in many ways, but in some cases they are being changed for the better. Meanwhile, ministry to prisoners and their families continue growing and striving to meet people’s needs while sharing the Gospel with them, regardless of reforms or lack thereof. This paper seeks to address the most pressing issues related to prison ministry and reform, and then use that knowledge in analyzing Mennonite involvement.

United States Prisons

The Pew Center on the States released a study, revised in April 2010, reporting a decline in United States prison population in 2009. This was the first decrease since 1972. While twenty-four states and the federal system still increased their populations (Figure 1 shows the percent change in state prison populations), the report brings talk of reform. Experts warn this is only the
first year of decline and hesitate against premature celebration. Yet, the numbers have been decreasing since 2006, with several states instituting significant reform measures yielding noteworthy results. (Prison Count 2010, p.1) Whether or not the trend continues, the United States rests comfortably atop the world’s list of prisoners, both in percentage and population (King’s College Prison Brief for United States of America, 2010). As of March 2010, the United States has over 2.3 million prisoners, or 753 people per 100,000. The second-highest nations in those two categories are China, with just over 1.5 million prisoners; and St. Kitts and Nevis, with 660 people per 100,000. (King’s College Prison Brief for United States of America, 2010).

Figure 1
How did we get here? Since the 1970s, a “tough on crime” mindset has dominated the American perspective on crime – at least among politicians. The 1960s were rife with war protests, rebellion, drugs, and new ways of seeing the world. Furthermore, a host of Supreme Court decisions were criticized as coddling criminals. Decisions in 1962 and 1963 required the government to provide public defenders for anyone who could not afford a lawyer. In *Miranda v. Arizona* (1966, 384 US 436), Justice Warren ruled that prior to interrogation, police must inform suspects of their basic constitutional rights. The Court also confirmed the Fourth Amendment requirement that police obtain search warrants before entering citizens’ homes, or the evidence would be inadmissible. All of these decisions made law enforcement’s job more difficult, and increased the chances of criminals being released on technicalities. Many Americans were not satisfied with this turn of events.

Fully aware of the growing discomfort, Richard Nixon’s Presidential campaign included a hugely popular “tough on crime” slogan. Shortly he took office in 1969, he initiated the “war on drugs.” According to political science professor and author Elaine Sharp (1992, p. 540), “The federal antidrug budget more than doubled between 1970 and 1971, and roughly doubled again between 1971 and 1972 (Goldberg, 1980, p. 57).” Nixon was not alone; New York’s Rockefeller Drug Laws are the perfect example of states following suit. Passed in 1973, Governor Rockefeller’s proposal imposed minimum sentencing regulations on drug dealers and users. These laws were enhanced by additional regulations over the next several decades, and by 1999 New York put over 8,500 people behind bars for drug offenses – up from only 470 in 1970. (Greene & Mauer, 2010)

Prison population increases continued in the 1980s, propelled by the crack cocaine “epidemic.” Crack cocaine is a cheaper version of powder cocaine, so its invention lead to
“exponential growth on the drug market” (The Sentencing Project, 2009, p.1). Congress responded with the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which introduced “mandatory penalties for crack cocaine offenses [that] were the harshest ever adopted for low level drug offenses and established drastically different penalty structures for crack and powder cocaine” (The Sentencing Project, 2009, p.1). Crack cocaine laws were one of the major factors in state and federal population increases of over 200 percent by 1996 (Blumstein & Beck, 1996).

Increased sentence lengths, high recidivism rates, and minimum sentencing laws are three of the biggest reasons for the prison population increase since the 1970s. Consequently, the federal prison system and the state systems are now struggling to house all their inmates, and thousands of nonviolent offenders are spending months and years among violent criminals. Corrections costs cut into state budgets, and overcrowding results in overwhelmed prison and parole staff who cannot physically meet the needs of every inmate or parolee under their care. Activists, lobbyists, religious Americans, secular citizens, community leaders, and families see the negative impact our struggling system has on society at almost every level. Many voices are calling for significant reform at the national and state level.

**Pennsylvania**

Pennsylvania, unfortunately, is no exception to the need for drastic overhaul. Figure 1 shows a 4.3% population increase in 2009, which meant 2,122 more prisoners – the greatest numerical increase of any state (Pew Center on the States, p. 2). As of February 2010, only four of the state’s twenty-seven adult institutions were not over capacity, and only one was less than 93% filled (PA Dept. of Corrections, 2010). Overall, the state is 115.9% over capacity – 7,001 more inmates than Pennsylvania’s institutions are designed to hold (Dept. of Corrections, my
This excess costs Pennsylvanians over $1.84 billion per year, and involves 1 in 28 adults in the state (Pew Center on the States, PA).

**Reform**

When confronting the problems within the prison system, one can easily acknowledge the need for reform. Unfortunately, the prison system is complex, and the stakeholders are both diverse and passionate about their sometimes opposing perspectives. Creating and implementing change is a taxing uphill battle with no easy answers. Yet some states, organizations, and individual prisons face the obstacles head-on, with inspiring success. Multiple new pieces of legislation, warden-led changes, and increased public awareness and activism all contribute to reform with positive results. They are further examined here.

**Legislative Changes**

Several state legislators proved the government’s potential for effectiveness over the past decade. In a report for The Sentencing Project, Judith Greene and Marc Mauer (2010) reviewed four states whose willingness to address these difficult issues has significantly decreased their prison populations – New York, New Jersey, Michigan, and Kansas. Greene and Mauer identify five key areas in which the states adjusted their policies: sentencing reform, prison alternatives, reducing time, adjusting parole release rates, and reducing parole revocations. Each of the five initiatives is worth exploring in greater detail.

