

Freedom in Christ Prison Ministry



I often tell people that change in the system moves slowly, like a dinosaur, unless it is trying to eat you; then it can move incredibly fast. Though I often share their impatience, I know that change can and does happen. Let me share some examples from my time here at Freedom in Christ Prison Ministry at Montana State Prison.

The very first memorial service I was called to do, everyone “knew,” because the state was paying for the interment, since the family either could not or would not, that it was just for staff. So no one bothered to invite the family. I visited the young man’s mother, in her nursing home, prayed with her and shared with her the sermon I planned to deliver, the next day. She was so pleased; she contacted the Warden, to thank him.

Of course the Warden knew nothing about it, which opened the door to review and clarity in understanding of policy, clearing the way to actively invite family members to attend, even family members who were also incarcerated here. At a recent memorial service for Chuck, an inmate who had been a participant since our beginning, there were six staff members in attendance, as well as an Associate Warden, a volunteer from a different worshipping community, and eleven participants from Freedom in Christ. This time the Warden thanked us!

Reintegration efforts have been guided by policies and policy interpretations that hampered the building of relationships between inmates and mentor teams from the outside. As the pastor of Freedom in Christ, I now sit on a task force that is re-writing policy for the entire Montana Department of Corrections. The model that is being used to shape that policy was adapted from the program of Luther Luckett Christian Church, another Prison Congregations of America congregation, and the guidelines of the framework of Healing Communities, developed by the United Methodist Church General Board of Church and Society, Criminal Justice Reform task force.

But for me, the most amazing and wonderful change has been the growth of Freedom in Christ into a genuine worshipping community, with emphasis on “COMMUNITY.” Let me close with one, recent example.

Chuck was struggling with health issues that reduced his ability to walk or see clearly enough to read, aloud. But he loved to read the Psalm reading in worship. Because of his sexual orientation, and his offense, Chuck was not, shall we say, one of the more popular guys at worship.

As he fought to stand up to read, other inmates assisted him to the lectern. As he started to struggle to read, in a halting and somewhat confused manner, an adult ADHD inmate (who I had been warned about as being disruptive,) walked to the lectern and stood by him, using his finger along beneath the words of the reading, and whispered the correct pronunciation to him when he faltered, then assisted him back to his seat. They wept at his memorial a few weeks later.

Pastor Rob