

How Love Scales Prison Walls

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“Advise your legislators, when they make laws for larceny, burglary, or any felony, to make the penalty applicable to work upon roads, public works, or any place where the culprit can be taught more wisdom and more virtue, and become more enlightened. Rigor and seclusion will never do as much to reform the propensities of men as reason and friendship. Murder only can claim confinement or death. Let the penitentiaries be turned into seminaries of learning, where intelligence, like the angels of heaven, would banish such fragments of barbarism.” —Joseph Smith, Jr., Documentary History of the Church, vol. 66, p. 205.

These views expressed by the Prophet Joseph Smith on certain policies of government were revolutionary when they were uttered in 1844. Revolutionary, too, is the family-centered home teaching program that is working miracles behind the walls of the Utah State Prison today.

Alan Baird, supervising chaplain at the prison, says with enthusiasm that “our approach to rehabilitation is a unique departure from any of the correction methods tried in prisons in the last 200 years.”

Chaplain Baird has personally witnessed the dramatic changes in the lives of even aggressive inmates when they discover that someone truly cares about them. A genuine concern for their welfare and a show of unconditional love are something that most inmates have never known before.

This remarkable and innovative program changes men’s lives by giving them hope and a new self-image. Directors of the program, which is sponsored by the Social Services Department of the Church, make no attempt to minimize the seriousness of a crime an inmate may have committed—a law has been broken and a penalty must be exacted—but their emphasis is on rehabilitation rather than on fixing the blame.

Contemplating the broad scope of the program, which is for juveniles as well as for adult men and women, Victor L. Brown, Jr., associate director of Social Services, says, “The goal of our prison program is to have it functioning wherever it is needed in the Church.” Brother Brown stresses that prevention is far easier than rehabilitation.

At the Utah State Prison the Church Social Service’s agency for special projects/prison services, directed by Charlie L. Stewart, is the organization that

actually administers to the needs of those in detention. While portions of the program are being implemented in other areas of the United States, the Utah facility is the only place at present where the complete prison program is in operation.

Without delving too deeply into the controversial and frustrating areas of prison reform, several factors might be mentioned that contribute to the general failure of most current correctional methods. That these methods for rehabilitation are not succeeding is evident when the high rate of criminal recidivism (repeaters) is considered. Saddest of all is the colossal waste of brains and brawn. Added to the penalty of incarceration is the atmosphere of prison life.

According to former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, "Ninety-five percent of all the expenditures in the entire field of correction in this country goes for custody—iron bars, stone walls, guards. Five percent goes for health services, education, developing employment skills—for hope." (*U.S. Catholic Jubilee*, May 1971, p. 21.)

One disenchanted task force director of a presidential commission on corrections says with bitter frustration, "Our system *nurtures criminals* with the same care the Air Force Academy uses to turn out second lieutenants."

However, on a more positive note, officials of the U.S. Justice Department's Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, who recently visited the Utah prison in their continuing effort to solve the riddle of prisoner reform, were extremely impressed and amazed with the record set by those inmates who had participated in the Church-sponsored family teaching program.

Another visiting official from the Federal Bureau of Prisons further discovered that it was family involvement and dedicated volunteer service that provided the answer for helping ex-prisoners become accepted back into the mainstream of life on a productive and permanent basis.

Rehabilitation is never an easy process, for it requires an unusual amount of patience and devotion from those involved to assure its success. In a reflective mood, Chaplain Baird said that "building a bridge between prison life and life outside is the most difficult of all building projects." He cited a not uncommon case:

"A man is released from prison after serving a sentence for writing a bad check. His wife meets him outside and they head for the nearest bar to celebrate with the few dollars the man received upon his release.

"While her husband was in prison, his wife felt isolated and rejected by her family and friends. Soon she gravitated toward an association with the wives of

other inmates, where she felt accepted because of their common interests. A local tavern became a congenial meeting place for them to discuss their mutual problems in a neutral yet uncaring atmosphere, and the pattern was set.

“After the couple’s brief celebration, the cloak of reality settles quietly around them. The husband sincerely tries to find work, but even though he may have had some vocational training, received a high school diploma, taken some college courses, or been involved in group therapy while in prison, he feels alienated from those who could help him now, and he chafes at the lack of concern and understanding of relatives and friends.

“Because his record shadows him everywhere he goes, he is constantly rebuffed. No one is willing to take a chance on him. Resentful and bitter, he heads for a gambling resort to try his fading luck. But with fate as the dealer, he loses what little money he was able to scrape together. To cover his losses, he writes a couple more bad checks. After being picked up and charged, he is convicted and placed behind bars again.

“Without the positive and sustaining influence of the inmate’s natural family or a home teaching family,” Chaplain Baird concluded, “nothing is changed when a man comes out of prison. His attitudes are still out of focus, and oftentimes his family suffers more than he does while they are apart.”