Sentencing reform means current corrections laws are repealed, amended, or replaced entirely. This can happen at the federal or state level through new legislation. A legislator or group of legislators introduce the new bill, which must pass Congress or the state legislature to become law. Sentencing reform arises from studies, reports, and committees which analyze problems in corrections and propose smarter, more effective, more efficient alternatives or
improvements. Proposed reforms would repeal minimum sentencing laws, which mandate that for certain crimes, offenders must be imprisoned for at least $x$ amount of time. Minimum Proponents of mandatory minimum sentencing argue that they guarantee consistent punishment. However, the past thirty years have shown mandatory minimums also remove judges’ flexibility in considering an offender’s context when making a ruling.

Starting in 1999, New York has reversed its former negative trend – in ten years, the state’s prison population dropped 20% (Greene & Mauer, 2010). Greene and Mauer (2010) attribute the change partially to reducing mandatory and minimum sentencing laws, such as the Rockefeller Drug Laws. While the Rockefeller Drug laws have not been repealed, they were amended significantly. Kansas made similar changes, and Michigan also eliminated sentencing enhancements for repeat offenders, both with positive results (Greene & Mauer, 2010). Revoking minimum sentencing laws returns discretion to judges, who assess each offender based on the context and specific circumstances in which the crime was committed. In this way, not every offender becomes a long-term prison inmate.

Instead of harsher sentences, New York now provides prison alternatives such as drug treatment facilities for low-level offenders (Greene & Mauer, 2010). Rather than entering the sometimes violent and hostile prison culture, these men and women receive treatment for their addictions and assistance in changing their lifestyles to avoid recurring criminal behavior. Prison alternatives may be government-run or non-profit organizations. Once they are established and approved by the state or federal government, they join a judge’s list of options. If a judge decides the offender could benefit more from a rehabilitation program than incarceration, he or she chooses one such facility and orders the offender to spend a certain amount of time there, along with any other necessary requirements.
But Greene and Mauer add that New York also allots “merit credits” for “participation in education and vocational training, treatment, and other services to speed parole consideration” (p. 4, 2010). Similarly, New Jersey and Michigan use risk-assessment tools to identify low-risk inmates and allow them earlier parole release. This is helpful for a number of reasons. First, parolees cost governments much less than inmates – in 2008, “for every dollar Pennsylvania spent on prisons…it spent 15 cents on probation and parole” (The Pew Center on the States, 1 in 31: The Long Reach of American Corrections: Pennsylvania, 2009). Secondly, quick and efficient parole processes likely result in lower recidivism. The less time inmates spend in prison, the less comfortable and familiar they become with the prison environment. The phenomena of adjusting to prison life to the detriment of one’s ability to live in society is called “institutionalization” (Spitale, 2002, p. 127). As inmates become institutionalized, the chances of them returning to prison increases. Any measure working against institutionalization is a positive one.

Kansas joins these states in their efforts to equip offenders on parole with tools for reentry into society, increasing their chances of success outside the prison walls. Finally, they again allow judges discretion regarding parole violations so that, when possible, simple correction and discipline can correct the problem behavior. Now not every parole violator automatically returns to prison. (Greene & Mauer, 2010) These reforms, according to a report from The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA), are working:

[The reforms demonstrate] the importance of being tough on crime in the right way--using the stick of enforcement to hold people accountable for their crimes and to get them to enter and stay in treatment. The immediacy and certainty of punishment for
noncompliance appear to be key factors in achieving success. Most significantly, DTAP demonstrates that we should not write off repeat, drug-involved offenders. (CASA, 2003, p. i)

“DTAP” is New York’s Drug Treatment Alternative-to-Prison program. CASA (2003) reported that DTAP graduates, and even participants, were drastically less likely than non-participants to be rearrested, reconvicted, or unemployed than non-participants (p. ii).

Reform is years-old in New York and Kansas, but at least two other states are on the verge of beginning the journey. South Carolina’s Senate passed new legislation in March 2010 introducing many of the same changes to state policy which are effective in New York, New Jersey, Kansas, and Michigan. Almost half South Carolina’s prisoners are nonviolent criminals, and twenty percent of inmates are drug offenders (Adcox, 2010). These men and women fill the state’s correctional facilities at great taxpayer cost and without benefit to themselves or society. Leaving prison, they are no less likely to commit crimes than when they entered; in fact, they may be more likely. South Carolina’s bill, “The Omnibus Crime Reduction and Sentencing Reform Act of 2010,” responds to the systemic flaws. In the House Judiciary Committee as of May 5, 2010, Section 1 of the bill succinctly summarizes the reasoning behind most current reformations:

Currently, the South Carolina correctional system incarcerates people whose time in prison does not result in improved behavior and who often return to South Carolina communities and commit new crimes, or are returned to prison for violations of supervision requirements. It is, therefore, the purpose of this act to reduce recidivism, provide fair and effective sentencing options, employ evidence-based practices for smarter use of correctional funding, and improve public safety. (Section 1, S. 1154, 2010)
Legislators promoting the reform emphasis their continued desire to be tough on crime. Adcox (2010) quoted Senator Gerald Malloy, who argued that reducing non-violent offenders’ prison time creates more space for violent criminals from whom the public does need protection. At the same time, drug and non-violent offenders receive the help they need, and the state saves millions of dollars.

