

# **Society and Prisons**

## **Perspectives for the Support of the Prison System and the Reintegration of Offenders**

Presented on the 8<sup>th</sup> CESCA Conference, Swaziland, August 8, 2007

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## **Introduction**

Links between the society and prisons are strong and powerful. They do need each other. Society does influence its prisons for the good - or not. But before I speak on this let me introduce Crossroads Prison Ministry to you.

### **0. Crossroads Prison Ministry**

Crossroads Prison Ministry registered Charity started in North-Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, in the year 1972, when a prison chaplain invited Christian youth groups to conduct a service behind the bars. The first voluntary based contact group started then in the Youth Prison of Siegburg: 20 volunteers go there on an evening every week, meet with 20 inmates in the church room, start together with a devotional time and then divide up into one by one communication. During the following years some more prisons were reached, and today the German Crossroad Ministry "Gefährdetenilfe Scheideweg e.V." is visiting 15 prisons with about 300 volunteers.

These volunteers came to know more about the situation of young offenders by visiting them in prison. They found out:

- Most of them were out of broken home situations.
- Many of them were drug addicted.
- Nearly all of them lacked the personal capacity to deal with life crises.
- Hardly none of them had a perspective for the time after release.

Volunteers therefore decided to accept released young prisoners in their families as "foster children". Till today 12 families are living with released young prisoners around the clock, supported by other volunteers. Crossroads started to run marked orientated and self supporting companies where these youngsters get jobs and professional training. Another step was the introduction of youth programs such as music and sports where they come to know non-criminal peers.

Today Crossroad Ministries can be found in West and East Europe, South America, Central and South Asia and Kenya, East Africa. In Kenya Crossroads started volunteering in a youth penal institution and to run a farm for the integration of released young offenders.

### **1. The links between society and prisons are strong and manifold**

The attitudes and opinions of society influence nearly every area of the penal system:

Law codes concerning crime and punishment are created by politicians with open ears towards their voters. This is very much the same when it comes to the use of public funds. When society tends to call for harder and longer imprisonment this may create problems for the prison system.

The acceptance of the work done in penal institutions and correction as a profession does also depend on public acceptance.

One the other and society has to be sure that prisoners are treated fair and under human conditions to accept prison penalty - and to believe in its effectiveness.

Most important is the acceptance of released prisoners in the society. If they are stigmatized and rejected, if they do not get a chance for a job, if they do not find new friends outside their former gangs, if they do not escape the circle of drug use and if there is no substitute for lost

family support they are driven back to crime. The first duty of penal systems is to avoid further crime which is only possible with the support of society.

## **2. Societies under a change tend to be more negative towards prisoners**

This can be seen everywhere in the world for different reasons:

Family systems lose their importance for social security and crisis prevention. More and more individuals are isolated and experience less empathy.

Crime figures rise and - accompanied by an intensive and detailed media coverage - cause more fears. Prisoners are measured by those committing the worst crimes.

Public funds are needed everywhere: Schools, health care, infrastructure i.e. and police seem to be more important to the public.

People tend to believe in the "survival of the fittest". They have to struggle hard themselves - why should there be support for prisoners?

And in many countries there is no history of charity because life crises have been covered by extended families in the past.

## **3. Society is responsible for prison conditions - for the prison system there is no reason to hide**

In the country where I come from drug abuse in prison has been hidden for a long time. I still can remember how I discussed with prison officials about this fact and they denied. When the first prisoner died after drug injection the picture changed.

Drug abuse is a problem everywhere in society- and in prisons as well. Reasons for the rise in drug abuse are found within the society and have to do with global changes as well. Why blame the penal system?

Overcrowding of prisons is created by courts, by criminal laws and procedures, by a lack of resources. The prison administration does not decide about the number of prisoners.

And even crime itself is "produced" in society. There is not only the decision of the individual to do wrong. Therefore repression must not be the only answer to crime.

## **4. People need motivation to care for prisoners**

First of all there has to be a clear signal from the penal system: We want to cooperate with society and therefore we welcome volunteers.

I found different attitudes in different regions. Last year I visited some East European countries. I spoke with Officers in Charge who believe: Volunteers only plan to destroy and abolish our system. Or they are paid by criminal gangs to support their members. This year I visited some African countries and I heard: Volunteers first of all serve themselves.

No doubt it is important to examine the motivation of volunteers:

Some go to prison to make society more just and our world a better place. Some believe that imprisonment might happen to their kids or relatives as well and that it is therefore good to care for prisoners. Christians go in because they believe in the power of forgiveness. As we can read in the Gospel of Matthew immediately after the Lord's prayer: "If you forgive men when they sin against you your heavenly father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins your heavenly father will not forgive your sins." (Matthew 6, 14+15)

## **5. People need information, concepts and partners to care for prisoners**

Information on the nature of crime and addiction, the social situation of prisoners and the rules and regulations in prisons are very basic. To train volunteers their organizations should cooperate with prison officials. In Germany we prepare volunteers with weekend courses for their service. And there has to be a concept how to continue with this training as well.

The service of volunteers in prison should be well organized. If they work as a group they can support each other and there should be a responsible leader amongst them. As well volunteers need a contact person within the prison administration. Communication between volunteers and this contact person has to be alive to avoid problems and conflicts.

To win and motivate volunteers you need ... volunteers. Those who are already active will invite and motivate others and give a good example. Helpful is also the example of prisoners who have changed their lives - with the support of the society.

Crossroads i.e. is visiting churches and reporting about its ministry there to win and train new volunteers. In Christian services ex-prisoners report about their change.

Often volunteers who start to work in prisons become also willing to accompany released prisoners with is most important for their social reintegration. So volunteering in prison becomes a "bridge into freedom".

Volunteers should know what their chances and strengthens are: To build up personal relationships with prisoners - without violating rules, counseling them honestly and giving them emotional support. Volunteers are not part of the penal system but action towards the same goals.

We may as well keep in mind that volunteers care for their financial resources themselves and act independent from public budgets. There are practical problems that have to be taken care of: How do they get to prison? During what time do they get admission to prison? How is the procedure of their acceptance? There should not much time between their offer to work as volunteer and the day their offer is accepted. The prison administration should cooperate with volunteer organizations on these issues.

## **6. Prison volunteers will become multipliers in society**

We have already mentioned that volunteers will win other volunteers. From our experience in many countries we can say that volunteers do support the creation of human prison conditions and a rehabilitation orientated penal system. They support the demand of the therefore needed resources as well and accept correctional officers as their partners. They inform their neighbors about prison and reintegration and help to have transparent and accepted penal institutions in a democratic society. And they offer relationship, jobs, spare time activities a from time to time a home in their own families to those who are released.

Volunteering is a basic need and institution in a modern society.

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