

It took me 1 Year to “Break Into” Prison Ministry

This article is about my journey this past year to get into Prison Ministry. I have been a Biblical Storyteller since early 2012 but have had only a few opportunities to practice my skill at local churches or workshops. After attending my 1st Festival Gathering in 2014, I watched Tom Boomershine passionately plead for us tellers to prayerfully reach out to the incarcerated populations in our local communities. That’s when God’s spirit touched me and guided me to where I am today.

Two weeks after FG, I met a woman here in central Pennsylvania who was a volunteer in our local prisons for over 40 years. Her name, Marie G. Hamilton, has become well known in our region because of the struggles she faced getting into the prisons. Recently a book, *Grace Goes to Prison*, was written about Grace (Marie’s middle name) and it described her struggles at breaking down the barriers to help prisoners. I actually met her last August at a local fair and told her about what biblical storytelling was and “How could I get into the prisons too?” A few days later, my wife and I had lunch with her and she gave me several contacts but she warned me that it would be difficult and to keep persistent (she is now retired from her volunteer work). I got a copy of her book and was converted immediately, especially, since I personally knew many of the officials in the prison administration here and how she was able to change their minds.

Marie’s victory was having the prisons make use of inmates technical and mechanical skills to repair used/broken furniture and equipment, then sell it as a nonprofit to help troubled youth (so they do not become inmates some day). Her project has flourished after 40 years and is thriving today. During the early fall, I faltered a bit because I was grappling with the idea of, “These prisoners deserve what they got and why should I try to reach out to them?” But between God’s Spirit working on me and being inspired by Marie “Grace” helping inmates, God won...I was off and running.

I should note that I live in a county in central Pennsylvania where 2 large PA State prisons (~5,000 inmates) are located side by side; a large county correctional institute (425 inmates); and a youth detention center for dozens of youth (ages 10-18). I decided to start the process to get my security clearance into the county jail and see how I might volunteer as a biblical storyteller for Bible study sessions. After my initial phone call to the jail, it took almost one month to make a connection with the Dir. of Programming; and then he wasn’t sure how they could use me because they have a Chaplain assigned on a regular basis, etc. The director did explain the process I had to go through to be cleared and said it would take over 3 months to accomplish.

At the same time, I was able to make contact with the Chief Chaplain at one of our two PA state prisons. After talking with him on the phone, he thought that I may be able to assist him. I had to complete many more security forms, etc., just for the PA State

prisons only...arrgh, more paperwork! It was now the end of November 2014 and nothing was happening on either front: county jail or state prison. After the holidays, I made contact again with both prisons but was rebuffed a third time due to the Chief Chaplain being too busy and the county jail not responding to my phone calls.

Finally in June 2015 when I called the county jail the director of programs told me that I was cleared but had to attend a 2 hour volunteer training session at the jail. Excitement was high but it was short lived because when I completed my volunteer training, I had to contact the program director to decide exactly how they would use me...you guessed it, no response for weeks! So back to the Chief Chaplain at the State prison and he was ready to meet with me...Praise God!! I met with the Chief Chaplain and his newly assigned Protestant Chaplain to receive my volunteer orientation training inside the prison compound. I must confess that I was absolutely petrified and nervous. After touring the large facility, we met in their chaplain's office at the church located inside the prison compound. It is a large sanctuary that holds ~250 inmates for Sunday services.

Once I received my training that morning, the Chief chaplain asked me to explain to them just what a biblical storyteller does. So as I explained it and I decided to perform a short scripture passage that they were familiar with. When I finished, they stared at me and then at each other and said, "I think Bob can really help our special-needs inmates!" They explained that these inmates are housed away from the general population and have special needs and have difficulty reading the Bible.

So on Thursday, July 23rd, the chaplains wanted me to perform for the general population of inmates who attend regular Bible study in the church sanctuary. They wanted to see how the inmates accepted biblical storytelling. I performed Mark 9:14-29 "I Believe...Help my Unbelief!" There were 50-75 inmates (average age ~45-50). They were absolutely wonderful, and many were very knowledgeable of the Bible. God was surely among us that morning!! The plans are to wait and see how the inmates "talk" about my visit and go from there. Both chaplains were very encouraged by the response of the inmates and have high hopes for setting some regular programs up in the months ahead.

And just when I thought God was pleased with what I accomplished with His help, that afternoon my phone rang...it was the County Jail Chaplain calling. After we talked on the phone about what a biblical storyteller does, he asked me when could I come to the jail and get started there with him?! I've been told that God gives us no more than we can handle...so now I'm off to the county jail to met younger inmates and face a whole different type of culture. Wish me well...oh, and I can always use some prayers too.

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