The framework for the Church prison program begins with the Sunday morning service, which is directed by volunteers called to assist. Chaplain Baird also works closely with a Protestant minister and a Catholic priest, who come to the prison to counsel and conduct services for members of their faiths.

The Sunday services are conducted in all but the maximum security facility and are much like a sacrament meeting except there is no sacrament. The inmates themselves take charge of the program, with the help of Church-appointed coordinators to arrange for music and speakers from nearby communities, where people have been most willing to help. Prominent men, such as Drs. Henry Eyring, Reed Bradford, Hugh Nibley, and many other Church leaders, have often spoken in their meetings.

At the conclusion of the Sunday service, a gospel discussion class is held for those who might be interested. But because prison life engenders many traditions, some of which are indefensible but nonetheless prevalent, i.e., “being kind is showing weakness” or “religious kooks are unmanly and suspect,” there is still plenty of room for participants in the Church prison program.

There is always that overriding spirit for survival in prison that seems to demand a kind of toughness of mind and body so that true feelings seldom surface.

One of the biggest boosts for the Church prison program has come from the support of natural leaders among the inmates. When such men, whose physical prowess is acknowledged and respected, decide to go with the program, others with lesser convictions take courage and are able to withstand the tremendous group pressures exerted against them. They become immune to barbs from fellow inmates—“Here comes God’s squad”—and other derisive remarks.

Talking to Jed, an inmate who had been on the Church prison program for over a year, was particularly revealing. A good-looking man of obvious physical strength, Jed said, “Before I came on the program, I just didn’t care about myself or anybody else. Now when my wife and little boy and home teaching family come to visit during the week or for family home evening once a month, I realize how much they really mean to me and how important the family unit is. We’re starting to put our lives back together again.

“Most of the guys I used to run with would never believe it if they saw me sitting on the floor with my wife and two-year-old boy playing ‘button-button-who’s got-the-button.’ But we have a whale of a time. Then we read and study the scriptures or just talk.

“My home teaching family is just as concerned about my wife’s well-being as they are about mine. They help her at home to feel needed and to become active in church and other groups so that her personality will expand and her confidence grow. We’re just an extension of their family, and we feel the same about them. When my parole was denied, they felt just as bad about it as my wife and I.”

Then as his eyes clouded unashamedly, Jed added, “The genuine love and concern my wife and home teaching family have for me is so precious. I want to live now so that when I get out I can really exercise my priesthood. I want to be able to give my son a father’s blessing. My dad was always in trouble with the law, and our home life just didn’t amount to much. I don’t want my son to follow in our footsteps.”

Harry, a third-termer, is only 31 years old. “Last spring,” he said, “before I came on the program, I was really bitter and filled with hate. I had just been released from prison for the second time and had started drinking again; drinking has always been my biggest problem. Within ninety days I was back in prison, but this time it was for manslaughter. I had been drinking, and on the way home I caused an accident. The only passenger in my car was killed.”

Harry continued, “One day I was sitting in my cell, and I got to thinking. I counted back twelve years to the first time I went to prison. I realized that life had just

stood still for me. I hadn't changed one bit in all that time. I was still making the same stupid mistakes, and I was hurting those who loved me even more than I was hurting myself. If I was ever going to change, I became determined that now was the time to start.

"I had gone to church when I was a kid, and so I began going to Sunday services here. That was six months ago. Now I have a home teaching family that comes to see me every Saturday, and once a month we have our home evening together. They've never missed a Saturday visit here or our home evening night together."

Harry's attitude was positive as he talked about his aspirations, and in paying tribute to his home teaching family, he said appreciatively, "They're such tremendous people. They helped me to get rid of all my hostility and get my life turned around so I'm going in the right direction. They offered the most beautiful family prayer of acceptance for me when we first met that you can ever imagine.

"After I had stopped drinking," Harry concluded, "they fasted and prayed with me so that I was able to leave cigarettes alone. I wouldn't want to do anything now to disappoint them or myself, because I've made a commitment to be a follower of Christ."

It is not required that an inmate be a member of the Church before he can participate in the Church-sponsored home teaching program; only 40 percent of them are members. However, it is required that those who participate attend at least eight successive gospel discussion periods taught each week after the Sunday services, as some measure of their sincerity and desire to change their lives.

After attending the necessary gospel discussions, the inmate fills out an application for a volunteer Latter-day Saint family to be assigned to him. The program directors determine which family would be most compatible with the inmate and his family and most effective in his rehabilitation.

Bishop Heber Geurts, a volunteer who is in charge of the family home teaching/evening program at the prison, is a dynamic man with abounding enthusiasm for his chosen service. In describing how the program started, Bishop Geurts said, "When I was a bishop several years ago, two men in my ward were charged and sent to the Utah State Prison. But the solution for their rehabilitation eluded us all."

