WELCOME TO THE GOD SQUAD

With a bunch of new folks, I thought we would take you all into a prison to try to get the feeling of being there.

First, prisons come in six custody levels, from #1 (minor) to #6 (maximum). When an inmate arrives at prison, each one goes through a process of establishing a level. The level is established by adding your total life to the crime. Minimum custody to super maximum. Housing may be a tent, a pole barn dormitory, single cell to 6-person cells. The most common is the two-men-per-cell, or two women. In each cell are two bunk beds, a toilet and sink combo, a thin mattress on a steel bed. Often they eat and sleep without bathing for long periods. You do not get to choose your cellie (cell mate).

If their custody level is high they are handcuffed to and from the shower and any movement around the prison. With overcrowding, inmates are often cell fed; each inmate receives one hot meal and two sack lunches all at once for the day.

I remember our first trip to San Quentin. Walking toward us, was a man cuffed from head to toe, with two guards and the loud speaker blaring “Dead Man Walking,” meaning a Death Row inmate was being moved, a chilling sight.

Many prisons are so over-crowded that gyms & chapels are used for housing. The stench in these units is really bad. If they have use of chow hall it is a massive rush to get fed and out in a flash. Some cells called the “hole” may not have bed, blanket, or toilet.

I remember Jerry Graham, who wrote “Where Flies Do Not Land,” telling of trying to keep the rats away from eating his flesh each night... shoving boots into the hole used for a toilet. Very cold in the winter and hot in summer.

With so much prison gang activity, inmates are often locked down for very long periods of time. Razor wire and gun towers are everywhere. Making a weapon is a must to survive. We advise you to go to the Internet, then to Prison, Prison gangs, prison violence; it will be educational.

RELIGION IN PRISON

This can be a very confusing topic. When we first started it was very challenging. Most inmates have had a little religion as they were growing up. Some had learned just enough to be dangerous. We always had a plan and God directed it.
I had a rule that we would take any question on the topic we were studying. The answers would be revealed the following week, giving me time to make sure of the answer. Most inmates can get a Bible; mostly just the New Testament. Some had study Bibles with notes, giving someone else’s idea of what is said. This is why we taught not to let our doctrine be a barrier, but a bridge to Jesus. Doing a lot with prayer helps control the way a ministry in prison goes.

We also established an All-Faiths Chapel and have kept that idea over the years. Since chapels (if there is one) are shared, and we are careful in what we allow. (Writing an inmate who is trying to go slow, get help; do not push “religion,” but Jesus.)

I learned the Bible as I taught it and learned well. We have found the Message easy to teach from. Message reads: in Hebrews 13:3: Remember the prisoner as if in prison with them.”

Ask lots of questions and be careful of the answer. I love to preach and teach, but Yvonne and I spent most of our time in prison; on the yard; in the cell blocks; and as much as we can in the visiting room. One-to-one is why Paper Sunshine really works. Getting into prison, due to severe over-crowding and gang problems, make Paper Sunshine letter writing a total package. The best preacher going into prison to preach will minister to tough men and women. But when they are gone, then what? The best teacher, even if going into prison weekly, will teach men and women.

The greatest problem with ministry in prison is that you are not allowed to spend private, one-to-one time with those in attendance. We know many good Chaplains whose hands are tied with paperwork, and the system wants them to play policeman. Often, like pastors on the street, the Chaplain’s Doctrine will be the base of most programs. We also know a lot of good Christian inmates who do services in prison, but they are also limited. Like all the Christian inmates he has to be in a constant survival mode. We often get notes telling us some inmates are trying to use our programs for one scam or another. That is why writing through us is a safety net.

Soon there will be 2.5 million inmates in prison. Rehabilitation instead of warehousing would be neat. Overcrowded and understaffed is rough. Keep in mind that you can get almost anything in prison that you can outside, often from staff.

ABOUT INMATES

In our prisons are some of the nicest and some of the worst men and women. When an inmate sends us an application, we read it and put it at the bottom of a pile. When you ask for a Pen Friend, we address an envelope and put it at the bottom of another pile. When your name reaches the top, the inmate chosen was there. Over 30 years we have seen the worst of the worst turn around and become very neat. We have also seen really nice men turn bad.