The Virginia Legislature is also addressing the issue of reform, but in a slightly more underhanded fashion; the 2010 budget included more lenient provisions for technical parole violators – those who are nonviolent but, for example, miss a meeting or are caught drinking alcohol. Called technical violators, their behavior can be addressed and adjusted by parole officers without reincarceration. Texas also experienced a wave of action by its legislature in March, when prison officials announced plans to close two substance-abuse therapy programs because they were only seventy percent full (Ward, 2010). However, according to Ward (2010), heads of the legislature reacted harshly, and the centers remain open. Ward spoke with State Representative Jerry Madden, who said officials are instead “investigat[ing] paperwork delays that may have played a role in the empty beds” (2010, para. 3). These are examples of state legislators using their influence without necessarily passing laws.

The United States Congress is also legislating reform. In 2008 it passed The Second Chance Act, focusing on reentry success for released prisoners. The act was unique in providing grants for “employment assistance, substance abuse treatment, housing, family programming, mentoring, victim support, and other services that can help reduce recidivism” (The National Reentry Resource Center, 2010). This groundbreaking legislation was followed in March 2009, when Senator Jim Webb (D-Va) introduced the National Criminal Justice Commission Act of 2009. Currently on the Senate’s legislative calendar, the act has thirty-five cosponsors and
dozens of supporting organizations and businesses as of January 2010 (OpenCongress, 2010, & Fact Sheet on the Legislation, 2010). The act’s purpose is to create a commission that will assess the criminal justice system and recommend “concrete, wide-ranging reforms” (Fact Sheet on the Legislation, 2010) in recognition of the rampant problems in the United States system.

The Fair Sentencing Act is simultaneously traveling through Congress. Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL.) introduced the act to address sentencing disparities between powder cocaine and crack cocaine, which are currently unequal by 100:1 rate (Mennonite Central Committee U.S., 2010). This means powder cocaine users currently have to use one hundred times as much of the drug as crack cocaine users to receive the same prison sentence. While the Fair Sentencing Act is a large step in the right direction, Mennonite Central Committee’s Washington Office lamented amendments already made to the act. In its Washington Memo, the office staff emphasized the act will only reduce the ratio to a 20:1 difference, rather than completely equalizing the sentences (Mennonite Central Committee U.S., 2010). Still, the act shows the beginning of a necessary mentality change.

**Warden-initiated Change: Pike County Correctional Facility**

One Pennsylvania jail has successfully initiated reform without legislative, religious, or lobbying efforts. Today, the Pike County Correctional Facility’s recidivism rate sits around 10%, in contrast to the national average of about 68% recidivism. This huge change resulted from a few staff members dedicating themselves to excellence. Warden Craig Lowe has held various positions at the facility for twenty-two years. As he worked through the ranks, he saw procedures and mindsets that were not working, so when he became warden he started implementing changes. Warden Lowe and Assistant Warden McLaughlin listed several areas of emphasis: staffing, communication, and inmate accountability.
Most prisons seek “big guys, tough guys” for their staffs. Lowe argued that communication is more important than physique. Similarly, rather than an officer with experience, Lowe seeks young staff who have not yet developed what he calls “bad habits”. He wants “someone that is looking for a career,” who is dedicated to corrections and not simply seeking to feed his or her ego. Officers hired by Pike County Correctional Facility go through seven weeks of on-site training, which is longer than the state requirement by two weeks. During training, the expectations for officer behavior are clearly articulated, and then the wardens and lieutenants hold officers accountable to those expectations.

Officers also learn to use the same level of communication with inmates. In fact, everyone at Pike County prioritizes clear communication, regardless of their job or authority. The wardens immediately address problem behavior or poor decision-making among their staff, who are all expected to do the same with their subordinates. For example, while I was visiting, an officer overreacted to an inmate’s behavior. Warden Lowe told me that rather than respond strongly, the officer should have approached the inmate and spoken with him. Reacting to inappropriate behavior is critical, but not overreacting is just as important. This way, inmates are respected and given a standard that is high but fair and attainable.

Indeed, from the moment they enter Pike County, inmates are expected to maintain utmost cleanliness. They make their beds daily and contribute to the jail’s overall cleanliness by serving as facility employees. They can choose from 105 different weekly programs, some of which McLaughlin oversees and others which are run by community volunteers. The staff encourages every inmate to attend a recidivism reduction program; in fact, Warden Lowe will not recommend an inmate for parole unless he or she participates in one of the four options.
The Pike County Correctional Facility mindset benefits staff – they supervise happier, more cooperative inmates; inmates – they learn new skills and prepare for successful reentry into society; and the community – they are always welcome to visit the facility, not to mention saving $5.4 million in just three years because of a low recidivism rate. This policy is effective, with no apparent drawbacks. Why are other local jails hesitant to implement the Pike County model? One major objection, according to McLaughlin, is that “it’s a little jail.” Other wardens agree and point out that Pike County is small and rural. McLaughlin acknowledged Pike County’s size but countered that larger prisons have no excuse. One small area of contention regards maintaining clean facilities. Larger prisons claim they have too many inmates to prevent dirtiness. McLaughlin responded, “I don’t care how many inmates you have, you can keep [your prison] clean.” If you have a larger population, “you have an inexhaustible work force” at your disposal.

Another obstacle is the sheer workload of maintaining the staff, programs, and community relations Pike County utilizes daily. Lowe and McLaughlin give up weeknights to talk with community members and organizations about the work they do. They singlehandedly created the new policy, catered to their specific situation, that now dictates Pike County’s operations. The facility runs extended in-house training instead of sending its officers to the training academy. Every time an officer responds inappropriately, his or her behavior is addressed. The wardens have a staff member position dedicated entirely to overseeing the extensive programs. And they keep the facility open to the public, so they are always prepared for visitors. One can easily see how this level of management is a daunting task for prisons not currently using it, even if it has been proven to be extremely effective.