A possible answer to the problem of turning men from a continuing life of crime toward one that was more productive and self-fulfilling was actually perceived by an ex-inmate who had been in prison several times. In a moment of unusual

insight this man told Bishop Geurts: "Every time I get out of prison I have the same problem: there's nobody I can communicate with. A slap on the back and the advice to 'go straight' just aren't enough." And that was the key.

All of the best and most creative efforts to rehabilitate prisoners are of little value if the ex-prisoner walks through the gates with a few dollars, some new clothes, but no one to help him pick up the thread of his life again.

"It's imperative," continued Bishop Guerts, "that a man who is released be able to go to someone who understands him and loves him, somebody he trusts and to whom he can relate. Without exception, before these men became involved with the home teaching program, they felt unloved and unable to communicate effectively with their own families. Now if they should get into trouble after their release, the first place they would go would be to their home teaching family."

As to how home teaching families are chosen, Bishop Geurts said, "We began with six families nearly five years ago. Now we have over 200 volunteers helping with the program. We try to pick the best and busiest people we can find in the Church. Then we submit a request to Church Social Services to have them called by their stake president."

Family home evening at the Utah State Prison is held in a long, narrow room in the administration building. Visiting home teaching families and members of the inmate's family who desire to participate are kept together in a surveillance corridor until, on a signal, the meeting room where the inmates are waiting is unlocked. Then the families enter through a single door as rapidly as possible, and the door is shut and locked again.

Folding chairs are arranged so that each family and inmate form their own circle. Bishop Geurts then welcomes the group, a song is sung from a songsheet, prayer is offered by an inmate or a visitor, and the families, children included, talk about personal problems, have gospel discussions, read together, and play games just as any family might do in their own living room. However, there are some differences.

The most important and obvious difference here is the intensity of purpose, as each family operates independently of the others. They try to make every minute count, and there is no reluctance on anyone's part to participate. They speak in quiet tones of when the inmate will be able to leave the prison; perhaps a parole is pending. Sometimes there are tears, but most of these evenings' involve fun and laughter. It is a welcome release when real emotions are exposed and when inmates and families can express their love for each other. And although they often visit together on regular visiting days, they all look forward to the next family home evening with great anticipation.

These home teaching families often become expert therapists, not because of any special training, but because of their caring attitude. Working from an outline prepared by the Church prison program directors, these families are able to assist the inmate and his family on the outside, where possible, with problems in a number of areas—spiritual, emotional, physical, sociological, vocational, financial, or educational.

Of the inmates participating in the Church prison program, about 40 come from the medium security facility, which has a population currently of 320. Another 30 participants out of a possible 150 inmates come from the minimum security unit. Forty inmates who are in maximum security are not permitted to participate. There is also a separate Church-sponsored prison program for those inmates in the women's dormitory at the prison who desire to participate. This facility houses about a dozen prisoners at present.

Another possibility for inmates at the prison who desire to round out their knowledge of the gospel is attendance at the institute of religion classes taught five nights a week by assigned instructors from the Church seminary and institute system. It is possible for an inmate to graduate from a full four-year institute course while he is in prison. One inmate who embraced this course with rare enthusiasm said after only his second instruction period, "I've been looking for something like this all my life. For the first time I'm finding real purpose, direction, and meaning in what I'm doing."

There is yet another Church-sponsored program at the prison (similar to MIA) called weekday service, which draws fifty or more inmates a week. Many of these faithful attenders are men who say, "I wouldn't be caught dead in a church meeting," yet they are happy and willing to serve as program organizers for this activity.

The emphasis with this program is on entertainment, education, and simply having a good time by being exposed to a variety of social and cultural experiences. One week an expert herpetologist presented to the fascinated group a demonstration on snakes and other reptiles. On other occasions, former BYU coach Stan Watts, boxer Gene Fullmer, and sportscasters have spoken to the group. In addition to sports figures and noted scientists, talented artists in the fields of drama, literature, and music are recruited for programs. Some outstanding variety shows have been performed for the group by members of local communities.

Religion isn't overlooked in these programs either, but rather than having discourses on doctrine, fundamental commandments are discussed. An appeal is made to the better self to accept worthy goals in life. And always there is an

overtone that someone cares. Every effort is made at these services to make them positive experiences for the inmates, whether they are organizers, participants, or spectators.

