

Prison Ministry – Why Do It?

Response to “Theologies of Prison Ministry” by Catherine Torpey

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Thank you, Catherine, for your reflections on prison ministry. You have touched on many aspects of prison ministry, from the injustices in the prison system to the fact that Buddhist ministries can be seen to serve the interest of the system. But the focus of your paper, it seems to me, is really on the question of how can Unitarian Universalists engage in prison ministry within the context of a congregation, or more specifically, how can *you* “do” prison ministry as a parish minister.

You list the many options included in our Association’s recent Statement of Conscience, and suggest that Unitarian Universalists have a natural niche in advocacy work because of their “substantial political muscle.” You describe the Church of the Larger Fellowship’s letter-writing program, and advise that the ideal prison ministry in a congregation would “encompass all aspects of advocacy and outreach.” You feel that there would be people in congregations “eager” to do the advocacy and outreach tasks, and that your ministry can be to help people develop a sense of solidarity with the prison population so that their ministry is not patronizing.

I’d like to suggest that a sense of solidarity, and some sense of connection even, is necessary not only to keep prison ministry from becoming patronizing, but to make it possible at all. I think that even for those who don’t see prisoners as “other” or different still may need some connection to the situation, or some personal experience like yours perhaps, to motivate them to engage in a ministry to prisoners.

There is a man in the Midland congregation, who started coming shortly after I arrived and hasn’t missed a Sunday yet. He goes by the initials, R.G., he’s retired, and he has become indispensable as our volunteer custodian. R.G. also spends much of his time writing letters to prisoners. I am thankful that when letters from prisoners come to the fellowship, I can pass them on to him and know that they will be treated with respect, and the kind of time and attention that I just don’t have to give.

R.G. served thirteen years in prison.

I interviewed R.G., and he wrote up some thoughts on his prison ministry for me. He says, “Having been charged with a crime that I could not prove that I did not do I spent 13+ years in prison with an attitude of service to those I found there (after a short period of grieving my loss of freedom).” R.G. started his prison ministry while still in prison. He says,

I found that about 30% of prisoners actually want help to get themselves on track to a better life when they are released. These are the prisoners who talked to me while in prison about their spiritual lives and how to make prison life more palatable and who now willingly write to me and want some help to get on that track. . . . My work with these prisoners started while I was in prison walking the yard with them side by side. The first five years after my own release were the most difficult and rewarding as I worked daily writing letters to prisoners I left behind. Many months 150 letters was not uncommon for me to write. The average was something like half that amount.

R.G.’s experience in the system gives him distinct advantages in this ministry, in that he understands the situation the prisoners are in as only someone who has been there can. He thinks they have more trust; they realize they’ve got someone who knows the system, knows what they’re going through. He says, “Unless you’ve been there, you don’t have any idea what these guys are going through.”

His experience not only helps the prisoners trust him more, it also helps him from being taken in by them. He says,

Some actually need money to help them in sending out letters to their families or the courts or lawyers. A few just want money so that they can buy things [like TV sets] and though I do write to them I do not send them any money, as that is never my purpose. There are others to whom I do send a few dollars here and there and I will bend over backward for a prisoner who looks for ways to serve those of the outside world and those in prison with them. Those are few and far between just like in the free world.

R.G. told me that there are those who will make up all kinds of things to get money or other help. They will say that the prison makes them buy all their food and clothing, which isn’t true. He told me of a prisoner who was living high on the hog with five or so women on the string, all sending him money and expecting to marry him when he got out.

R.G. now only writes to those prisoners who write to him, but he still writes to prisoners all over the state. A couple of times he has picked up prisoners when they are released on parole, taken them to the parole officer and then home. Once I gave R.G. some money from my

minister's discretionary account to buy a book for a prisoner that would help him research his case. R.G. has become knowledgeable about law, and sometimes helps prisoners to navigate the system. He does advocacy work, writing letters, emails and faxes to government officials when he feels something wrong with the system needs to be addressed.

R.G. has first-hand knowledge and plenty of horror stories about the problems with the system. He has stories of men being left to bleed to death in their cell, or being intentionally given the wrong medication and dying. The images that stay with him motivate him to work to change the system.

But R.G.'s strength and his focus is not so much in fighting the injustices in the system; it is in helping others to achieve a spiritual acceptance of their circumstances. His ability to accept his own situation without bitterness or anger is what allows him to help others accept where they're at. Even today, years after his release from prison, he deals with the legacy of being an ex-con, something that never goes away no matter how many years pass. It causes him pain, yet he doesn't get angry; he tries to work around it. He doesn't have much money to live on, and yet he buys things for the fellowship when he sees a need. He has some health issues, and his family has mostly been unable to accept his being gay, and yet he remains cheerful and accepting of whatever life throws him. I admire R.G. greatly for this, as it is an important spiritual lesson I have been working on for years.

Because of his education, R.G. was (and is) able to research and help prisoners with their cases. But he feels his main purpose is to help them accept where they're at and make the most of their situation. He encourages them to do something for themselves and their fellow prisoners. He helps them learn who they are, what strengths they have, and what tools they have to help them serve in prison.

I asked R.G. if he thought he would be doing the prison ministry if he hadn't had the prison experience. He said, "maybe not."

Our congregation was recently offered the opportunity to vote on whether to do a congregation-wide social justice project, and if so, which one of three choices. The choices included prison ministry as well as reproductive rights and homelessness/accessability. The last one won, so we will not be doing prison ministry as a congregation, at least not just now. And we have the advantage of having someone in our congregation who already has an active prison ministry and could help us and guide us.

The suggestions in the UUA's statement of conscience on prison ministry are all good, but who is doing them? Would it be enough to feel that people in prison are not so very different from the rest of us? How would we convey that sense of solidarity? I doubt that Unitarian Universalists will get it through relating to the biblical stories of imprisonment from our Judaeo-Christian heritage. Many don't know the stories, and of those who do, many won't claim them as ours.

Catherine, you describe finding a sense of solidarity in the experience you had this summer, which helped you relate to the situation of Elaine Bartlett and to appreciate her wisdom and courage. But is that enough to sustain you in doing prison ministry? Is it enough for you to motivate others to do it?

Maybe even more than a sense of connection with those we wish to minister to, what's needed is the sense that we Unitarian Universalists have a saving message. This, as you point out Catherine, is what motivates Evangelical Christians in their prison ministries, and mission work as well as the sense that people need what they have to offer, and it is their duty as religious people to share the good news, whether or not those they minister to ever end up on their membership lists or contribute to their institution.

I believe we do have a saving message as Unitarian Universalists. Our fundamental belief that every person has inherent worth and dignity can lift a person from despair to hope. That fundamental belief of ours requires us to believe that no one is ever beyond redemption, that no one should ever be given up on or should give up on themselves. Because the worth is inherent, it can't be taken away, no matter how badly we act. This is the good news of Unitarian Universalism, and people outside our walls need to hear it, even if we can't expect a pledge from them. People inside prisons need to hear it, people who run the system need to hear it.

This message of radical universal acceptance can lead to the self-acceptance and forgiveness that helps us accept our lot. It can help us to turn from punishing ourselves for our mistakes and fighting against the way things are, to making the most of our situation and doing something for the others around us. We all need this message, prisoner and minister alike. I wonder if we Unitarian Universalists truly believed this saving message in a deep and personal way, if we might not be motivated to spread the word, to reach out to those imprisoned and to work to change the system to respect the worth and dignity of all. I'd like to see us try.