

BEING AN EFFECTIVE VOLUNTEER IN PRISON

The following is an excerpt from the speech given by Reverend Ulli Klemm at the YPM 2005 Annual Conference. Ulli is the Administrator of Religion and Volunteer Services, Bureau of Inmate Services, for the PA Department of Corrections

I would like to introduce you to five prison ministry volunteers I have met on my journey as a prison chaplain. While most volunteers view themselves as being effective servants for Christ, unfortunately, many are not as effective in their ministry as they perceive themselves to be. Let us reflect on our own volunteer service as learn from these examples.

The first volunteer I want to introduce you to is **Earplug Eddie**. Earplug Eddie always went to prison with a well-planned Bible study, complete with outline and handouts. His job, as he saw it, was to get through the materials he prepared at whatever cost. As his study progressed, he did all the talking, never pausing to answer questions because he was trying to get through the study in the time allotted. Unfortunately, amid his great intention to share the Living Word with the inmates, he had forgotten to remove his earplugs. His earplugs distanced himself from his learners and their stories and prevented him from hearing their questions, doubts, cries and pain. Because his ears were closed, the Bible had little chance of intersecting with the story of the individuals he intended to liberate with God's Word.

In order to be an effective volunteer, you must enter someone else's story. In order to enter someone else's story, you have to open your ears and intentionally listen to that story to allow it to penetrate you. Only then can you find and ask God's grace to help you intersect God's Words with the lives of those you seek to help.

The second volunteer I want to introduce you to is **Exhibitionist Eileen**. Exhibitionist Eileen has lived an exciting life, often on the edge. Her stories from the streets - stories of experimenting with drugs, selling her body, and serving time in prison - were always engaging. Members of Eileen's church were anxious to get her on their prison ministry team. What credibility she would lend to their efforts! But whenever Eileen shared her testimony in prison, she spent her entire time entertaining her listeners with how bad she was back then: how she hung out with the worst of them, stole to feed her addiction, overdosed, was shot at and almost killed. Then all of a sudden, with a minute left to share, she dropped the "Jesus bomb," telling inmates in thirty seconds how she gave her heart to Jesus and has never been the same since. It was like she took a magic pill and was "high on the Lord" The men, who listened sat there motionless, confused. To them, changing for the better was always a struggle. To her, as soon as Jesus entered her life, the struggle stopped. Although Eileen's last incarceration was ten years ago, and the stories of life on the streets were entertaining, the guys couldn't believe her. It was as if being a Christian is one glorious day after the next with no pain, no struggles, no doubt. The men know that that's not the way life is.

Truthfulness, being real, telling what it was like back then: yes that is important. But telling what it's been like since then and telling it with truthfulness and honesty is even more important.

We all have things in our past, maybe not quite so exciting and on the edge as Eileen, but we all have things in our past that we are not proud of. We also have things in our lives that we struggle with as Christians. We need to share those areas in order to be an effective witness of God who is at work with us now, just as God was at work when we first came to faith.

Good Guy George is the third person I've met in prison and with whom I am well-acquainted. For I was "Good Guy George" at one time. I was living in Chicago, married, had a stable job, and was part of a healthy church. When I was asked if I would go and visit folks in prison, I thought that here is an opportunity for me, 'the good guy,' to visit the 'bad guys.' I went to visit those in prison, figuring that I, as a 'good guy' would get the royal treatment. My assumption was to be dispelled. As I entered the prison, an officer immediately told me to take off my jacket, belt and watch and to remove my shoes. "Hey" I wanted to yell, "I'm the good guy! Why are you treating me as if I was a bad guy?"

