



Above, the Rev. Gloria Aghogah D'98, supervisor of chaplaincy services, preaching in the Chapel of the Nameless Woman. Right, Chanequa Walker-Barnes D'07 meets with members of the Multifaith Transition Aftercare Program, a chaplaincy-based re-entry program.

BY CHANEQUA WALKER-BARNES D'07

AFTER PRISON

Freedom is Far from Easy

Although North Carolina releases thousands of inmates each year, there's little support for adjusting to life outside prison. Left to fend for themselves, many end up back in prison. A new program at N.C. Correctional Institute for Women is challenging churches to help inmates keep the freedom they earn.

During my first week at N.C. Correctional Institute for Women (NCCIW), the Rev. Gloria Aghogah D'98, supervisor of chaplaincy services and my field education supervisor, took me to the center of the 30-acre campus-style facility, where a slight elevation provided a bird's eye view of the entire complex.

The weather was good and most of the inmates seemed to be out on the yard. Looking at the sea of women in their blue, green and tan uniforms—each color denoting custody status—Aghogah asked, “You know what I see when I look out here? A mission field. I’m in the trenches.

“There are hundreds of women here who are in pain, who need healing, who need to be led to God. That’s what chaplains do. We’re here to help point the way to healing.”

Aghogah believes her role is to be a

loving and nonjudgmental presence. “I meet inmates where they are and we work from there,” she says. “I’m not concerned about what they’ve done. I want to know ... their spiritual needs.”

“Nobody Wants Them”

“What are we supposed to do if nobody wants them?” screamed Yolanda Oxendine, the case manager in the adjacent office. Trying to find housing for a soon-to-be-released inmate with a history of mental illness, Oxendine had met roadblocks at every turn.

Telephone numbers of group homes had been disconnected. Halfway houses were full. Not even a temporary placement was available.

Each year, North Carolina’s 70 prisons release more than 22,000 inmates. Without re-entry assistance, more than half will return to the corrections system. Budget cuts require case managers to handle large caseloads, preventing the attention needed to ensure a successful transition for each inmate. High staff turnover doubles the load for case managers. Most inmates, then, are left to fend for themselves when it comes to re-entry.

Linda epitomizes this dilemma. In her mid-40s, she has been in prison most of her adult life, mostly for misdemeanor property offenses related to drug addiction. When we met during



N.C. Correctional Institute for Women's 30-acre campus-style facility in Raleigh, N.C.

the second week of my placement, she was back for her ninth prison term, sentenced to eight months for parole violation. She was desperate.

"I tried to do everything right this time," she choked out between sobs as she sat in my office. Both the chaplain and several case managers confirmed that, during her previous incarceration, Linda had indeed been a model inmate. She had successfully completed a drug treatment program and vocational training in cosmetology. She worked closely with the chaplain in pastoral counseling sessions and attended Bible studies and worship services regularly. Prison staff thought they were witnessing a real Cinderella story.

The transformation did not end abruptly following release. Linda read her Bible regularly and attended services at a local church. Her enthusiastic witness even became a source of conflict with her adult daughter. Despite several months of fruitless job hunting, Linda tried to keep her spirits high.

But when the landlord discovered Linda was a convicted felon living with her daughter, he evicted them. Federal housing policy prohibits felony offenders from living in public housing. For many people, the solution would be simple—stay with another relative. But all of Linda's immediate family, at least those she could count on for support, lived in public housing. Terrified of

putting another family member at risk for eviction, she wandered the streets for a few nights before seeking a place to stay from a familiar source—a drug dealer.

"We Didn't Bus Them In From Hell"

During workshops at local churches, Chaplain Aghogah tells her audience, "We didn't bus these people in from hell. These are our kinfolk—our sons, daughters, cousins, nieces and nephews. Stop acting like you don't know them."

Many, perhaps most, Christians know someone who has been or is currently incarcerated. Typically, though, we like to think of these individuals as exceptions to the rule; that is, unlike most

Continued on page 8

EX-OFFENDERS WAIT FOR CHURCHES' WELCOME

FOR 10 WEEKS LAST SUMMER, I drove the 30 miles from my Durham home to Raleigh and joined dozens of state employees in the same morning ritual: locking our valuables—purses, wallets, and cell phones—in our car trunks or glove compartments.

Taking only our car keys and identification, we walked through the gatehouse of the North Carolina Correctional Institute for Women (NCCIW). There, for the next nine hours, we were sealed off from the rest of the world with 1,240 women convicted of offenses ranging from financial fraud to first-degree murder.

NCCIW is the state's major correctional facility for women. It is also the site of women's death row. In addition to the general inmate population, it supports the state's six other female prisons. Dozens of inmates arrive daily for the medical and mental health units, educational services, and vocational programs. The prison's diagnostic unit is the point of entry for all women sentenced as felons. There, all newly-sentenced offenders undergo substance abuse screening and educational/health evaluations to determine their prison assignments.

