

## Coming Home: Opening Our Eyes, Ears, Hearts, and Minds

by the Reverend Dr. Gary B. Reiersen

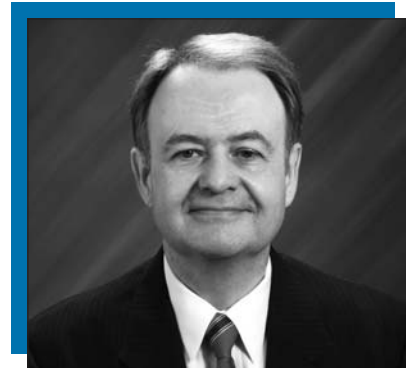
### Some Startling Facts

- For the first time, one in 100 adults in America is behind bars.<sup>1</sup>
- The United States incarcerates more people than any country in the world, including the much more populous nation of China (U.S.: 2.3 million incarcerated; China: 1.5 million)<sup>2</sup>
- 860,000 people (1.8 million over the next three years) will be released from federal, state, and local correctional facilities. More than 12,000 people are released each year to the City of Minneapolis alone.<sup>3</sup>
- Two-thirds of those released from correctional facilities each year will be re-arrested within three years, and 52 percent will be re-incarcerated within three years.<sup>4</sup>
- Recidivists commit, on average, at least two additional crimes before they are re-arrested, re-sentenced, and re-incarcerated.<sup>5</sup>

Our criminal justice system in America is not achieving the results we want it to achieve. Even those who for decades have championed mandatory minimum sentences and three-strike laws have indicated that the criminal justice social policies of our society have failed. For example, Rep. Bob Inglis of South Carolina, one such ardent past supporter of these public policies, said on the floor of the House, "I voted for them in the past. I will not do it again."<sup>6</sup>

So what are we to do? Clearly, we must find new policies and approaches that will produce better results.

One sign that we as a society are moving in a new direction on this issue was the passage by



Rev. Gary Reiersen, President  
Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches

Congress of the Second Chance Act which was signed into law in April of this year. The purpose of this act is to assist prisoners, who are returning to our communities in large numbers, with education, job training, mental health care, and drug treatment.

The Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches started down this path five years ago with the launching of two new initiatives:

- The Community Justice Project which focuses on reducing recidivism by changing offender behavior and, thereby, increasing public safety by decreasing crime.
- The Clinical Pastoral Education program which provides graduate level training to seminary students, pastors, deacons, members of religious orders, and lay leaders in churches working with offenders.

The Community Justice Project trains volunteer mentors to help newly released inmates avoid re-offending after release. The mentors help ex-offenders navigate through social service and government channels and offer practical advice on job hunting, budgeting, and housing issues.

Last year the Community Justice Project trained another 110 mentors – more than 270 since the program began in 2003. Tracking shows mentors make a real difference in recidivism. For example, 105 felons were matched with a mentor at the Adult Correctional Facility in 2007 and only 21 percent were re-incarcerated during the first year after release, compared with 44 percent nationwide.

In a recent study, we also learned that, as a group, those ex-offenders who stayed connected with their mentors had a total of 223 arrests prior to incarceration and only 6 in the first year after their release.

This is an approach that reduces both crime and recidivism. Hillary Freeman and the Rev. Brian Herron are the co-directors of the Community Justice Project.

Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) is a companion program which provides an in-depth clinical experience of learning using the action/reflection model of education. The curriculum integrates personal history, theology, the behavioral sciences, and spiritual development with pastoral skills. Most CPE programs are operated in hospitals and nursing homes. Our CPE program is the only one in the nation that focuses on training for those wanting to work with offenders and ex-offenders.

In 2007, CPE provided graduate level training to 10 seminary students, pastors, deacons, members of religious orders, and lay leaders in churches working with offenders in prison. In 2008, this program is expanding in partnership with Catholic Charities to serve ex-offenders (and others) in the community as well. The Rev. Dr. Susan Allers Hatlie is director of Clinical Pastoral Education.