Pike County’s level of initiative is unusual, and when wardens answer only to County Commissioners, the main requirement is usually to stay within their budget. Change can be
frightening, difficult, and humbling. There are a lot of voices for reform in Pennsylvania and throughout the country, but unless someone directly pressures a warden to reevaluate his or her entire program, he or she will rarely be compelled to introduce this drastic change. Lowe and McLaughlin were optimistic several years ago when they began seeing the fruit of their labors, but they have seen how few people in their positions are willing to try similar reforms. It is tempting to believe more highly of people’s desire for good, but thus far the evidence is stacked in favor of doing what has always been done and forcing changes to come from other avenues.

Public Awareness and Activism

One “other avenue” for reform is public awareness and activism. This is, perhaps, the most crucial method of influencing change. Awareness is the key to fighting just about anything – cancer, drugs, violence, mental health problems, human trafficking – and the list continues. The public will not rally behind an issue about which it is ignorant or misinformed. And in a representative democracy like the United States, public opinion matters. Our public servants are either elected or appointed by other elected officials. Therefore, they answer to their constituents and in many ways determine their actions by the likelihood of receiving public support. Anyone remotely involved in or familiar with politics knows it is nearly impossible to accomplish change to which the general public is opposed.

Consequently, organizations like The Sentencing Project and Justice & Mercy work constantly to raise public awareness around prison system problems and reform. The 1970s “tough on crime” attitude is still prevalent among much of the public today. People want to feel safe, and they believe that is accomplished by locking criminals in jail cells for extended periods of time. Often, when legislators or organizations propose reform, it is translated as not taking crime seriously or choosing offenders over victims and communities. The media is quick to
publicize corrections’ failures and mistakes, feeding the fear of reform and insistence on across-the-board tight policies. Unfortunately, it is reticent to celebrate successes; happy stories reportedly do not appeal as well as negative ones.

For example, Michigan recently created new risk-assessment tests allowing the state to release some inmates on parole earlier than with previous procedures. This reform led Michigan’s Department of Corrections to “[announce] plans to lower the prison population by 3,500 to 4,000 people, allowing closure of three prisons, including a maximum security facility…along with five prison camps. Budget savings were projected at $118 million” (Greene & Mauer, 2010, p. 41).

Unfortunately, in June 2009, Michigan accidentally released sixty-two sex offenders when its psychologists created a new category in the risk-assessment test, and offenders with too little information to classify were sent into society instead of being retested (Associated Press, 2009, retrieved from http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,529801,00.html). The story aired throughout Michigan and national news, with virtually no mention of the risk-assessment’s success. Although the risk-assessment has been effective in many ways, citizens were still gripped with fear and maintained a “lock-‘em-up” mentality.

The Sentencing Project “is a national organization working for a fair and effective criminal justice system by promoting reforms in sentencing law and practice, and alternatives to incarceration” (The Sentencing Project, 2010). The Sentencing Project’s research yields reports with compelling statistical data and analysis regarding incarceration rates, racial disparity, sentencing problems, and costs to society. Its reports and advocacy work earn it nation-wide recognition and increase public awareness of critical prison problems. It is joined by several other organizations in Washington, DC, including Justice Policy Institute, Mennonite Central
Committee Washington, and The Pew Charitable Trusts. Each of these represent groups of individuals working for social change and improved policy in some capacity, including criminal justice in the United States.

**A Closer Look: Jean Bickmire, Justice & Mercy, Inc.**

Justice & Mercy, Inc. is one organization working tirelessly to change the public’s perception of reform and get people involved in their efforts. Jean Bickmire is the Secretary and Legislative/Administrative Director of Justice & Mercy in Strasburg, Pennsylvania. Justice & Mercy’s tagline is, “Promoting Safer Communities through Justice System Reform,” and they accomplish that through research, political advocacy, public awareness, and local community partnerships (www.justicemercy.org). In a personal interview, Bickmire articulated the public’s misunderstanding well:

> I think once people understand what we’re doing about correctional issues, they support us. From outside they see us as soft on crime, bleeding hearts, and that’s not who we are. We’re just about trying to address the system in an efficient way, trying to bring real change to the people that are impacted by it. (March 19, 2010)

Justice & Mercy brings that change, “from arrest to reentry,” according to Bickmire. She listed several ways the organization works – it finds experts to present at congressional hearings, holds statewide conferences, advocates against problems like wrongful conviction and overcrowding, and helps inmates and families work through the court system. One of Justice & Mercy’s efforts since its inception has been connecting mentors with inmates. Bickmire also makes court appearances to suggest alternate sentencing when appropriate.

Bickmire confirmed much of Justice & Mercy’s work in Lancaster County specifically, and Pennsylvania generally, is with faith-based groups. They are among several dozen
organizations involved with the Lancaster County Re-Entry Management Organization, which pools many existing resources to work for effective reentry strategies. However, Justice & Mercy would like to see churches become more involved with its mentoring program. Christians support the organization’s work but do not often want to enter the prisons on a regular basis.