Mirroring most prison systems in the nation, North Carolina's female offenders have higher rates of psychiatric disorders and substance abuse than do male offenders. Moreover, women's roles as mothers lend an additional layer of complexity to life at NCCIW. Last year, 220 women entered the prison pregnant

and 92 of them gave birth there. A staff of social workers helps these and other women navigate custody issues and provides parenting education classes.

Over the course of the summer, I learned that the role of prison chaplain is unique. Prisons exist for the purpose of punishment. Chaplains emphasize the possibility of redemption, stressing pastoral care and spiritual formation where others focus upon security and safety.

Prison chaplains are called to be visionaries, discerning and anticipating the spiritual needs of their congregants, and developing programs to meet those needs. At NCCIW, these programs include weekly worship services, Catholic mass, Bible studies (seven for the general population and three for death row inmates), and Islamic worship services.

As I prepared my first sermon for the inmates, the pressure to deliver relevant, meaningful preaching was particularly salient. A congregation behind bars demands a life-giving Word.

During my first few weeks, I struggled with the appropriate way to say goodbye at the end of each day to those whom I had come to know and care about. "Have a good evening" was no longer just a farewell; it was a benediction.

Pastoral care also took on a qualitatively different aspect. Within prison walls, time grinds to a halt. Yet life continues at its normal pace for the loved ones of inmates on the outside.



Chaplain Gloria Aghogah D'98 and Walker-Barnes outside the Chapel of the Nameless Woman. Inspired by an anonymous \$2 donation, inmates helped raise funds to build the chapel in the mid-'60s. It is dedicated to the memory of the nameless woman Jesus saves in John 8:7 saying, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast a stone at her." KJV

In addition to sitting with an inmate grieving the death of her grandmother, I had to explain that permission to attend the funeral had been denied.

And while walking in the confidence of Christ, I worked against the backdrop of fear that is a constant when working with those convicted of transgressing society's laws. Each day I entered the prison gatehouse expecting a safe environment, but fully knowing that safety could never be taken for granted.

Most prisoners spend their days working—as janitors in the complex, at the adjoining license tag and duplicating plant, or in the dental lab, laundry or dining hall. They live in single-story, concrete-block dorms arranged in quads—four large rooms with 30 bunks, open showers and toilets, and a small recreation space with a few tables and a television.

There is no air conditioning in these quarters, and during the summer it's often hotter inside than out in the sun in the prison yard, the only other space where prisoners can spend their leisure time. There is little comfort and absolutely no privacy.

In the midst of this, prisoners must cope with mental illness, alcohol and drug addiction, health problems, loss of friends and family, and feelings of guilt, isolation and abandonment.

The shortage of funding for rehabilitation reflects society's emphasis upon punishment and the control of offenders. Mental health services are often available for only the most

severe cases. And even a judge's order does not guarantee access to one of the prison's drug treatment programs.

Even churches seem to have a "not wanted" policy toward ex-offenders. With a prison in nearly every North Carolina county, almost every church has a correctional institution in its backyard. Yet often divinity students serving field education placements find no opportunity for prison ministry.

Despite Christ's command to his disciples to visit the imprisoned, few churches have ministries that reach out to these men and women. Fewer still have support services for ex-offenders as they transition back to society.

Chaplain Gloria Aghogah explains, "Everyone wants to come to the prison to preach salvation to these women. But afterwards, they're saying, 'We don't know if we want you in our church.'"

The N.C. Department of Corrections offers many opportunities for ministry. For more information, contact the chaplain of the local correctional institution. To find out how to become involved in transition efforts, contact Roshanna Parker, director of the DOC Office of Transition Services, at 919-716-3080.

— Chanequa Walker-Barnes

Left, Chaplain Aghogah returns from one of the weekly worship services at the Chapel of the Nameless Woman (right).



convicts, they are not hardened criminals, but victims of life circumstances.

Nearly every inmate I met this summer had something in her background—poverty, drug or alcohol addiction, mental illness, abuse—that “explained” her criminal history. This does not excuse criminal behavior. But it does point to the possibility of redemption and reconciliation. This is the task of the church. While the state can aim to rehabilitate offenders, only the body of Christ can restore them to right relationship with God, self and society.

This restoration is the aim of the Multifaith Transition Aftercare Program, a chaplaincy-based re-entry program being piloted at NCCIW. Developing this program was my primary task during the summer. The Rev. Betty Brown D’96, statewide director of prison chaplaincy services, who commissioned the program, hopes it will become the exemplar for re-entry services throughout North Carolina.

Through pastoral counseling and mentoring, the program aims to help offenders understand their past, envision a better future, and attain the skills, beliefs, values and resources to become healthy and productive members of society.