In my early days as a chaplain, I thought that my number one assignment was to teach those bad guys and women how to be like me: a good guy. The inmates listened politely to what I said and expressed appreciation for my coming to talk with them. But there was something wrong with this picture. You see, I came into prison with an assumption that I and the inmates in my care were not made of the same fabric. I assumed that I was different than them. That they were the ones who needed changed, not me. And so when I prayed I prayed, "Lord Jesus I pray for **them** that **they** might hear a word today; that **they** might be changed." I didn't pray, "Lord I pray for **us** because life is hard and **we** have hard choices to make. " I didn't pray "Give **us** the courage to be faithful when **we** are tempted" No, me the good guy, prayed: "Lord touch **these** men. Change **their hearts.**" In reality, it was my heart and my attitude that needed changed.

Prisons need 'good guys' but even more they need good guys who know they are bad guys. Prisons need volunteers who pray, "Lord, have mercy on **us**...help **us** to change....help **us** to grow...."

A fourth volunteer I have met I will call **Predetermined Pete**. As a chaplain I received many calls from Predetermined Pete. Always, he would tell me that God had spoken directly to him as he was reading Matthew 25:39 or Hebrews 13:3. As he watched

a movie about prisoners, he thought, "I've got to get in there." As he talks with me on the phone, he tells me that God has told him exactly what he will do in the prison where I am chaplain, on what day of the week and at what time. He further states that if I'm a godly man, that I would open the prison doors wide and let Pete come in.

For some reason, without having stepped foot in our jail, Pete decided that he knew exactly what we needed. When he didn't get the response he was seeking, under his breath he muttered that I was of the devil.

When you approach a chaplain, a superintendent and want to offer your help, simply say: I feel called to do prison ministry. I know there's a lot I don't know and a lot I have to learn, but how can I be most helpful to you? In my tenure as a chaplain, I didn't get many calls like that. When Predetermined Pete would call, I'd put his name on a different list.

Finally I'm going to talk about ***Righteously Indignant Rochelle***. Rochelle's number one concern was inmates. Her concern led her to drive 10 miles out of her way to pick up another volunteer and then drive another 30 miles through rain and snow to the prison. She wanted to be with inmates. And unfortunately her zeal to be with inmates, let her to ignore any and everyone else en route to the prison chapel or classroom. The officers she met at the prison gate were simply necessary evils. They were not people to treat with the same Christian kindness she treated the inmates who attended her study. She treated them as if they didn't exist.

One day, when the lobby officer asked her to remove the suit jacket she was wearing, she stood up straight as if she was about to rebuke Satan, and said, "No, I'm not taking this jacket off. I have always worn this jacket into the prison and I don't intend to take it off now. It goes with my suit." As you might expect, Rochelle was stripped of her volunteer privileges and sent away. It was too bad that she didn't treat the officers at the prison with the same Christian love she showed to her inmates. She became her worst enemy.

I contrast Rochelle with an elderly volunteer I knew, a volunteer who still volunteers in her 80's. In her own saintly way she would kiss the balding heads of the officers she met en route to the chapel or to visit inmate on their housing units. Over time, officers began to position themselves to happen to be wherever she was to receive her blessing in the form of a kiss or a hug. In my opinion, she is the most effective volunteer at that prison because she loved inmates and staff with the same depth of love that God loved her.

These are five of the volunteers I have met in my journey as a prison chaplain. There is a common string that binds these not-so-effective volunteers together. The string is "self." Self is what often gets in the way of our being effective volunteers. When we put "self" above our service to others, we will always lose. Self

rears its head in the form of our pride which thinks that what we have to say is more important to listening to others. Self becomes evident when we deny the truth of our struggles as Christians pretending once we give our lives to Christ that life is one big party. Self judges ourselves as good, while judging other as bad and in need of change. Self is present whenever we feel we have the most clear and direct line of communications to God as if we were an angel and everyone else is a demon. And finally, self finds ways to distinguish who is worthy and who is unworthy of our love when God calls us to love all.

In Matthew 16 Jesus said of the self:

"If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for me will find it."

To be an effective volunteer in prison you must lose your self because self will get in the way of faithful, compassionate and effective ministry every time.