Overall, Bickmire named numerous committees, programs, and groups working in Lancaster County and at the state level to improve the criminal justice system. However, there are still inefficiencies, hesitancies because of wary constituents, and the constant reality that change takes time. Consequently, there are still way too many people under corrections’ supervision, too few mentors, and many obstacles to climb. Yet Bickmire’s countenance remained optimistic as she shared her definition of success:

When I go to court and I recommend alternative sentencing, and they agree with what I say and they understand, I think it’s successful, because it’s successful for the people we help. Also when we see a change in the prison atmosphere or culture. We just had a training of officers, a new code…. [I measure success] by the number of people that understand greater outreach of communication, education about what’s going on in the correctional system, [and] how we can change it, and I think that’s changing particularly with officials and legislators. (personal communication, 2010)

Justice & Mercy is certainly doing something right; every other person interviewed for this project either mentioned Justice & Mercy or recognized the name when he heard it. Hopefully Bickmire and her colleagues will continue pushing for reform and finding new ways to point Pennsylvania’s corrections in a positive direction.
Prison Ministry

While prison reform efforts focus on changing the criminal justice system, prison ministry exists to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to inmates, and often their families and communities, as well. Prison ministry ranges from chaplains who work full-time in prisons to local church volunteers offering worship and Bible studies on a weekly basis to Christian organizations helping offenders reintegrate into society post-incarceration. Prison ministry is difficult yet highly rewarding work, according to those involved. It often requires long-term commitment to gain trust from people who often build protective walls around themselves after having been hurt in the past. As in any interpersonal work, it can be frustrating, complicated, emotional, and confusing. But Christians throughout Pennsylvania and the United States nonetheless enter prisons by the thousands and give countless volunteer hours, individually and through various organizations.

Prison Fellowship is one such organization. Probably the most well-known prison ministry in the United States, Prison Fellowship currently operates five extensive programs. Angel Tree exists specifically to reach inmates’ children, giving them gifts around Christmas and being a consistent presence throughout the year. InnerChange Freedom Initiative is a reentry program for prisoners, and Operation Starting Line equips churches nationwide to enter prisons and touch lives. Justice Fellowship works to bring restorative justice to prisons, more effectively addressing victims’ and offenders’ needs. Finally, BreakPoint is a ministry program offering Christian worldview teaching. (Prison Fellowship, 2010) Through all of these avenues, Prison Fellowship interacts with Americans at every level of society – from the nation’s leaders in plush buildings to its disenfranchised homeless. Prison Fellowship leads the way in equipping Christians for prison ministry. This ministry giant is by no means working alone, though.
A Closer Look: Al Huber, Lancaster County Prison Chaplain

Al Huber has worked in prison ministry since he began volunteering in 1989, and it became his job in 1994. He is the lead chaplain in Lancaster County Prison in Pennsylvania, working through Support for Prison Ministries (SPM). SPM’s mission is to:

- Touch lives with Christian love
- Present the Gospel in clear and understandable terms
- Nurture new believers in faith and discipleship
- Facilitate contacts with churches and Christians on the outside
- Help develop prison ministry teams in local congregations
- Provide training to the local church, community and interested persons. (Support for Prison Ministries, n.d.)

Rev. Huber works directly with prisoners and oversees the staff of chaplains and the hundreds of volunteers who give around 475 volunteer hours each month. When asked his greatest joys in ministry, he immediately responded, “Seeing God work in people’s lives.” How? By spending one-on-one time with a prisoner and “connect[ing] him with God so he hears what he needs to hear, instead of telling him what he needs to hear.”

The work is difficult – Rev. Huber is experienced enough to realize some inmates attend religious services just to get out of their cells. He is used to new people coming in, and because it is a local prison, no one stays five years or more (longer sentences are carried out at a state correctional facility). Huber also mentioned another problem, confirmed by several other people with whom I spoke. It is relatively easy to be a Christian while in prison, when there are few interactions with family, friends, and negative influences. But, as Huber said, prisoners “don’t
know how to be Christians on the streets when life hits.” They almost always return to the same context in which they lived when arrested.

But Huber does not work alone; every week local churches provide six church services and an average of 475 volunteer hours, in addition to visits from ministers. Additionally, most of SPM’s funding is from the local community. While Lancaster County Prison has its share of problems, and the ministry not easy, a huge team of Christians support the work there. Huber has learned to “leave it up to God’s plan…and go with the flow.”

**A Closer Look: Clair Weaver, director of Jubilee Ministries**

Clair Weaver is the director of Jubilee Ministries based in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. Jubilee ministers to the community through counseling and prison ministries, both within and outside of several local and state prisons. Jubilee Ministries began in 1972 when a Mennonite youth group in Lebanon spent a night praying about doing more for their community. That night they drove past the prison and decided to start a Bible study there. After about a year, six couples began helping the youth, three within the prison and three with people post-release. Weaver was one of the people working inside the prison. Then a group of women in local churches started a thrift shop to help fund the ministry, and around 2003 they opened a coffee shop for local youth. Today Jubilee works in three county and four state facilities, runs four thrift stores, and offers counseling, material services, temporary housing, and summer camp to the local community.

After years of working in prison ministry, Weaver said his greatest joy is “seeing God’s handiwork, not only in the people we serve – the inmates and people coming out of prison – but [also] in the staff” (personal interview, 2010). The work is not without its challenges, though. Even while the ministry is growing:
A challenge obviously is hanging on, keeping up with God, and when you’re doing
growth like that, the big challenge is keeping your staff trained [and] communicating.

Well, making sure your mission is being accomplished, and you’re not forgetting people
that you’re there to serve. (personal interview, 2010)

And when it comes to inmates, the difficulties abound. Weaver mentioned today’s prison culture
is much younger and less familiar with Christian principles than when he began ministry.
Consequently, chaplains in the prisons now have to “start at the roots” (personal interview, 2010)
with the basics of the Gospel and moral living.