## **The Paradox of our Faith**

When I first issued a President's Letter to the community in 2006 on these issues, I put forth what I called a paradox of our faith regarding criminal justice.

On the one hand, we believe in responsibility, accountability, and legitimate punishment for those who harm others or damage property.

On the other hand, we believe offenders (as well as victims) are children of God who deserve a chance to turn their lives around for the better in order to become contributing members of our communities once again.<sup>7</sup>

This perspective is rooted in a declaration of the Faith Statement of the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches which says, "We believe God calls us in Jesus Christ to care for children, vulnerable elderly, and those who are hungry, imprisoned, impoverished, or oppressed."

Since 2006, we have been joined by over 50 groups and individual public safety officials and judges in promoting October as Criminal Justice Month, an occasion in Minnesota to reflect on crime, offenders, and our faith.

Criminal Justice Month is a good time to remember our "felons of faith":

- Moses, who killed an Egyptian slave master (Exodus 1:12 ),
- King David, who sent Uriah, his rival for Bethsheba, to the forefront of the battlefield "that he may be struck down and die" (2 Samuel 11:15), and
- Paul, who described himself as a persistent persecutor of the early Christians (Galatians 1:13).

With ancestors in the faith such as these one would think that we would be more open to helping ex-offenders. Unfortunately, the opposite is often the case. Retired United Methodist Bishop Kenneth L. Carder, who teaches pastoral formation at Duke Divinity School, quoted "a respected federal judge" as observing that "pastors should be as familiar with the inside of the local jails and prisons as they are the local hospitals."<sup>8</sup> Those working inside our correctional facilities can vouch for the fact that this is not the case.

The churches often prefer to avert our eyes to the realities staring us in the face. The Reverend Otis Moss, III, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, in a conference on urban ministry this past spring, commented, "We are us. 'These people' in prison are our relatives, friends, and parishioners, yet we pretend they are not there." How often, for example, do we even offer prayers in our worship services for those who are incarcerated and their families?

The British philosopher Iris Murdoch observed that most analysis of moral action in the past 60 years has focused on act and choice and not enough on waiting and attention. Like the French philosopher Simone Weil before her, Murdoch inspired people to just see—really see—and to understand others and the circumstances in which they find themselves. In the case of offenders, ex-offenders, and their families, here is an opportunity to open our eyes and truly see and understand the challenges they face and respond with support so they may change their behavior and return to our communities as transformed people.

## **What Can I Do to Help?**

1. Gain greater understanding of the complexity of the issues by attending the Criminal Justice Month Call to Action. This event features former Governor and Congressman Al Quie as speaker, includes stories of ex-offenders and of mentors, and discusses the role volunteers can play. It will be held, in partnership with Prison Fellowship, on Thursday, Oct. 2 from 7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church, 511 Groveland Avenue (at Lyndale Avenue South), Minneapolis. Contact Hillary Freeman at [hfreeman@gmcc.org](mailto:hfreeman@gmcc.org) or 612-721-8687, extension 332 for further information and to sign up to attend. Perhaps you will discover that mentoring is what you are called to do.
2. Provide financial support to continue the Community Justice Project and Clinical Pastoral Education program. A contribution envelope for the Justice Circle is enclosed for your consideration.

Let us open our eyes and ears, and hearts and minds, to build a more just community where people are

both held accountable for their behavior and given a second chance to begin again as contributing members of our communities. Let us pray for victims, offenders, and the families of both. Let us support initiatives that work to reduce crime and recidivism.

God calls us to such acts of charity and justice.

---

<sup>1</sup> February 28, 2008 report of the Pew Center.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> As quoted by Christ Suellentrop in the *New York Times*, December 24, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> I introduced this paradox with a statement of the U.S. Catholic bishops entitled *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, November 15, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> "The Call to Prison Ministry . . . you visited me," *Christian Century*, October 3, 2006).

**The Reverend Dr. Gary B. Reierson is President  
of the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches.**

**Office: 612-721-8687 Fax: 612-722-8669  
reierson@gmcc.org**