

Black Ecumenism and Theological Education: Reflections From Prison

When we think of *ecumenism* in theological education, we usually do not think in terms of that body of Christians who are incarcerated in our State and Federal prisons, or Correctional Facilities. But when we think of *black* ecumenism and theological education we cannot afford to ignore that body of incarcerated Christians in prison. An over-represented proportion of inmates come from our own black communities, families and churches.

The generic meaning of the term *ecumenical* is 'to inhabit the world.' It has to do with promoting Christian understanding and unity among the many Christian denominations. *Ecumenism* is concerned with the study of the nature and mission of the church and has to do with the historical character of *all* theological reflection. This includes theological reflection done in prison.

My purpose is to share and to reflect upon two exploratory courses I offer at the Pacific School of Religion in an attempt to link theological education with prison experience. One course is *Prison Ministries* and the other is *Ministries in The Criminal Justice System*. The first one is co-taught with the Protestant Chaplain, Nick Risted, and the second one is co-taught with my colleague, Sharon Cole and the Protestant Chaplain, Paula Gold-Timmons. I shall share the nature of both of these courses, their rationale, their effects upon inmates in the two prison settings and the effects upon students. I will draw on an article written by the Reverend Carol Nelson, one student who chose to write an article and to reflect extensively upon her experience after taking the *Prison Ministries* course. We may ask, 'what happens to theological students and to theological education in a prison setting?'; and 'what happens to inmates when they meet over time with theological students'? To anticipate, a struggle with scripture and the reality of prison life is precipitated. ". . . I was in prison and you came to me." Matthew 25:36.

There are some men and women who need us. I confess that I had not paid much attention to Jesus' words about visiting prisoners up until recently. It was my next to the last quarter in seminary; I was sick unto death of academic classes; I needed just one more field education course, and something was haunting me. Once in my ministry so far, I had encountered a family which had separated for a while because of a parent's incarceration. I had not known how to talk about the experience with them, and I didn't even know if I should. I took the class to try to find out. Four other students enrolled; and we got the nickname of "Odd God Squad" because of our unlikely composition. We were one Black woman, one Japanese-American woman, one white wo-

man, one white man, and one seven month pregnant German woman, and our Black male instructor.¹

The rationale for both courses is to expose the student to the prison setting and to expose inmates to theological students and to their education. The course is designed to help students to explore whether or not a chaplaincy in a prison or total institutional setting is for them, and to prepare them to include in their ministry an active concern for incarcerated people.

The course on *Prison Ministries* takes place at the Medical and Correctional Facility at Vacaville, California an all male institution. The class size has ranged from four to twelve students in any one quarter. The course meets for 10 weeks each Monday and all day. Our first class session of the day begins with inmate participation. This is an open session. Anyone who wishes and is able to participate may do so. Usually one of the theology students is prepared to lead a discussion on a biblical theme. Sometimes the topic for discussion has emerged from a previous prison contact and may be co-lead by a student and an inmate. This session last from 1½ to 2 hours, and is followed by lunch in the mess-hall where students and inmates can meet on a less formal and volunteer basis.

The time after lunch, roughly between 12:30 and 3:30 is unstructured time. The student is free to find and to develop a ministry somewhere within the prison. These ministries may take the form of tutoring an inmate; Bible study; participation in the activities of the Christian Fellowship, or in a therapy group lead by a prison psychologist or psychiatrist; visitation in the hospital or with inmates who are in solitary confinement and who do not have access to the mainline; or their ministry may take the form of one-to-one, or group counseling with inmates. Their ministry may include any combination of the above.

The professor and protestant chaplain are also engaged with inmates in a similar way and also available to the student to work through specific relationship problems as they may develop. From 3:30-5:30, the students and about four inmates whom the protestant chaplain has selected meet and work together in a closed, on-going group to reflect upon the nature and meaning of their ministry and the role of faith as it unfolds in the prison setting. The other inmates are locked in their cells during this 3:30-5:30 time and the prison is relatively quiet. For those who are in the small closed working group, this is a time of intense searching, confrontation and reflection. An operating assumption is that inmates also have a ministry to other inmates, correctional officers as well as to students. On many occasions inmates and students ministered to each other.

I met someone who says he is innocent of the crime he is convicted of; actually I met a lot of people who said that—this particular one I do believe. He is imprisoned for

¹ Reverend Carole Nelson, "We are called to visit the prisoners" *Viewpoint*, Los Angeles, California. (Vol 1, No.2 May 1981), P.11.

killing a Los Angeles police officer. He says he has dealt in drugs, and he admits he was a pimp, but he says he never killed anybody; he says he was framed by the police. I hope someday to find a law student or an attorney who will volunteer to check out his case. He has no money to pay an attorney; his family and friends have dropped him. He has a beautiful singing voice. In the worship service we did the last day we were there, he sang "Save A Seat For Me." He told me that every once in a while he gets the feeling that he would just like to run for the fence, knowing full well he would be shot by the tower guard. Death would be a release from the isolation and frustration of having no one to care.²

Many of the one-on-one contacts with inmates go smoothly. But in the small closed working group tension is evident. A continual source of tension centers around the more fundamentalistic orientation to the Christian faith of inmates who take the Bible literally and the theology students who tend not to be as familiar with the Bible and whose orientation to the faith may be characterized as 'liberal'. Many see themselves as 'questioning'. They appear to some of the inmates in the group as 'lacking faith', and in need of a dramatic conversion experience.

Many of the theology students viewed the inmates and their religion as closed, rigid and authoritarian. Some of these inmates view the theology students as soft or wishy-washy in their faith. Both perceptions bear some truth and the tension within the group often lead to impass or to polarization.