Weaver was one of the people who confirmed Reverend Huber’s assertion that being a
Christian in prison is easy. He calls it “Jailhouse Christianity,” and had a prisoner explain the
difference to him: inside the prison, they have no choices, but once they get out they are
bombarded with choices. Inmates are told when to get up, eat, go outside, participate in
programs, clean, work, and sleep. Back in society, they are suddenly bombarded with daily
struggles around securing food and shelter, renewing old relationships, even deciding what outfit
to wear. Maintaining Christianity suddenly becomes much harder in light of the new
independence. Again reflecting Huber’s struggles, Weaver mentioned prisoners’ tendency to
participate in Bible studies because they expect earlier release. He has had people openly admit
they used the chaplains to “get out, and start over.” Starting over is a common theme, but many
people “are not willing to sacrifice.” The insincerity creates difficulties for Jubilee. The
ministry’s ideal model is seeing chaplains share the Gospel with inmates inside the prison so
other workers can “make disciples” in aftercare.
When it comes to success, Jubilee struggles to determine their measurements. If a woman leaves prison, spends time in Jubilee’s programs, and yet returns to prison, is that a failure? Not necessarily, according to Weaver, who asked several blunt and thought-provoking questions:

If any one of us that has an area in our lives that causes us grief because it causes us sin, how many times do we go back and sin until we finally get victory? So how do we measure success if someone goes through our system and then fails, how many times is it gonna [sic] take until he gets victory? (personal interview, 2010)

These questions point the finger right back at Christians, and members of secular society, who are quick to condemn repeat offenders. Most people’s shortcomings are admittedly less dangerous to society than the average inmates’, but Weaver’s attitude calls them to extend the same grace they expect to receive when making poor choices.

Weaver defines “ultimate success” as someone still “walking with the Lord” and part of a church several years out of prison, but even if he or she is not in a church, avoiding prison is still successful. The best reform works toward this end, although among non-Christians, obviously the goal is more of a moral lifestyle than Christianity per se. Consistent with Pike County’s approach, Weaver’s ideal reform is a mindset change. The moment prisoners enter the facility, the goal should be helping them obtain education, a skill set, counseling, one-on-one mentorships, and other tools to prepare them for release. This is specifically for the county level, since state inmates include those who will not return to society, but with modifications the model can still be applied to state institutions.

Jubilee works to provide mentors for inmates beginning several months from their release date, an effort in which Justice & Mercy is also involved. The struggle, though, is a lack of mentors. In his experience, Weaver has found churches willing to hear him speak and support the
ministry financially, but it is much more difficult finding Christian men and women who will commit to long-term mentoring relationships with inmates. Most people, if they want to help with the ministry, prefer conducting weekly Bible studies or writing checks. The dire need, though, is for strong one-on-one mentoring relationships, which no amount of money can buy.

Another important change is in prison staff. Just like Lowe and McLaughlin, Weaver has seen the impact officers can have on inmates. He had only positive words for the attitude in Pike County Correctional Facility, where officers respect inmates and in turn receive respect. The atmosphere becomes ripe for reform and positive interactions that benefit inmates, rather than the “anger and bitter[ness]” with which some men leave the prisons. Breeding hatred toward authority harms individuals and the community at large, and Weaver believes prison staff can be part of the solution, not the problem.

**Mennonite Involvement**

Looking back on Anabaptist roots, there was a deliberate separation from all the churches that were intertwined with the states. While Catholics and Protestants divvied Europe into segments marked by religious affiliation, Anabaptist leaders decried the church-state intimacy. They saw how easily politics and power bred corruption, even among well-meaning church leaders. Anabaptism began when Grebel, Mantz, and Blaurock refused to compromise for the Zürich Council’s approval and were consequently banned from the region. The church-state distinction followed Mennonites all the way into the Twentieth Century, where faithful members still wrestled with questions of dual citizenship – in earthly governments and in God’s kingdom. Since their first allegiance was (and still is) to the latter, Mennonites remained cautious about strong political involvement.
Some of that began to change in the 1960s. Mennonite Central Committee’s Washington Office identified several contributing factors:

During the 1960s MCC workers in Vietnam heard appreciation for their work, but were asked to focus their efforts on persuading U.S. policymakers to stop the war. At the same time some Mennonites in the U.S. were becoming involved in the civil rights movement [sic], and were also citing the importance of speaking to government. These voices, along with writings such as John Howard Yoder’s *The Christian Witness to the State*, helped to form the basis for establishing the MCC Washington Office in 1968. (MCC Washington, “Frequently Asked Questions,” 2009)

Since then, a large portion of the Mennonite community, or at least Mennonite leaders, has increased its political involvement. Today workers at MCC Washington work in coalitions, write letters, meet with Congressmen, write newsletters and blogs, and contribute to Mennonite Weekly Review, PeaceSigns, and Third Way Café publications and blogs (What We Do, 2010). They visit Mennonite churches and empower laypeople to join them in action.

Mennonites also join the larger community of Christians who advocate political involvement in similar ways. Sojourners ministries publishes Sojourners Magazine, which advocates for social justice in the United States and around the world. Sojourners started with a group of concerned Christians at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, but today its staff includes a wide variety of faith backgrounds (Sojourners, 2010). Mennonites like Yoder have been involved in writing and editing the magazine since almost the beginning. Sojourners actively engages politics; today their web site includes advocacy on issues from immigration to big banking to global warming (Sojourners, 2010). Like Sojourners, MCC Washington engages the
political forum concerning a host of current issues, including healthcare, economic justice, global peace, HIV/AIDS, and racial inequality.

