A white dove is shown in flight, its wings spread wide, against a background of a weathered wooden wall. A large red heart is painted on the wall, and several strands of barbed wire are draped across it. The text 'I WAS IN PRISON AND YOU VISITED ME' is written in a bold, yellow, distressed font over the heart.

I WAS IN PRISON AND YOU VISITED ME

Social Justice Sunday
September 25, 2011



National Council of
Churches in Australia

FROM THE GENERAL SECRETARY

"I was in prison and you visited me" is a mark of Jesus' followers (Matthew 25:34-46). The Social Justice Network provides this resource to help individuals and congregations grapple with what these words mean.

Archbishop Rowan Williams notes that these words convey two messages: "that Jesus is already with those in prison, as he is with all who live in loneliness (including the loneliness of self-reproach or self-hatred); and that he is waiting for us there." (UK Prison Week 2010)

The number of people in prison in Australia (both sentenced and unsentenced) is increasing faster than population growth. At the same time, rates for most categories of offending are decreasing. These trends require us to pause and reflect on what is happening in our society and especially, who is most likely to be found in prison.

The great majority of prisoners come from impoverished circumstances, often experiencing multiple disadvantage. However, most attention is given to the few high profile, even very wealthy, individuals who engage equally high profile legal advisers to secure their freedom.

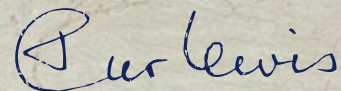
In 1988, the (then) Australian Council of Churches issued a paper called *Prison, the Last Resort*, which is available from the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA). How far have the churches come since then in grappling with criminal justice and prison issues in our society? How do we understand the text of Matthew 25:36 — "I was in prison and you visited me"? As Christians, what are we called to do in response to incarceration trends since 1988? What can we do? Does it matter what we do, or say?

Matthew 25:40 continues, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

I encourage you to creatively use this resource to engage congregations and others, thus raising awareness of the alarming facts about prisons in Australia. Let us all advocate for a more just society.

Tara Curlewis

General Secretary.



National Council of Churches in Australia

ALARMING FACTS AND ALARMING STATS

The partisan nature of law and order politics in the community can often obscure the reality of crime in Australia and how best the areas of policing, sentencing and imprisonment can be approached.

Public discourse can often consider differing approaches to sentencing and imprisonment with a view to extremes; that rehabilitative approaches rather than punitive sentencing effectively permit criminals to cheat a "just punishment".

Community support for harsher sentencing, a "lock-'em-up" policy in effect, has not been overlooked by public policy makers. Indeed, in response to questioning over the cost of prison building, then-New South Wales Premier Nathan Rees commented in 2008, that "The advice to me is we have still got 500 cells empty, I don't mind if we fill them up, and if we fill them up and have to build another jail, we'll build another jail."

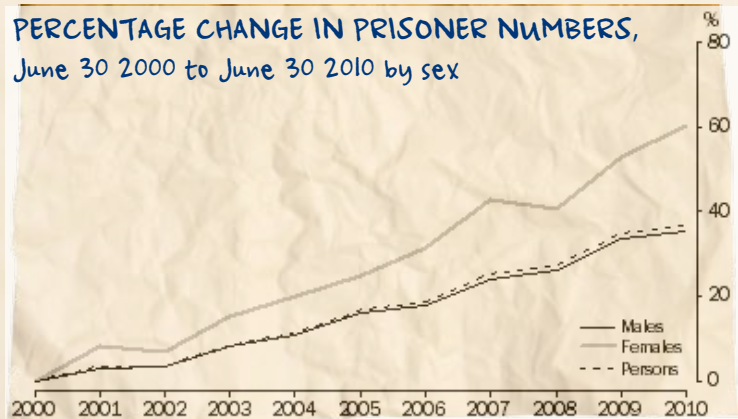
Australian Bureau of Statistics figures detailing Australia's present prison population exhibit a series of concerning trends which can in some sense be considered the result of prison being the default criminal justice strategy in Australian politics.

INDIGENOUS FIGURES STRIKING

At June 30, 2010, there were 29,700 prisoners (sentenced and unsentenced) in Australian prisons with a median aggregate sentence length of three years. This represents a national imprisonment rate of 170 prisoners per 100,000 adult population.

