



Rev. Lynn Litchfield Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women

Hebrews 13:3 says, “Remember those in prison as though you yourself were in prison, those being tortured as though you yourself were being tortured.” If we follow this command, we cannot simply accept “out of sight, out of mind.” Won’t you help minister to the forgotten?

December 2007 – Live It!

Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Ministering to the Forgotten

Inmates are perhaps the largest forgotten population of people in the world. We have over 2 million incarcerated adults in the United States alone. In Virginia, we have about 30,000 people in prison with 2000 of them being female. As the sole Chaplain to Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, I serve 1200 of Virginia’s female felons, 500 staff and 200 volunteers.

For the majority of folks on the outside, my experience is that we just don’t think about those in prison very much. They are indeed, out of sight so out of mind. Felons lose voting privileges and reputation so, typically, advocacy for this population relies on those outside the prison population. However, those without time within the corrections system lack the experiential knowledge to effectively address concerns and needs.

This leads us to the importance of correctional Chaplains and volunteers. Desperate, broken, desolate and hurting, female felons enter these gates with fear, depression and grief that knows no bounds. Life as they knew it, dreams, hopes and relationships have ended. Seeking solace, comfort and often escape from their pain, they are vulnerable to discovering new addictions within the confines of prison. As Christian volunteers we know a God who loves the least of these. We can share that loving God with these broken women.

While mother is isolated from society, she is also isolated from her children. Children of incarcerated parents are six times more likely to become incarcerated than children of parents not in the “correctional” system. The cradle to prison pipeline in our country is phenomenal. In the United States, we incarcerate a higher percentage of our population than even South Africa during Apartheid. Alarming, it is an ever increasing number.

Children are truly innocent victims of corrections, frequently suffering the greatest upset in routine and stability. Those children who stay in contact with family members have a greater chance at staying out of prison themselves. The importance of parenting and the family unit cannot be overstated. As church communities, we can reach out to those children and include them in our lives. We can positively influence the younger generations to know the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Perhaps we can assist the family of an incarcerated parent by driving them for a visit, paying a phone bill (in VA, there is a 2.85 cent surcharge on all calls received from an inmate, a 15 minute time limit, but a high, collect call per minute charge), or including the kids for ice-cream.

As a Chaplain, I see a great deal of people who desire to evangelize the prison population. Volunteers come in once to assist with worship, ask the women to accept Christ and then we never see them again. In truth, most of the women in our services are professing Christians. While I certainly believe Jesus is desperately needed behind the walls, we need more discipleship training than conversion preaching. We need modeling of Christian decision making, developing a healthy self-esteem, healthy relationships, applied theology – what does my belief in Jesus Christ mean to how I live my life? We need pen-pals and people willing to open their hearts and lives to those inside the gates – and those just released from them.

You can help by praying for the correctional system, the staff, the inmates, the chaplains, the volunteers. If the Holy Spirit leads, perhaps you can help by volunteering with a prison program, a transitional program for those just released or by parenting those little ones who need an “extra” mommy or daddy. We know where many of the most desperate and desolate men and women are located. Most of them will come out to our communities after incarceration. How can we expect any better from them if we don’t minister to them while they are a genuine “captive” audience?

Tangible Grace by Rev. Lynn Litchfield

Christmas has always been my favorite time of the year. I love the worship, the lights, the decorations, the music, the tasty treats and the hope. I remember being a small child at the Christmas Eve service and feeling such warmth – love and joy so deep that, even then, I knew it came from God. Christmas remains full of awe and mystery in my life.

After ten years serving as the Chaplain at Fluvanna, I still love all those things – but I have a greater appreciation for the blessing of it all. Christmas for those in prison has none of the trappings of the “outside” world. My ladies at Fluvanna have no gifts under trees, no lights to hang and no tasty treats to eat. They do not have the hope of seeing their children at Christmas – much less the joy of watching them unwrap a gift. Although I think our prison is a nice one, as prisons go, it can still be a stark and lonely place, seemingly more so at this time of year.

Yet, on December 4th, the atmosphere here will change. Sixty volunteers will come dressed in festive holiday attire (I purchased new red and white striped, white faux fur

trimmed socks for the occasion) to share the Christmas Spirit with the women of Fluvanna. It is a day made possible by the overwhelming generosity and hard work of thousands of people – many of them my beloved WMU.



Except those too ill or confined for security, all 1250 inmates will line up in the prison gymnasium to sign for their Christmas gifts. (For those who cannot come to us, we take the gifts to them.) The women will be escorted by a volunteer to receive a toiletry kit, a small “Datebook” calendar, a Salvation Army “card” calendar, a pad and pencil from Kingsway, a workbook on healing from abuse and a stationary pack with stamped and unstamped Christmas cards, all purpose cards and stationery. All of these are gifts that have come from the community of faith in Virginia as tangible grace.

Women will cry tears of joy at this gift of grace – unmerited favor. These gifts will ease the financial stress of many women here. For some who are too ill to work, this day will enable contact with the outside world. For some, it is the only chance to touch something that their children will hold. For others, it will be their only Christmas gift. After years in here, family and friends disappear and the women are on their own to provide for their needs at 23 cents an hour. Volunteers will cry, too. Many will offer a tearful “thank you” to the churches and people who made this possible. And, I will cry. I am always deeply moved by this day in ways I cannot verbally express – so I weep.

We will also laugh. We will laugh great, big, belly laughs of joy at this blessing and the fun it brings. They will laugh at my socks. Women will sit long into the night looking at each card, examining and reading, deciding who will get which one. They will happily overwhelm the mailroom for the next week or more. Although prohibited, they will also trade and save some items for “Christmas gifts” to each other. Many women here practice charity, quietly and discreetly, for fear of punishment if they are caught and to honor the pain of the one in need. We will smell pretty soaps and feel like women. We will get to write our children. We will laugh.

As long as I live, I hope never to forget the tearful words of a woman who had just lost her only parent to death. In sharing with me her devastation, she said, “I only got one card. . . from another inmate here. Since they don’t sell them on canteen, I know it came from the package you gave us at Christmas. It was all I got. Thank you.”

I still enjoy the decorations and food at Christmas. But among my favorite Christmas events is my front row seat to the ways your grace for these women affects their lives – year round. On behalf of the women “inside” who have no voice “outside,” thank you! Thank you for loving these women who have such a huge place in my heart. Thank you for the joy, the laughter, the sharing and even the tears. Thank you, most of all, for reminding a broken and desolate woman that she is loved. What you did mattered. Merry Christmas!