This is not to say the entire United States Mennonite body agrees on the optimum method of church-state interaction, or that everyone is interested in politics to the extent of some leaders and organizations. In 2005 at the General Conference, John D. Roth proposed Mennonites take a “five-year sabbatical from affiliations with any political party,” because Mennonites had become too deeply embroiled in political polarization and were “in danger of expecting far too much from government and far too little from the church” (Roth, 2005, para. 5 & 8). However, at the same conference, another speech encouraged continued conversation with the State on biblical, theological, and global awareness grounds (n.a., 2005).

Mennonites still proclaim that “The only Christian nation is the church of Jesus Christ, made up of people from every tribe and nation, called to witness to God's glory” (Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, 1995). Therefore, they do not fight for a Christian State nor hope in the complete redemption of government. According to the confession, “Even at its best, a government cannot act completely according to the justice of God because no nation, except the church, confesses Christ's rule as its foundation” (General Conference Mennonite Church & The Mennonite Church, 1995, para. 3). This theological understanding, then, contradicts some Christians’ goals of completely changing the political system and prevents many Mennonites from entering the public forum. Conversely, strong Mennonite desires for justice and equality juxtapose the anti-political stream of thought. The prison system is wrought with racial and socioeconomic inequalities, and that reality continues to draw Mennonites into criminal justice issues even while they hold traditional Anabaptist views of church-state interaction.
It is misleading to present every Mennonite pastor, congregation, or individual member as politically active or even convinced that political engagement is an acceptable Christian response. However, the Mennonite desire to witness to the government through legislation and advocacy is a strong and growing force. I believe it will continue to grow as Mennonites actively and responsibly discuss the best way to be faithful witnesses in the Twenty-First Century.

**Restorative Justice**

The first half of this research, *The Mennonite Church: Theological History, Pacifism, and Restorative Justice*, described the modern Restorative Justice movement and its strong connection to the Mennonite Church. In the interviews I conducted, I asked for people’s opinions of restorative justice. The response was generally positive, but several people offered helpful critiques and insight from their various perspectives within and outside of the prison system. There were several helpful reminders for restorative justice advocates not to simply criticize the existing methods, but to acknowledge the years of experience and hard work behind prison chaplaincy that works within the current system, however flawed that system is. The personal interviews yielded several worthy examples of the complexity of change in general and restorative justice in particular.

Reverend Ulli Klemm is both a Mennonite and the Administrator for Religion and Volunteer Services in Pennsylvania. Klemm appreciates the concept of restorative justice, but emphasized that the corrections system is punitive; it is designed for retributive justice that responds to crime by locking people in jail cells (personal interview, 2010). In his view, the government is driven by money. Therefore, if restorative justice saves money, administrators will welcome it. At the moment, though, it is difficult to incorporate into the system. For Klemm, it is especially hard to remember both victims and offenders. He makes concerted efforts to
remind offenders of the pain they caused victims, and to be sensitive to victims’ pain when he meets them. Although restorative justice advocates strive to minister to both parties, in Klemm’s experience it tends to be more victim-focused.

One point of disagreement was the best time and place to incorporate restorative justice. Victim-offender reconciliation programs (VORPs) are most commonly used in juvenile justice, although Lancaster VORP recently expanded its work to include some adult offenders (Singer, 2010, personal interview). Restorative justice advocates push changes to the corrections system, but Reverend Huber sees that as “trying to change the end of the rope when the beginning of the rope’s the problem” (2010, personal interview). He would rather see restorative justice happen within communities, helping young people avoid going to prison in the first place. That is perhaps more easily said than done, however. Jubilee Ministries started its coffee shop, The Refuge, with the goal of expanding its focus to include preventing incarceration. Aimed at reaching at-risk youth, the shop now faces closing. It is difficult to maintain the shop’s effectiveness, according to Weaver, because the more at-risk youth frequent The Refuge, the more hesitant local Christians become in allowing their teenagers in the coffee shop. Ultimately, it is not a place of ministry but just another locale for potential delinquents to gather with little to no positive influence.

Jon Singer of Lancaster Victim-offender Reconciliation Program (LAVORP) would argue that both can be done. LAVORP has programs to reconcile offenders and victims, but it also works with youth to teach them and their parents conflict resolution skills. Singer (2010) does not advocate entirely abandoning the current prison system, but bringing reform. His ideal scenario includes identifying appropriate situations for victim-offender conferencing (not dealing with “a real serious crime”) and sending them through programs like LAVORP and mediation.
services. Currently, some cases do not get to LAVORP from the courts for extended periods of time – Singer told me about a case he received two years after the juvenile committed the crime. He wants appropriate cases to bypass the courts and go directly to these restorative justice programs, so the programs can be more efficient and effective.

The reality of restorative justice work, along with any type of reform, takes a lot of time and effort. Both Huber and Klemm mentioned they are completely swamped with the workloads of ministry within the prisons, so while they generally approve of advocacy and reform, they prefer leaving those efforts to people like Bickmire at Justice & Mercy and Singer at LAVORP who can dedicate themselves wholly to that work.

**Analysis and Opinion**

Although I disagree with the traditional Mennonite perspective of church-state separation – I fall more along the lines of those who engage the political system – I believe Mennonites are most consistent with and faithful to their theology when they create their own structures in which to reach and reform society, rather than seeking to change the political systems under which we live. Mennonite Central Committee is the clear example of the Mennonite Church focusing on ministry through its own programs without neglecting what it deems necessary political interaction. Mennonites are not the dominant Christian voice for prison ministry or reform, but there is a portion of the church that is aware of the problems and passionate about finding solutions.