Prisons do not make better citizens. When a match starts and we see trouble, we jump in, offering you another Pen Friend, and we talk to the “bad seed.”

We have a lot of really educated inmates, and we have a lot of not-too-smart ones. Finding common ground may be hard and take time. Please, if you are mismatched, let us know; we will work it out. Please do not give up. 70% of the matches we have kept track of worked.
“Idle time is the devil’s workshop” is true. Most inmates serve “dead time.” Sleep and (?) If they have a TV or their cellie has one, they are lucky. A radio helps, but few are found. Dorms have day rooms with TVs which are controlled by gangs.

Prisons have stores where everything is expensive. Going to the store, if you have money, Is a chore. The gangs may take your stuff. Getting in debt is easy and getting out of debt is very hard. Fights, rape and murder are very common. With most states where the mindset is that longer sentences are better, suicide is much more common.

Now we are inviting you to safely go with us into these cesspools of life to try to make life better, or whole, by caring. You may be the only chance some of these folks have.

ANOTHER WAY TO MAKE IT ALL BETTER!

This is an election year and our votes count. No, we are not going to tell you who to vote for (though some pastors have done so), shame on them!

The cost of prisons is terrible; the graft is terrible; and men who are sent to prison as punishment, not for punishment, deserve a chance. Cutting costs in prisons could eliminate the national debt.

80% of those in prison are getting out some day. Will they be better off for their time served? No.

If Jesus had not lifted me, where would I be?

In a cell somewhere is a man or woman, boy or girl. From the comfort and safety of your home, you might help change a life.

Our God Is An Awesome God. Paper Sunshine has entered many a cell to bring the Light of Jesus to many. Please let your light shine.

JEAN’S JOTTINGS

It seems like forever since my last column; it’s been a difficult winter this year, with two deaths in my family, and the usual lack-of-sunshine syndrome.

Paper Sunshine should be broadcasting reams of cheer to our prisoners worldwide.

God provides birds in abundance, especially if we feed them well, and the variety here is so neat. It’s amazing how all the creatures can fluff up fur or feathers, and survive the bitter cold. They’re waiting no doubt, as I am, for Spring to set in. My reward next summer will be to open the doors, turn on the keyboard, and have them singing on key in the trees outside.

My partner will be back from Florida today, a welcome event that cheers me immensely. I’ll miss feeding the barn cats all talking at once around their breakfast.

One morning as I was admiring the Currier & Ives landscape behind the house, a lovely deer stepped through the border of the field. It was followed by another and another, and still another until all 14
animals were evenly spaced, following their leader in single file toward the woods. What a thrill!

Just last weekend, our chapel group acquired a talented new member. I’m never late (with one exception) and our new inmate was playing the organ softly. What a lovely atmosphere to come into. When the song service began, he opened his mouth and out came one spiritual after another from our hymnals. It was good to feel an angel choir join us with their presence also. It’s a special time.

It is also a special time to observe the progress our group has made, especially those with little education. They’re like summer flowers, opening to bloom, as they read from the materials my partner finds for them. One of the group is also good at putting Bible studies together. There is no shortage of jobs, at the prison or at church. Each church should have a group like that.

One of our chapel group was wondering how they would be welcomed or not, in a regular church setting with an established congregation. I assured him that I didn’t think ours would do other than welcome him heartily, as we should.

The sun has decided to make an appearance, and a part of the roads have been scraped some. Tufts of grass are showing here and there, but I took my walking staff anyway.

There is a huge area of water to the north, draining the hills and valleys. My neighbor ½ mile to the north has two barns in the middle of this “lake.” Are those the “Ides of March?” The cats already had food and water, so now they have two helpings. A lesson learned: drive on the grass; driveways stay frozen longer but cars play games sliding down the slippery slopes in the sunshine.

So hibernate for a few weeks looking for ideas to use in your new Paper Sunshine ministry with Someone Cares. Entice your family to join you; also your church family. Even school classes safely write to inmates and little children lead them to Christ.

Someone Cares Home Page