Of the Australian prisoner population at the mentioned date, males comprised 92% (27,472) while females comprised 8%

PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN PRISONER NUMBERS,
June 30 2000 to June 30 2010 by sex



(2,228). The highest imprisonment rate can be found in the Northern Territory with 663 prisoners per 100,000 adult population imprisoned.

Although the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community comprises about 3% of the Australian population, it remains a very high risk group for imprisonment making up just over a quarter (26% or 7,584) of the total prisoner population. The standardised imprisonment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders was 1,892 per 100,000 adult population. This striking figure is at least 14 times higher than non-Indigenous prisoners at June 30, 2010. J. Fitzgerald has found that between 2000 and 2008 the increase in incarceration of Indigenous Australians in New South Wales was 48%, most of which was "due to increased severity by the criminal justice system" and not to increased offending.

The rate of increase in prisoners coupled with the recidivism rate for prisoners should be of much concern. Between 2000 and 2010, the total number of prisoners increased 37%, from 21,714 to 29,700. Over the same period the number of male prisoners increased 35% while female prisoners increased by 60% (see table).

All states and territories, with the exception of Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory, recorded increased imprisonment rates since 2000.

PREVALENT OFFENCES

Over half (55%) of all prisoners had served a sentence in an adult prison prior to the current episode indicating a very high level of recidivism. At June 30, 2010, the most prevalent offences/charges for prisoners were: acts intended to cause injury (20%); sexual assault (13%); illicit drug offences and unlawful entry with intent (both 11%); and robbery and extortion and homicide (both 10%).

Peter Norden, a fellow at the University of Melbourne's Melbourne Law School, has argued that the dramatic increase in the Australian prisoner population in the decade to 2010 is evidence of a failing prison system and a "criminal justice

system that is in urgent need of review and evaluation". Mr Norden suggests that there are "more effective interventions than imprisonment for ... high risk groups", including the addressing of "underlying issues such as access to education, housing and employment".

It is clear then that public support voiced in favour of a tough and punitive approach to sentencing in Australia, often headed by politicians, has not resulted in a decrease in incarceration or recidivism. Instead, a marked increase in both the latter and former has occurred.

"Teaching them a lesson", imprisoning offenders without addressing causes of crime and disregarding rehabilitative approaches to sentencing have not resulted in decreasing prison populations. Instead, they have fostered an until now unabated trend in the negative direction.

Note: Most statistics used in this article are found in "4517.0 – Prisoners in Australia, Australian Bureau of Statistics", released on 09/12/2010.

Joseph Haweil

NCCA Social Justice Network
(Other sources available on request.)



PRAYER FROM A PERSON WHOSE BROTHER IS IN PRISON

Dear Lord,
sometimes families hurt so much.
They wonder why the person
they loved
did something so wrong
that resulted in a prison sentence,
and whether they could have
prevented the crime.
It can often be isolating,
shaming and helpless
being the family of a prisoner.
Lord in your mercy; be with those
who have a relative in prison.

PRISON WEEK, BE WITH ME, 2010

SPIRITED SERVICE

I was in prison and you visited me.

As a prison chaplain, serving the past 20 years of spiritual service to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal inmates, I have seen the same families through generations coming through the system.

Aboriginal people are over-represented in prison because of racism and are systematically discriminated against in the courts and police services.

A majority of the Aboriginal inmates are serving big time for petty crimes. They fall into the system of institutionalism as a result of racism, are unable to successfully assimilate into mainstream society, and are harassed by police.

I see the same people coming in and out of the system. I personally know that these inmates are good people who need effective outside support and encouragement; not have restrictions placed on them by Corrective Services once they have served their time.

Aboriginal men and women in prison are not valued or recognised for the valuable contributions they make through their artwork, which they donate to charities like Zoe's Place and the Fred Hollows Foundation. These artworks can be worth thousands of dollars.

They also give back to communities by donating outdoor furniture made in prison workshops.

I see men and women who are proud of their culture and heritage. I see this when they are painted up and dancing or painting, tapping into gifts they didn't realise they had.

I am the voice for those in prisons who don't have a voice. I am the person they come to when they face discrimination and intimidation from prison guards. I am the person they come to when they have lost a family member to suicide and feel helpless and lost.