One major existing problem, mentioned by Warden Lowe at Pike County Correctional Facility, is the amount of work change requires. From the Warden’s end, initiating internal change takes hard work, persistence, commitment, communication, discipline, and time. For example, when I visited the prison, an officer made an unnecessary snap decision which drew
more attention than was appropriate. The Warden planned to speak with that officer to correct his or her behavior and insure the same mistake was not made again. That meeting would take time, the ability to communicate the problem and appropriate solution, and willingness to engage in what might have been a difficult conversation. The work at Pike County exceeds what is strictly required to run a prison, and not everyone wants to put extra effort into the job.

Another problem is the public’s mindset that being “tough on crime” means putting more people in prison for extended amounts of time. In reality, this simply results in overcrowded prisons. Inmates are then surrounded by a culture of resistance and violence. Local, state, and national budgets cannot support the increasing numbers of prisoners, so each prisoner receives a much lower level of attention and care. The problem extends to parole officers and violators, as well. In order to truly be tough on crime, nonviolent prisoners must be equipped with re-entry tools, so they can become responsible, contributing members of society rather than recidivism statistics. I am not naïve enough to believe every prisoner who receives help along those lines will stop committing crimes, but the case study proves that a huge majority will be effectively changed.

Reform from the inside out is not the only thing that takes time and effort. Since the public mindset is so largely “tough on crime”, work to the contrary is an uphill battle. First, people must realize prison reform is not bad or unsafe. That realization will only come when we change how we talk about reform, and when the media follows suit by approaching it with a positive spin rather than a fear-inducing ominous voice. Sentencing reform does not equal letting every criminal run free; it means working for the solution that will help transform lawbreakers into contributing members of society, for everyone’s benefit. Only upon reaching this understanding are they receptive to their potential role in producing change. And politicians will
hesitate to introduce radical reform legislation until they have strong constituent support; otherwise, helping inmates is close to political suicide.

These changes are not easy, but every lobbyist and politician knows legislation is neither a quick nor easy process. It takes patience and persistence. In the meantime, I agree with Reverend Klemm that Christians must continue entering the prisons and ministering. We cannot wait for a perfect system before we decide to join its work, or we will wait forever. Yet ministry also requires patience and dedication. As Weaver noted, even people outside prison walls struggle with recurring sins and struggles; of course inmates need time to change. He mentioned a staff member who had counseled a woman and did not receive positive feedback from her until several years later when the woman called Jubilee and thanked her counselor. And Weaver has been working in prison ministry since the 1970s, yet there are still significant problems and shortcomings in Lebanon. This is not due to ineffective ministry on Jubilee’s part; it is simply the nature of ministry, especially in prisons, which are often ignored or considered too highly suspect.

Christians need to rise to the occasion and seek out ways to become involved. The wisest plan is to contact people like Clair Weaver, Jean Bickmire, and Craig Lowe. Rather than offering to send money, ask them how you can most effectively help bring about change. Do they need mentors? The church must step out of its comfort zone and enter long-term relationships with prisoners, under the direction of experienced ministers like Weaver. Do they need businesses that are willing to hire ex-offenders regardless of their records, giving them a chance to succeed and grace when they fail? Christian businesspeople should be at the forefront of that movement. Do they need community members to bring music, art, education, and sports programs to the prisons? The body of Christ is diverse and filled with helpful talents. Do they need senators and
representatives to have mailboxes full of letters from constituents who want reform? The church should write those letters.

Many churches participate in a plethora of wonderful ministries to society, and of course they have neither unlimited time nor resources. However, Jesus commanded His followers to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and imprisoned. Our lifestyles are to be examples of caring for society’s forgotten outcasts. If we are not an active presence in prisons, we are missing a huge opportunity to reach people with the Gospel and the life-changing hope they so desperately need. It is not easy, but with guidance from men and women like those with whom I spoke, the Church can step out and join those already active in prison ministry and reform in Pennsylvania and the United States.

**Conclusion**

The most obvious area for further study is more conversation with Mennonites in Pennsylvania. As the research progressed, it became more of a look at reform and ministry in general, with limited analysis of Mennonites in particular. Juvenile justice, which is its own entity in many respects, was also not included in this research outside of restorative justice initiatives. I would also like to speak with more prison administrators and chaplains who work in state correctional facilities to see how ministry and reform mindsets change when dealing with long-term prisoners as opposed to those in local prisons who will likely return to society within a few years. Another huge element of the problem which this paper left virtually untouched is the correlation between imprisonment and socioeconomic status. Although the people with whom I spoke were all aware of that relationship, it can be explored to much greater depths, and some of the Church’s greatest potential for influence is through systemic changes that prevent populations from reaching prison in the first place.
In spite of its limits, this research revealed a growing body of Pennsylvanians and United States citizens concerned about our criminal justice system’s problems and shortfalls. There is a vast array of men and women who are passionate about bringing change. While they work in different capacities and sometimes see the issues from varying perspectives, they all want several of the same things: a prison system that yields contributing members of society rather than repeat offenders, which benefits offenders, public safety, society at large, and everyone’s pocketbooks. The Christians I interviewed, Mennonite and otherwise, also want inmates and their families to know the saving grace of Jesus Christ and grow in relationship with God, because He is the only real hope. They each have unique ministries and methods, but together are making a difference in Pennsylvania’s prisons and communities.

The battle is not over, though; nor will it be any time soon. Therefore, those of us not already involved in prison ministry or reform to some capacity have an obligation to join the fight, take risks and use our strengths to aid the cause. As cliché as it sounds, together we truly can make a difference.
References