For six weeks starting in June, I worked with a group of 11 inmates,

ages 18 to 43, who had nine to 12 months remaining on their sentences. We began by reading and discussing biblical scholar Renita Weems’ *Showing Mary: How Women Can Share Prayers, Wisdom, and the Blessings of God*. The group has continued to meet weekly to pray together and to discuss their lives and their



Inmates share a light moment during a meeting with Walker-Barnes.

faith. In the fall, they began a study of womanist theology.

Most important, each participant is paired with a mentor from a local faith community who will help build a support network to provide encouragement, practical assistance and account-

ability. The mentors visit and write to the women, pray for them, coach them in life skills, and help them to plan for re-entry. The mentor relationship, which extends for three years post-release, is a crucial component of the program. Unfortunately, this is also the most difficult aspect of the program to maintain.

Although I had identified 13 potential mentors, only seven, from four different congregations, eventually attended the training session and were matched with inmates. Yet four months later, many mentors had not followed through.

During a recent visit to NCCIW, the women reported mentors who have never visited and who did not answer their letters. Although such attrition might be expected in a pilot program, it has potentially disastrous consequences. These women have changed from blue to green uniforms, the marker of a rapidly approaching release date. Without a mentor, crucial planning

for transition is not getting done.

The program has encountered other snags. Of the original 11 participants, four dropped out in the first two months. And while participation was supposed to preclude transfer to other institutions, two have been

ALUMNI AT FOREFRONT OF PRISON MINISTRIES

WHILE THE U.S. POPULATION has grown 20 percent over the past two decades, the number of people in local, state and federal jails has doubled twice. The prison population has risen for 35 consecutive years to reach the 2.1 million inmates currently held in the nation's correctional institutions.

Among Duke Divinity School alumni ministering to this population are Mark Hicks D'87, LuAnne Charlton D'04, and Landon Adams D'06.

As chair of the United Methodist Disciple Prison Ministry Task Force in 1998, Hicks helped author a study that became the basis for a thriving prison ministry supported by the Western N.C. and N.C. conferences.

Hicks was called by Bishop Charlene Kammerer in 1999 to become the first executive director of Disciple Bible Outreach Ministries of NC (DBOM) Inc. Since then, the program has expanded to 70 correctional institutions across North Carolina, trained more than 300 lay and clergy volunteers, and ministered to more than 6,000 inmates.

Charlton has served as associate director for DBOM, coordinating local church programs. She currently serves as minister of education at Hayes Barton UMC in Raleigh, N.C., and as consultant for the DBOM RINGS (Responsibility, Invitation,

Neighbors, God and Service) of Fellowship program.

The program was developed in association with the N.C. Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to reach young people in the correctional system. According to the DBOM Website, it uses the Disciple Bible model "to reach teens in an innovative format that promotes spiritual growth and positive peer dynamics." Charlton is a member of Cokesbury's national training team for Disciple Bible Study.

Adams is the first executive director of the Triangle Lost Generation Task Force, which was founded in 1995 by the Rev. Dr. David C. Forbes Sr. In partnership with the Wake County Sheriff's Office, Wake County Schools, the Raleigh Police Department and the county's parks and recreation department, the task force works with minority youth, particularly from Hispanic and African-American backgrounds, to help them make decisions that will keep them out of the criminal justice system.

Adams was a chaplain intern at the federal correctional complex in Butner while at The Divinity School. In a recent Raleigh *News & Observer* article, he said, "It takes a child to sustain a village. If the children are lost, then the village will be no more."

— Reed Criswell

moved, including Linda. The oldest participant in the program, Linda was also the most eager. In contrast to women incarcerated for the first time, Linda knows firsthand what lies ahead outside. She knows that she will not succeed without help.

I hope Linda will succeed despite her transfer to another facility. After letting her family down many times, she had been reluctant to contact relatives who were in a position to help her. I encouraged her to try again. During my last week of the summer, she finally reached out to her siblings and told them about her participation in the re-entry program. To her surprise, her sister offered her a place to stay. Her brother, owner of a hair salon, offered

her a job while she studies for her cosmetology licensing exam.

The Way Forward

Like any pilot program, there are a few bugs to be worked out in the Multifaith Transition Aftercare Program. Rev. Brown is optimistic that it will eventually be available at prisons statewide. In the meantime, approximately 2,200 inmates will be released each month from the state's prisons, many with little more than a bus ticket, a change of clothing, and identification.

Within the next six months, they will include Linda and the five women who have been faithful participants in the program. And while few of the com-

munities to which they return will have re-entry agencies, all of them will have at least one church. I pray the doors of that church will be open. ■

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holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and taught at the University of N.C. at Chapel Hill before entering the master of divinity degree program at The Divinity School. "I know that NCCIW will shape the course of my vocation," she says. "Somehow I plan to be one of those waiting to embrace our sisters and brothers as they return home."