



Assured of God's Love

"I was in prison and you visited me"

Sun Shining In, Allan Swart

BY ROSALYN MCKEOWN-ICE

Every Sunday we went to church the message was, "These are the rules, and if you break the rules you are going to hell," the man said of what he learned in church as a child and teenager. After six previous weeks of study with this man, I knew he understood the unstated message from his church to be, "We don't like you very much and neither does God." It was heartbreaking. He had not learned that God's love, forgiveness, mercy and grace is for everyone, including incarcerated individuals like him.

A few years later another man explained his church upbringing with this image: "God sat on his throne every week with a clipboard on his knee. He looked at individual members of the congregation and put a black mark by their name, shook his head, and said, 'You are going to hell.'" He continued, "I didn't see a way out, so I decided to go my own way and have fun because I was goin' to hell anyway."

These are just two of the stories I've heard in the six years I've been involved in an outreach ministry to Morgan County Residential Recovery Court (MCRRC), a local residential drug court. MCRRC is an all-male, low-security incarceration and addiction treatment facility adjacent to the county prison. This recovery facility provides a 12-month, 12-step program for nonviolent felons who have addiction disorder.

A Life-changing Program and Ministry

Twelve-step programs require that participants identify their higher power and develop or deepen their relationship with their higher power, because they have been unsuccessful in overcoming their addiction on their own. With so many of the men having experienced only judgment and threats of punishment in church, they need the message that God's love is for everyone, including them.

Jesus' red-letter words, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk. 23:43), promised a biblical criminal that he also received God's love and salvation. The men at MCRRC recognized themselves in that passage, and that divine forgiveness softened the earthly condemnations they felt from society and the courts.

Strengthened with this message, the residents begin to feel hope for the possibility of long-term sobriety and the good life that accompanies it. They begin to experience God's love and see God's love at work in the world. Step 4 of the 12-step program—to make a moral inventory of their lives—and step 5—to admit to God, themselves and others the exact nature of their wrongs—bring about repentance. Being set right with God (or one's higher power) is one of the goals of recovery.

Across the years at MCRRC, we have done book studies, Bible studies, Alpha¹ courses on the basics of

Christianity and worshiped together. I have had the incredible privilege to watch as men, who arrive with cobbled together theologies dominated by judgement and punishment, begin to understand that God, as their higher power, loves, forgives and cares for them. They internalize that Jesus died for their sins and develop the capacity to see the Holy Spirit at work in their lives and the lives of the men around them. Their faith flourishes.

One day, an incarcerated man read the crucifixion story from Luke, including the interchange between Jesus and the bandits—who we would label today as violent felons and repeat offenders. Jesus' red-letter words, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk. 23:43), promised a biblical criminal that he also received God's love and salvation. The men at MCRRC recognized themselves in that passage, and that divine forgiveness softened the earthly condemnations they felt from society and the courts. In that moment, my head and heart understood that this divine love and salvation was, is, and will always be greater than the men's sins recorded in their rap sheets.

The Roots of Addiction and Societal Misconceptions

From talking to the counseling staff at MCRRC, I learned that a high number of individuals in this recovery program experienced childhood trauma. Research shows that individuals with adverse childhood experiences (ACE) have a greater chance of substance misuse as adults² and individuals with severe ACE profiles have a greatly increased chance of incarceration.³ One man had been raped in a department store restroom

at the age of nine and believed it was his fault until he received counseling at the recovery facility. Another recalled being choked by his father until his mother screamed, "Stop! You're going to kill him!" Another man recounted, "It all started when Dad went to prison. Mom's boyfriend moved in. I stepped in to stop him from beating her. I went to juvie."

MCRRC and other detention and recovery facilities house many individuals who experienced trauma in other ways. Some grew up in families of intergenerational drug use and the accompanying emotional turmoil and neglect. Others are veterans who suffered a physical injury or a moral injury during their military service and/or had rough transitions from the culture of war to a culture of peace in civilian or hometown life.⁴

Working in prison ministry has made me sensitive to misconceptions related to incarcerated people. A common belief is that most incarcerated people only develop a relationship with God in prison. My experience working in the Bible belt is that most prisoners have a church background. Usually their parents or grandparents took them to church. I have heard men talk about going to worship while in active addiction. One father of three recounted that, while driving to pick up his youngest at daycare, he prayed to God to relieve him of his addiction. He was arrested and his local drug court sentenced him to MCRRC. In residence, he deepened his relationship with God, worked his 12-step program and graduated. He secured a job and created a stable home for his sons. The Holy Spirit was at work in his life before his arrest, during incarceration and afterwards.