I am the one who provides comfort and calm when there has been a death in custody as a result of neglect from prison guards who don't act upon complaints of severe pain from

inmates. I see inmates with serious health problems and mental illnesses who should not be in prison.

I provide an outlet through my church services in prison, so they are able to voice their grievances and struggles in life. We sit in a circle, open the meeting with prayer and give each person the opportunity to share whatever is upon their heart. This gives them hope to address their issues and allows them to offload their burdens in a safe environment.

I am the advocate who will speak up and challenge officials and systems that discriminate against them. I am highly respected and valued for the service I provide and am treated with the upmost respect by all inmates. Jesus came to set the captives free and I tell them that Jesus loves them — and about the free gift of salvation from God in my ministry.

I would like to know how the Government is going to implement changes to address the problem of overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in prison when they promote this new incentive of "Closing the Gap".

How do they justify this incentive when Aboriginal people continue to struggle with poverty, racism and institutionalism? The prison population is increasing, not decreasing.

Aboriginal people need spiritual healing. This can only come through connecting back to the land and connecting with our culture, not being confined to prison walls.

Why are the churches silent?

*The Rev. Alexandra Gater (Auntie Alex)
Walkabout Aboriginal Ministry.*

"One of the most serious aspects of being in prison can be the sense of isolation and even abandonment; and one of the most effective witnesses that can be given to prisoners is the assurance that they are not forgotten. When I was in prison, you visited me, says Jesus and this tells us two things: that Jesus is already with those in prison, as he is with all who live in loneliness (including the loneliness of self-reproach or self-hatred); and that he is waiting for us there. I hope and pray that this year's Prisons Week will help us all to connect with the Jesus who waits for us in prison, and that those undergoing imprisonment will feel confident that they are accompanied in prayer and compassion by the Lord and his servants."

ROWAN WILLIAMS, ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY, 2010



POSTCODES OF DISADVANTAGE

God's justice demands the inclusion of the poor and disadvantaged (Luke 14:15-24) and sharing of wealth (Luke 16:19-31, 19:1-10).

Addressing income inequality at the national level can reduce violent crime and increase trust in communities.

Emeritus Professor Richard Wilkinson of the Equality Trust has observed that those nations with the biggest gap between rich and poor (and greater fear across the social hierarchy or less empathy) also have higher levels of violent crime and imprisonment.

Stronger communities are safer communities. Communities displaying cohesive relationships between people tend to have lower levels of crime.

Australian social researcher Tony Vinson has found Victorian postcodes with high levels of social connectedness or cohesion have remarkably lower levels of imprisonment.

He found that those communities typified by higher levels of involvement in local groups and events, neighbourliness and trust “dampened down” harm associated with low levels of education and high unemployment.

His research shows postcodes with high levels of social connectedness or cohesion — as evidenced by people's participation in local organisations and events, engaging in neighbourly acts and feeling positively identified with their locality of residence — have remarkably lower levels of incarceration.

Disturbingly, an “ever increasing number” of the prison population are sourced from a “relatively small number of neighbourhoods”. Twenty-five per cent of the Victorian prison population comes from 14 postcodes (out of 647).

MORE WORK REQUIRED

In general, long-term work in these disadvantaged communities is required to establish beneficial community connectedness.

Tony Vinson generally advocates:

- Engagement of disadvantaged communities in community decision making;
- Cultivation of community capacity; and
- Priority consideration to education and training, work opportunities, health promotion, parental skills, “problem solving” law enforcement and local leadership.

Vinson states that “poverty postcodes” should be priority areas for specific actions such as:

- Concentrating on the early years of life, including postnatal outreach services, parenting support and childhood diagnostic services;
- Aiming to raise educational attainment by improving early education programs, preschool attendance and providing financial incentives to attract experienced and successful teachers to disadvantaged schools;
- Guaranteeing three- and four-year-old children living in areas that fall within the ten per cent most disadvantaged localities in each state/territory 18 hours per week of free preschool to support a good start to formal education;



- Support for projects which combine personal support, attention to educational deficits and skills development for disengaged young people; and
- The correctional arm of governments should monitor the social impacts of its own operation and synchronise its endeavours with other Government portfolios.

According to Jesuit Social Services (JSS), young people who have early interaction with the criminal justice system are more likely to be drawn further into the system (this phenomenon is commonly referred to as “net widening”).