Another source of tension centered around the discovery that theology students may harbor judgemental attitudes towards certain inmates and their reasons for being in prison. One student who had developed a counseling relationship with an inmate later discovered in the small group that he was incarcerated for pushing drugs on children, who were about the same age as her own. She felt a real conflict and was not sure how she would continue to relate to this particular inmate.

On other occasions students have found themselves impatient with inmates who attempt to con them or who take advantage of them. Such encounters have deepened the question of the meaning and nature of ministry in prison, the meaning of acceptance and forgiveness, and what it means 'to tell the truth'? Students are forced to struggle with the context in which they are ministering and being ministered to and come to discover that the gospel of Jesus may reveal different truths and meanings in different prison situations.

It was hard to put together the realities that the man you were talking with was a convicted murderer or drug dealer or rapist and the two of you had just come back from the piano where you'd tried to sing a duet of "Precious Lord." I kept thinking, there but for the grace of God . . . and I wondered what made the difference. I mean, I have been angry beyond belief on occasion, and I know other people who have been even angrier, but somehow we never killed anybody. How come? This person who had killed somebody was just as human and as comfortable to be talking with as my next door neighbor.³

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

The questions, tensions, polarization and sometimes judgemental attitudes that arose were handled through individual sessions with the student or inmate, the professor and chaplain and were explored for their meaning and implications for christian ministry. They were often brought to the group for further exploration and reflection.

Near the end of the class experience each student prepared a reflection paper which included their understanding of what their ministry was about, how it unfolded, what were some of the major obstacles that hindered them, how they addressed these obstacles and where do they see their growing edge. The papers were prepared one week in advance for reading by the group members. Each student and inmate received a copy of the other's reflection paper and prepared their comments for feedback. The following week each student received twenty minutes of reflective feedback on the above mentioned criteria from their peers, the four inmates, the chaplain and the professor. The students were also asked to reflect upon the readings they had done from a prepared class reading list.

Over the years students have reported that this course has been the most traumatic and the most integrative course for them in their seminary experience. It has forced them to re-read the Bible and with new meaning. It has forced recognition of the importance of Old and New Testament courses, courses on Christian social ethics and liberation theology and pastoral care. These courses have taken on new relevance.

After spending ten Mondays, ten very long Mondays working out of the California state men's penitentiary, after Protestant Chaplain's office almost causing a riot because we violated the voluntary segregation rules, and after some very rich personal encounters with inmates, my life has been profoundly changed.

At first I was apprehensive about going. All I knew about prisons was what I had seen in "Stir Crazy" and "Brubaker" and some TV movies.⁴

Inmates who have been a part of the small working group for several years have deepened their search for a broader meaning of God's word as found in the Bible. Some have been freed-up to raise questions they never thought to ask before and somehow found the permission to do so through the struggles of students. One inmate has been a participant in this class for five years. At first he was very quiet and withdrawn, but he kept coming. He now is one of the most active participants and has been a key resource enabling the group to move beyond polarization. He usually did so by sharing an experience which spoke to the defensiveness of both sides. Sometimes he would side with a member of the group who in his perception needed support or comfort. This particular inmate has shared that the group over the years has helped him to better relate to non-inmates and that the students have provided him with an experience he needs, but cannot get in prison, namely to interact with people on the outside. He felt he needed these kinds of experiences in order to make it on the outside. This particular inmate will be released from prison this

⁴ *Ibid.*

month (July 1981). The Reverend Carol Nelson is correct when she stated “. . . the inmates who have the best chance of surviving prison experience . . . are those inmates who receive the most outside encouragement and support, particularly for the people we know.”⁵

The experience at the Women's Prison is similar. The major difference is that there have been greater opportunity to worship and to plan things together and to co-lead discussion, to join in singing, in sharing of stories and poems which inmates have written. The prison chapel choir is also able to travel and periodically they come to visit a church in Oakland where there is opportunity to meet and to fellowship with them on the outside as well. The women's prison at Pleasanton looks less like a prison when compared to the men's facility at Vacaville. Vacaville is a three-tiered multi-winged stone building surrounded by a high fence with rolled barbed wire and with guards in the towers which surround the prison. The prison at Pleasanton appears to look like a college campus with a manicured lawn and dormitory-like buildings with individual rooms instead of cells with bars. One may observe inmates playing baseball or frisby, or strolling about talking. No towers with guards, and inmates are free to choose the type of clothing they wish to wear. None of this is the case at Vacaville where inmates must wear blue denim, or they are dressed in greens which the state provides. Yet Pleasanton is a real prison. The stripping of an inmates personal identity kit and self-confidence is a typical occurrence in the interaction between correctional staff and inmates. One inmate put it like this: 'they never let you forget for one minute that you are a prisoner, not a person. You are daily assaulted in little subtle ways and there is nothing you can do about it. They really know how to get to you.'

There are other implications for this course and for ministry *with* the incarcerated. In the past, the focus has been on ministry with people *in* prison. In the future, the course is also challenged: to consider a broader scope of ministry and to think through the responsibility of the church to inmates upon their release from prison and their move back into the community; to consider the church's responsibility to the criminal justice system; and, to address the society's tendency to want to build more prisons as the way to address the problem of crime. Has the theological education anything to say to this? Does *black* ecumenism have anything to say?

For I was hungry and you gave me food,
 I was thirsty and you gave me drink,
 I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
 I was naked and you clothed me,
 I was sick and you visited me,
 I WAS IN PRISON AND YOU CAME TO ME.
 And the righteous will answer . . .
 "Lord, when did we see you. . . ?
 And the Kind will answer . . .

⁵ *Ibid.*

'Truly I say to you, as you did it
to one of the least of these . . .
you did it to me.' (Matt.25:36-40).