Another common misconception is that incarcerated people who find their faith in prison leave that faith behind when they are released. I suspect this misconception comes from the high recidivism rate for incarcerated men. Going back to prison primarily comes from an inability to find stable jobs and housing upon release. Many businesses screen for felonies on job applications and will not hire formerly incarcerated people. Finding a place to rent without proof of employment is difficult or impossible. Men who are released from prison become second-class citizens with little hope for social and economic mobility.⁵

A Caring Presence

It surprises me that so few congregations have prison ministries. I suspect it is due to the stigma and fear stimulated by words like prison,

convicts and incarceration. Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, expresses a similar sentiment—“After all, criminals are the one social group in America that nearly everyone—across political, racial, and class boundaries—feels free to hate.”⁶ Our society chooses not to love people in prison. We “other” convicts and felons, failing to recognize the child of God in them.

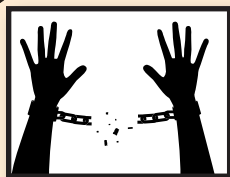
This othering became evident when a friend of mine, who organizes the congregational visitation program for the presbytery, attempted to find volunteers so that the ministry to MCRRC could be part of the visitation program. To her dismay, no one she contacted wanted to enter MCRRC. They asked about security and were generally uncomfortable with such a visitation. When she

reported the lack of volunteers, I assured her that I was never fearful on campus, rather it was just the opposite. Participants in Bible study often walk the ministry team to the gate. The men carry our book bags and guitars, and we all hug goodbye before the monitor unlocks the gate. We have become one another’s extended families. We pray for one another during the week.

Most pastors already have overwhelmingly busy jobs, however, congregants can lead the ministry. Granted, a minister or commissioned lay pastor are necessary for the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, but for everything else volunteers from a church family more than suffice. Showing up, spending time with the residents, sharing stories, smiling, listening and saying “God loves you” with words and deeds is the heart of prison ministry.

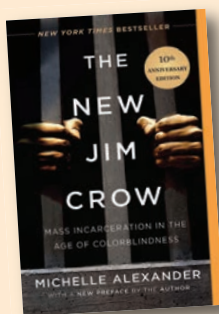


Learn More



Struggle is Real Series: A Webinar with Church and Community Leaders on Mass Incarceration
Presbyterian Committee on the Self-Development of People
vimeo.com/653705583

A panel of PC(USA) leaders and partners convened in 2022 to offer insights about how the church can provide support for individuals returning to society after incarceration.

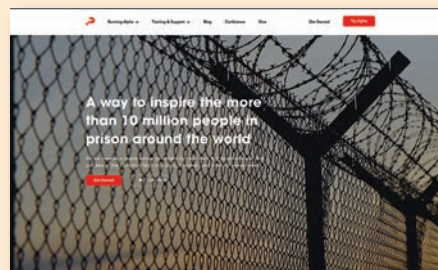


The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness
By Michelle Alexander
New York: New Press, 2010

The United States imprisons the largest percentage of its population, and even more alarming is that the U.S. imprisons the highest percentage of racial ethnic minorities—even more than South

Africa imprisoned during the bleakest days of apartheid. This book is a wake-up call for anyone who is concerned about this new caste system, whose ranks are barred from

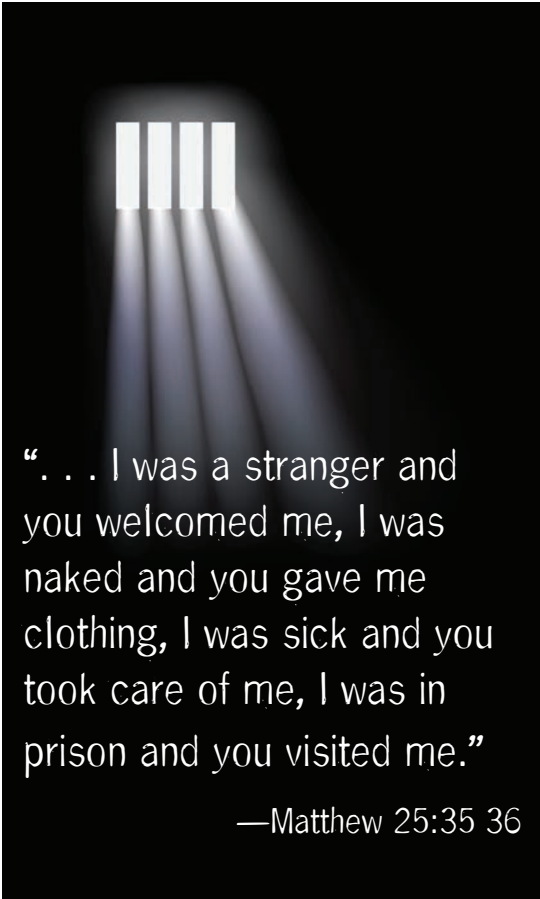
meaningful participation in this democracy, from voting to finding meaningful work.