ADDRESSING THE ROOTS OF INEQUALITY

JSS believes that, among other measures, community strengthening and crime prevention planning is required for postcodes with large numbers of young people coming into contact with the justice system. This could lead to community strengthening planning and provide a basis for “whole of Government” collaboration between a range of Government departments and other stakeholders that often work in isolation. This work could also include other key groups, particularly families.

It's important to get at the roots of inequality, related social problems and lack of community cohesion.

As Orthodox theologian Bishop Kallistos Ware reminds us, we are all interrelated: “No-one is saved alone” but “no-one falls alone” either and our faith in God's love makes us dare to hope that all will be saved (Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom*).

Antony McMullen

*Social Justice Officer, Justice & International Mission Unit
Uniting Church Synod of Victoria & Tasmania
(Other sources available on request.)*

PRAYER

Lord, you offer freedom to all people.
We pray for those in prison.
Break the bonds of fear and isolation that exist.
Support with your love,
prisoners and their families and friends,
Prison staff, and all who care.
Heal those who have been wounded
by the activities of others,
especially the victims of crime.
Help us to forgive one another,
to act justly, to love mercifully, and walk humbly
together with Christ in His strength and in His Spirit,
now and every day. Amen.

A PRISONERS PRAYER, HOLLOWAY PRISON, UK

RETHINKING STEREOTYPES

"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

One of the sad consequences of modern living is that it gets harder to know and care about those around us. People often don't know their neighbours and have no sense of responsibility for them.

Jesus' message is meant to encourage those who care for those in need but it is also a warning to those followers who believe they are virtuous but who only care for those whom they "like".

The great reversal that Jesus taught is that all are made in the image of God and are therefore members of the same family of humanity. We are all capable of incredible good and, if we are truly honest with ourselves (and God), know that we are capable of incredible bad.

So we need to care for all in their need, not according to what we believe they deserve ... just as God cares for each of us.

It's interesting to see how people's view of those who are imprisoned often changes when a friend or member of their own family is imprisoned. It's easy to stereotype and vilify those whom we don't know — particularly when the media concentrates on those who have done the worst things. This leads to a community perception that "Only the bad people are in prison. I'm not in prison; therefore I can't be like *those* people."

If we regarded all those who are in prison as family — ours and Jesus' — then we would be much more likely to provide the support necessary while they are in prison and, on release, to reassimilate them effectively into the community.

Suffering and social exclusion tends to make people feel angry and resentful or hopeless and worthless.

If we think of Jesus' treatment of the woman who was caught in the act of adultery and of the thief that was beside him on the cross we see that people respond much better to compassion and care than they do to vilification and judgment.

CARING FOR PRISONERS

For privacy and security reasons it's very difficult to visit people in prison today, unless you are on their visitors list and they know you as family or friend. So how can you care for prisoners today?

- You can pray for politicians and the community to address the causes of crime through better community services.
- Support governments to provide proper community care for those with mental illness.
- Encourage and support employers who are willing to employ ex-prisoners on release.
- Encourage governments to provide adequate housing, accommodation and support services for prisoners and their families on release so that they can assimilate well to life on the outside.
- Volunteer to become part of a Circle of Support & Accountability, which cares for individual prisoners on release.
- Push for the development of legal processes that focus on Restorative Justice to bring reconciliation and healing between victim, offender and the community.

The Rev. Jonathan Chambers

Senior Chaplain, Anglican Criminal Justice Ministry – Victoria

Respect the wide diversity among us in our lives and relationships. Refrain from making prejudiced judgments about the life journeys of others. Do you foster the spirit of mutual understanding and forgiveness which our discipleship asks of us? Remember that each one of us is unique, precious, a child of God.

FROM: ADVICES AND QUERIES
AUSTRALIA YEARLY MEETING
RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS,
QUAKERS



NONVIOLENT ALTERNATIVES

AVP (Alternatives to Violence Project) in Australia is a network of volunteer not-for-profit organisations running experiential workshops in personal nonviolent conflict transformation.

The workshops are run in various settings in most states of Australia: in prisons, schools, colleges, a refugee centre and the general community.

The first AVP workshop was run in Green Haven Prison, New York, in 1975 in response to a request from long-term inmates who were concerned that young men were arriving at the prison from the Bronx, serving short sentences and then returning to serve longer and longer sentences.

