

..Over the Years

Over ten years ago in November 1991, prison ministry was something very strange and a new concept to me. When a young Pastor, fresh graduate from Seminary approached me with the idea of taking up prison ministry in the beginning of his career, I wondered why he chose prison ministry as against a rather comfortable job of pasturing a Church. Almost at that time I had finished reading Charles Colson's book 'Born Again' in which he had narrated his prison experiences vividly. On being convicted in the Watergate Scandal which had rocked the presidency of Nixon in the United States, Colson - a proud and shrewd aide of President Nixon was thrown behind the bars. It was in the prison that his pride was shattered and for a change he came face to face with ugly side of life. Sharp edges of his personality were smoothed and he turned to the Creator. Eventually, he gave his life to Jesus Christ and vowed to work for the spiritual enlistment of the prison inmates as much as he thought of their rehabilitation.

BEGINNING

So glimpses of this wonderful and revealing book were very fresh in my mind when this Young Pastor approached me for supporting him in case of his taking up prison ministry work. Initially I was hesitant. Did not know how to take up the challenge. But we were led in prayer to think over it. I remember talking to Sushil Parekh, our family friend, the next day about it and was really amazed to find his positive response to my proposal. I realized that the Lord was at work in our hearts and mind to take up the challenge. So,



as we found the PURPOSE, means followed. Soon we had a registered body struggling to find its way into the dingy cells of the prisons of Bombay. Permission to visit prisons was as hard to come as were our initial encounters with authorities and inmates but we were persistent in our efforts. The Lord softened the heart of the then 1. G. (Prisons), Maharashtra, Sh. M. G. Narwane who granted us permission in 1992 only to visit Thane Central Prison inmates to carry out moral teaching as the Prison Manual had some provision for the same. We proved our credentials by staying within the given set of parameters and bringing in some positive changes in the attitude of some of the inmates with the guidance of Jesus Christ. Yes, the Lord was with us and then we went on getting the permissions for visiting more and more prisons of the State.

SUPPORT FROM PRISON/POLICE AUTHORITIES

Somewhere in 1995, Sh. T. Singaravel took over as the new Inspector General Of Prison of Maharashtra. He adopted a pragmatic approach of encouraging the role of Non government organizations in the task of counselling, correction and rehabilitation of prisoners. It was because of his initiative that a meeting of NGOs was organized on 20th March, 1998 at Mantralaya under the chairmanship of Sh. R. V. Pillai, General Secretary, N H R C to elicit their opinion and form a balanced strategy for governing various prisons of the state. On knowing about the objectives and activities of CROSSROADS, he granted permission to us for visiting all the prisons in the State. More challenges but meager resources! However, more and more volunteers started joining us. Sh. B. T. Nghinglova has been one of the great supporters of our ministries since the time he was posted in Mumbai in the year '91-'92 as Deputy Commissioner of Police.

Crossroads have always looked upon him for guidance in carrying out the activities of the organization since then. we are proud of him and praise God for his contribution towards building this ministry. At present Mr. Nghinglova is Special Inspector General of Police, Mumbai and remains concerned about the development of the ministry.

COMMUNITY HOME - a step forward

While visiting the prison inmates, we came face to face with certain ground realities which made us think and act in keeping with the demands of the situation. Rejected as they were, and treated as not more than scum of the society, in the event of their release they had nowhere to go because their own family members did not welcome them back in the family fold even if they wanted to lead a good life. Stigma of being in the prison haunted them wherever they went. Though it is true that most of the released have been finding their way back to criminal world because various social and financial reasons, it was worth making an effort to prevent them from doing so by providing a shelter to them temporarily in our Community Home when they were neither accepted by the society nor even by their own kith and kin. Thus, we started a Community Home at Nallasopara in the suburbs of Mumbai in July 1995 in rented premises. During our visits to prison, we have been encouraging to change the course their lives once they are out of prison. Since then, we have been taking care of some of the released prisoners and remand home youths within the limited facilities available with us there.

When we started this Community Home, we entrusted the care of inmates to a young theological graduate but soon realized that they have be put under the care of house parents. At a time , we keep not more than six in this extended family at the Community Home as we believe that family atmosphere is indeed necessary to assuage the bruised feelings of these rejected souls. God sent the first house parents, Rev. Roy and Princess Varghese for the Community Home in the year 1997. When they had approached us in December 1996,! wondered as to what made them take up the challenge of staying with the released prisoners in the Community Home but soon we found out their inner strength that comes only through strong faith in Lord Jesus who empowered them to withstand the rigours of the assignment that they had voluntarily taken. This experiment has enabled us to integrate about 50 individuals in the society so far but we did have our share of difficulties while carrying on with this work. On one hand, the housing society used to be very inimical towards the Community Home in the beginning, so much so that at one point they asked us to dose down the Community Home saying “this is the place where respectable people stay and so criminals cannot stay with us“. This was just on the basis of hearsay and apprehension but when they were asked whether any of the inmates of die Community Home had ever created any nuisance for die society members at any point of time, they were speechless. On the other hand, there were serious inter -personal squabbling between the inmates which used to pose even greater challenge for us, particularly for the house parents. But these things never deterred us from carrying on with this activity.

