

An Amazing Reflection on How Kairos Changed a Chaplain's View on Prison Ministry

Community Building In Unexpected Places, by Reverend Bob Reed

After 35 years of chaplaincy in county jails and larger correctional facilities, a recent Weekend was an exceptional highlight within the framework of all those years. I was blessed beyond all expectations. Since moving to Florida, I had longed to do some kind of jail/prison work again. A kind word was extended to me to become part of a Kairos Prison Ministry team in a maximum prison not far away. I thought I'd try it, why not? I had heard the name a few times but knew absolutely nothing about Kairos.

As I type my reflections, I have come away convinced that Kairos is one of the most impacting outreaches to the incarcerated that I have ever observed. All of the elements that are included in the Weekend and through the program, give the possibility of creating an authentic Christian community for inmates while they are still inside.

Previous Experiences - In my experience, outreaches to prison and jail populations tend to be primarily evangelistic with little emphasis on spiritual growth, education and most of all, discipleship. The evangelistic approach is usually made up of three steps comprised of enthusiastic music, a Gospel message, and an invitation with an opportunity to "accept Jesus." I have occasionally heard volunteers remark something like this, "Did you see how many got saved?"

After giving hugs or shaking hands, volunteers leave and inmates try to figure out how this should work. No chaplain can follow up on all those who want to be strong Christians. The Kairos Weekend has shown me that the key is to incorporate Christianity in such a way that one on one relationships are the building blocks that give the inmate a fighting chance.

My Kairos Weekend Experience - With Kairos, the inmate selected usually has little knowledge of his fellow participants and wondering what will happen next. By the end of the Weekend, they discover a groundbreaking experience with the Lord, fellow inmates, and volunteers, who reach out with love and concern. Twice I heard an inmate express surprise that these people would "give up their time" for prisoners.

The days are carefully scripted so that every minute is used. There is much interaction with speakers, then times around tables for discussion where everyone has an opportunity to share. Subjects are chosen to elicit conversation which occurs more easily as time goes on. Enthusiastic music is enjoyed by all, meals are eaten together, times of prayer are powerful and the inmates feel God's presence as their need and the needs of others are lifted up to the Lord. There are many more elements involved, essentials that give them an understanding of what a life of commitment to Jesus looks like and what surrender entails. Ample scripture is given by each speaker and each talk clarifies the decision before them. What makes this such a powerful event is its simplicity. The volunteer is the tool God uses in a profound way.

Kairos As Continuing Ministry - The end result is that a cohesive community is established within the facility, a family built in hope and the love of Jesus. This family can pray and care for one another while still within the prison walls. Kairos returns at regular times, follow up is a big component in order to continue to encourage those who have joined the family.

I highly recommend this multi-faceted ministry and I pray that clergy and lay people make time to be that hand extended in Christ's name. In closing these remarks I do have one regret. It is this....I regret that I didn't look into this ministry years ago and then incorporate it into our programs.

I do leave you with one of my favorite sayings, "I am just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread!"

- Reverend Bob Reed