Growing up in a violent society, the cycle of violence was too well established for them to escape its clutches. The concerned long-term inmates approached the Quaker Project on Community Conflict (QPCC) for help. A group created a workshop to help inmates discover how to live without depending on a violent way of life. The group of primarily Quakers included Larry Apsey and Bernard Lafayette, a Quaker and aide to Martin Luther King, who led the nonviolence training that was the cornerstone of the Civil Rights struggle.

Although AVP was started by Quakers, it became an ecumenical organisation.

DYNAMIC PROCESS

AVP stands out from other prison activities because:

- All prison facilitators donate their time as volunteers. All participants are volunteers who have chosen to attend.
- An AVP workshop has neither teachers nor lectures — learning stems from experiential activities where each participant's understanding and experience will be different.
- The workshop works through the building blocks of affirmation and self-esteem, community building, communication (listening and assertive expression), and cooperation as the grounding for nonviolent conflict transformation.
- All facilitators are participants in every workshop.
- The process is dynamic — activities are continually being revised to fit the location and culture. Up-to-date manuals are the essential tool for facilitators.
- The process centres on reflection and personal transformation.
- There is a major focus on community building, both among the participants and the facilitator team.
- AVP trains inmates to become facilitators.
- AVP is non-denominational and respects diverse spiritual journeys.

By empowering people to find their own nonviolent alternatives for responding to conflict and violence, AVP learning reduces the need for prisons by reducing recidivism (re-offending) by up to 40% and, in schools and the community, by reducing the escalation of conflict and violence that leads to prison.

The most peaceful person benefits from the AVP experience. Violence and conflict are not just physical.

Outside the USA, AVP has focused more on the general community. In Rwanda, AVP was a primary agent in bringing together the Hutu and Tutsi tribes after the civil war. All Justice

Department staff, including judges and prosecutors, attended AVP workshops. In Kenya AVP was and is heavily involved in healing communities torn apart by violence.

TRANSFORMING CONFLICT

In addition to a prison program and a community program, AVP in New South Wales has developed specialised HIP (Help Increase Peace) workshops for primary, middle and high schools and, over the last 12 years, has trained teachers to facilitate more than 1,000 workshops in schools. An AVP-based course (Transforming Conflict) developed for TAFE classrooms has been attended by more than 100,000 students over a similar period.

Australia's TAFE Transforming Conflict course is now taught in several universities around the world.

In 2005 AVP (NSW) developed and facilitated a series of Interfaith AVP workshops that brought Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Sikhs, non-theists and Christians together in community building.

In Sydney AVP has integrated Restorative Practice concepts into the workshops and the AVP manuals and Australian participation has helped establish AVP programs in new countries including Papua New Guinea and Nepal.

*Malcolm –
AVP Australia*

MORNING PRAYER

O God, early in the morning I cry to you.

Help me to pray
And to concentrate my thoughts on you:
I cannot do this alone.
In me there is darkness,
But with you there is light;
I am lonely, but you do not leave me;
I am feeble in heart,
but with you there is help;
I am restless, but with you there is peace.
In me there is bitterness,
but with you there is patience;
I do not understand your ways,
But you know the way for me
Restore me to liberty,
And enable me to live now
That I may answer before you and before me.
Lord, whatever this day may bring,
Your name be praised.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

RESOURCES

- Australian Catholic Social Justice Council:
www.acsjc.org.au
- Restorative Justice: www.restorativejustice.org/other/chapel/sermons-on-restorative-justice
- Sycamore Tree Project: www.prisonfellowship.org.au/sycamoretreeproject_155_8.html
- Celebration of Healing: www.pfi.org/cjr/newsitems/celebration-of-healing-report-from-the-sycamore-tree-projectae-2013-pilot-at-acacia-prison
- Salvation Army Prison Ministry: <http://salvationarmy.org.au/court-and-prison-services.html>
- Alternatives to Violence Project: www.avp.org.au
- Murri Ministry, Queensland: www.centacarebrisbane.net.au/content.php/murri-ministry
- Equality Trust: www.equalitytrust.org.uk
- Prisons Week 2011, UK: www.prisonsworld.org
- A local Restorative Justice article from the UK:
www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/21/conversation-restorative-justice
- Social Justice Network of the NCCA:
www.ncca.org.au/departments/social_justice_network

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