CELEBRATIONS WITH PRISONEPS

Christmas 1996 at Thane Central Prison is another landmark in the history of Crossroads and will always be remembered as a very special one. For the first time, we witnessed to 2500 inmates at a time with Carols & Hymns and narrated the story of birth of Jesus Christ. This was the result of good relations Crossroads had established with the prison inmates and the prison authorities that in spite of such a large gathering of so called criminals (which would normally be considered a security risk), there was no untoward incident all through over two hours programme. Since then, we have been organsing several such programmes year after year in various prisons of Mumbai and



Pune on the special occasions of Diwali, Independence Day etc., in coordination with the I G 's office/ prison authorities.

PRARTHANA SABHAS

Looking to the Creator for putting our lives in order whenever there is a personal debacle of any nature is indeed a time tested remedy. Worshiping God through the medium of prayer (prarthana) and hymns is essential to obtain peace, spiritual guidance and strength to combat evil in our lives. We have drawn the strength to minister to the prison inmates from our Lord Jesus Christ. For quite some time now, we have been encouraged to hold regular prarthana sabhas in prisons for the willing inmates and we have found the number of the inmates attending these sabhas increasing on every next visit. Prison authorities have seen remarkable positive changes in the attitude of inmates and encourage us to visit the inmates more often but as Crossroads moves ahead on the strength of volunteers drawn from different churches and other institutions, their availability are normally marred by their own daily schedule. Whenever we visit prisons, there are several volunteers who are unable to make them available for the visit, pray at their respective places for the inmates for a total transformation in their lives.

EXHIBITION CUM SALE OF GOODS PRODUCED BY PRISONERS

At the instance of Sh. T. Singaravel, I. G. (Prisons), Maharashtra, an exhibition-cum sale of a \ of goods produced by the prisoners in various prisons of Maharashtra was organised in the premises of YMCA, Andheri Branch from to 31 May, 2001. The then Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra was the Chief Guest at the inaugural ceremony of this event.

JOINING HANDS WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

On our invitation, a group of 22 reformed prisoners from Germany called Joy Singers had visited India in February 1995 and February 1998 under the leadership of Friedel Pfeiffer and Hans to minister to the inmates in prisons and remand homes of Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore and Delhi. They also interacted with the staff and students of several schools and colleges in these cities to create awareness about the prison ministry. During their visits to prisons, they sang songs, presented skits and gave their own testimonies to the prison inmates with the underlying objective of telling them that as they had changed their lives for good, even the prison inmates of India could do so. Sh. T. Singaravel, Inspector Gt Of Prison of Maharashtra had words of appreciation for the meaningful programmes presented by Joy Singers in prisons of Mumbai & Pune.

Bombay Y M C A has all along encouraged die activities of Crossroads and associated itself in organizing Seminars to create awareness about prison ministry When die ministry was passing through its nascent stage and finance was a problem in carrying cut its activities. YMCA had not only extended monetary assistance but also die material support as they allowed US to use their existing facilities.

Chief of Prison Ministries, England Mr. David Picford and his wife Betty visited Mumbai and contacted Crossroads in February 1997, They expressed their desire to visit prisons in Mumbai but the same could not materialize for lack of time to obtain permission from IG. However, we arranged their visits to New Observation Home, Mankhurd as well as Chembur's Children Home.

Rotarians from various Clubs affiliated to R. 1. District 3140 have joined hands with Crossroads on several occasions over the last couple of years to organize programmes for the welfare of the prison inmates in Mumbai.

CROSSROADS' EXTENSION SERVICES

Some interesting developments have taken place very recently at Bangalore where our work had come to standstill on account of some administrative reasons but Mrs. Anita Mathew, our representative, informed us that the prison authorities have granted permission to our volunteers there to visit Bangalore Central Prison for conducting programmes aimed at counselling the inmates.

On the invitation of Prison Incharge of Nasik Central Prison as well as Kohlapur Prison, our volunteers from Mumbai have been visiting these prisons at least once in a month under the guidance of Local Committee for the last about one year. We are also planning to visit prison at Amravati and Nagpur soon as the Superintendents of these prisons have been writing to US to visit them. Since visiting outstation prisons involve a lot of expenditure, we would try our best to accommodate these extended activities in our already very tight budget hoping in God that He will provide the necessary funds for the same.

LITERACY PROGRAMME FOR INMATES

During our recent visit to Byculla Prison, Mumbai, Mrs. Swati Sathe, the first lady Superintendent of the prisons, requested us if Crossroads could organize Literacy Programme for the inmates. Being a very dynamic and efficient officer of the prison, she is always very much concerned about the fact that the prison inmates should know their rights so that they have knowledge of penal provisions under which they have put behind the bars. She found that most of the inmates in the age group of 20 to 30 were illiterate and so education is the only media through which they could be made aware of their rights. So since literacy programme was inaugurated on 5 September, 2001 at Byculla Prison, Mumbai. Present on this occasion were J. Arthur Prem, Aroon Gorey (Vice President, CPM), Robert Clements (General Secretary, CPM) and several other volunteers from Taylor Memorial Methodist Church, Mumbai were present on the occasion. Ms. Doris, Inspector of Schools, Mumbai was kind enough to devote her time in training the voluntary teachers who are now conducting the literacy classes in Byculla Prison. Crossroads needs your support to sustain the activities of prison ministries in India.

J. Arthur Prem
Chairman
Crossroads