Zimbabwean couple's prison ministries see one-third of nation's offenders enrolled in Bible studies

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In Luxon and Charity Zembe's native Zimbabwe, the idea is generating staggering results -- more than one-third of the country's prison population is enrolled in Bible studies and 500 prisoners joined the church last year, marking the first known time in Zimbabwean history prisoners have requested baptism.

Since launching Glenara District Prison Ministries, the Seventh-day Adventist couple has logged many firsts. Their ministry was the first such outreach program Zimbabwe had seen -- tough in a country where societal attitudes toward prisoners are enmeshed in fear and prejudice, often leaving former prisoners ostracized by family and friends and with little hope of rehabilitation.

The Zembes, along with 12 volunteers from their local church's Woman's Ministries department, began ministering to the Hwahwa Young Offenders Prison near Gweru, Zimbabwe, six years ago. Now, they're present in 43 of the nation's prisons -- all but Zimbabwe's two maximum-security prisons -- offering prisoners access to Hope Channel programming, Bible studies and a support network.

Still small, their team now benefits from fledgling partnerships with Adventist churches located near area prisons. Members can lend financial and spiritual support to prisoners without costly long-distance travel.

"When a church is close by and can 'adopt' a prison, this is a very good thing in terms of sustainability," Luxon says. In one such case, prison authorities were so impressed by the dedication of volunteers, they asked a local church to build an extension chapel within the prison complex.

Convincing members to participate is sometimes difficult, though. "Obviously not everybody buys into the idea of working with prisons," Charity says. "This is something you have to go out and do first. Then you come back and show people pictures and videos, tell them stories and say, 'This is the work that is happening within prisons.'"

Show and tell has preceded support from the beginning. When the Zembes first asked whether they could install Hope Channel in several prisons, officials were suspicious, wary the programming contained political messages, Charity said. After watching broadcasts for several months, officials gave permission. Soon afterward, several requested Bible studies, Charity says.

Since then, prison authorities have conducted research, independent of the Adventist Church, to measure the impact of the Zembes' ministry. "What they discovered is a very significant reduction in repeat offences for those prisoners engaged in the program -- who watch Hope Channel, who take Bible studies," Luxon says.