One powerfully built inmate said of the weekday service just before a recent program began, "It's the best rehabilitator we've got. You know, being in here is a form of being damned. There's a deadly monotony in prison life that gets you to feeling that there is no hope or progress while you are in here. I know I've made mistakes and I'm not resentful about my punishment. I'm trying to do better now, and I'm anxious for the day when I can get out. I really appreciate people coming out here to put on these programs for us, and I know the other guys do too." All of these efforts toward rehabilitation are not to suggest that the Church supports the idea of a country club-type atmosphere in prison, for it is basic to Church doctrine that we believe in being subject to the laws of the land in which we live. When laws are broken, punishment is necessary. But the real goal of prisoner rehabilitation should not be a collection of broken and submissive men and women, but truly repentant human beings who have retained their individuality, regained their self-esteem, and grown spiritually, with a desire to be constructive and contributing members of their families and their communities.

When a person is released from prison, he suffers from many apprehensions. Now *he* must provide for everything that had been done for him by someone else while he was in prison. "Where will I live?" he asks himself. "Will I be able to get a job? What about my family and friends—will they be glad to see me?" And these are just a few of a long list of questions difficult to answer. Continued participation in the Church programs, however, helps an ex-inmate respond positively to his new challenges.

After an inmate who has participated in the prison home teaching program is released from the Utah prison, he is encouraged to take advantage of a Church-sponsored follow-up program. Dr. Dan Christensen, a practicing physician specializing in psychiatry at the University of Utah Medical Center and head of this program, stresses the importance of the follow-up activity in effecting the ex-prisoner's rehabilitation.

Dr. Christensen says, "The ex-inmate is encouraged to keep in close touch with his home teaching family for counsel and moral support. But he must not actually live with this family, or his independence may become seriously eroded." Another valuable friend to the recently released prisoner, Dr. Christensen pointed out, is one of a number of graduates of the Church prison program who are making it in the "straight" world.

“The help that these men can give is immeasurable. They serve as a buffer between the ex-inmate and the outside world, a kind of big brother. Because they are high achievers now and strong in their testimonies and support of the Church rehabilitation program, they can, by their example and past experiences similar to those they are helping, relate extremely well.”

Frank, one of the “big brothers,” was very candid about himself and his experiences. “I came from a family where love was never expressed in any way,” he said. “And it is only now that I’m married that I have been able to express love for someone else. It hasn’t been easy,” Frank continued, “because I always felt that showing love was a weakness, and it had been bottled up inside of me all these years behind a belligerent front.”

Frank said that from the time that he was a boy his life had been completely undirected. He became a “professional” thief before he had completed high school. He told of some other experiences and then of the importance of prisoners’ maintaining links with the world outside:

“I experienced withdrawal from life so that when I was released from prison, even though I had been on the Church prison program and was later baptized, I became discouraged and disenchanted. I felt so low one time that I even thought about going back to stealing, but I was able to turn the thought away. I felt impressed to pray; then I made a self-appraisal. What I wanted most in life was to be successful, have a family, and wake up each day feeling that life was good. I just couldn’t let all of those people down who had done so much to help me.”

Now that Frank is realizing his goals and has come through many sore trials with a positive attitude, he is better able to help others find their way again.

“Happiness,” says Frank, “is based on an activated triangle, with God, others, and me as its points. You have to keep the triangle solid but equal.”

With a modesty equal to his confidence, Frank concluded, “I’ve come a long way, but there’s a long way for me to go yet. I really have a bad temper that I’m trying to master.

“Whenever anyone just out of prison needs a helping hand, I want to be ready when they call, because I’ll never forget what that lonely and unwanted feeling was like for me.”

Ex-inmates are also encouraged to participate in Latter-day Saint Student Association activities, firesides, and institute classes as another part of the follow-up program. And to help the community accept them, a Church-sponsored community relations group shows films, such as *Four Gray Walls*, to civic

organizations, firesides, or wherever it is felt they would be most effective in the rehabilitation program.

Halfway House, which is an extension of the Utah prison, is an interim rehabilitation Facility near Salt Lake City that can accommodate about thirty men. During a certain transition period, selected low-risk inmates can, until their complete release, work at regular jobs in the city during the day and return to the Halfway House each night. While they are there, they are obliged to pay for board and room and their transportation costs to and from their work. Some of the money they earn can be spent, but a substantial amount must be saved. Such procedures have proved effective in helping the men rediscover their independence. The Church follow-up program is available for these men too.

While there is great diversity in implementing the prison program of the Church, its primary function remains the same—the rehabilitation of our brothers and sisters so that they can build toward their own salvation.

Happy and blessed is the home teaching family that can see the change for good in an inmate's life because of their loving care and selfless effort. They have discovered a dimension in home teaching that few will ever experience. Their reward, though they haven't sought it, is a sure knowledge that Heavenly Father's love is unrestrained.

And blessed is the congregation that sustains an ex-inmate after he has been introduced and presented to the membership. For in their forgiveness and acceptance, the wellsprings of their hearts are tapped, and they find comfort and joy in abiding the Savior's counsel:

"... I was in prison, and ye came unto me. "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." ([Matt. 25:36, 40.](#))