The Alpha Course

The Alpha course explains the basics of Christianity and allows participants to

explore them in a safe and comfortable environment, and in contexts where people of many denominational backgrounds come together. The course is based on lectures and small group discussions. The Alpha Course is appropriate for seekers, people who are curious about Christianity, those who want to “brush up” on the basics of Christianity, long time Christians who could use a recharge, those who have fallen away from church, and the unchurched. Fourteen lectures are available to view free online or on DVDs for a minimal price. Specific guidance for prison ministries is available at alphausa.org/prisons.



“ . . . I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

—Matthew 25:35-36

A great deal of prison ministry is simply showing up consistently. We are the feet, hands and hearts on Earth through which the Triune God works. After months of Bible study via Zoom during the pandemic, a lull in the Covid-19 infection rate allowed the ministry team to visit in person and deliver an intensive six-week, twice per week Alpha course. We observed the Holy Spirit change men from the inside out, meeting their most basic need to fill the God-shaped hole in their lives—the hole that they had been filling with drugs and alcohol. Although five men were baptized and two requested re-affirmation of baptism, I feel the ministry team had little to do with their rapid spiritual growth. It was humbling to witness the Triune God at work in the men’s lives.

Support Following Incarceration

Before they graduate, we talk to the men about finding a compatible church and church family soon after they leave. We also advise them that if they go to a church and are asked to cover their tattoos, feel judged or do not feel that the congregation recognizes the image of God in them, then leave and continue their search for a church. We tell them to look for welcoming and inclusive churches.

Ninety-five percent of state prisoners reenter society.⁷ Congregations offer what formerly incarcerated people need, which is the same as what we all need—regular worship and

fellowship with a church family, Bible study with other believers, a loving environment to practice their faith with a church family, an opportunity to belong and work alongside others, and to be loved as children of God. Beyond these universal needs, congregations can also help with the needs particular to people reestablishing themselves after being incarcerated—access to the internet to request a replacement social security card or make an appointment for reapplication for a driver’s license, or a network to find leads on job opportunities and secure housing.⁸ Just as congregations provide such help for refugee families, they can also help individuals who have completed their sentence and are being released from prison. It’s about loving our neighbors and welcoming them at the table. 🍷

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Notes

1. Alpha Course (2022); alphausa.org.
2. Karen Hughes, Mark A. Bellis, Katherine A. Hardcastle, Dinesh Sethi, Alexander Butchart, Christopher Mikton, Lisa Jones and Michael P. Dunne, “The effect of multiple adverse childhood experiences on health: a systematic review and meta-analysis,” *Lancet Public Health*, 2017 Aug, e356-e366; [thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanpub/PIIS2468-2667\(17\)30118-4.pdf](http://thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanpub/PIIS2468-2667(17)30118-4.pdf).
3. Leslie E. Roos, Tracie O. Afifi, Christina Gamache Martin, Robert H. Pietrzak, Jack Tsai, and Jitender Sareen, “Linking typologies of childhood adversity to adult incarceration: Findings from a nationally representative sample,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 86(5), (2016), 584–593; doi.org/10.1037/ort0000144.
4. Daniel J. Ott, “Killing,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, Vol. 203, No. 15 (October 2021), 26–31. In this article, Ott cites Nancy Sherman’s definition of moral injury from *Afterwar: Healing the Moral Wounds of Our Soldiers* (New York: Oxford University, 2015): “experiences of serious inner conflict arising from what one takes to be grievous moral transgressions that can overwhelm one’s sense of goodness and humanity.”
5. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010.
6. *Ibid*, 283.
7. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, “Reentry Trends in the U.S.” (2003); bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/reentry.pdf.
8. Chris Hoke, “One Parish one prisoner: Every church a local resurrection community,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, Vol. 204, No. 15 (October 24, 2022), 12–21.