FORMING CITIZENS OF GOD'S KINGDOM IN PRISON AND UPON REENTRY
Loving Your Neighbor

Dear FORUM Community:

In March of 2020, our world began to change due to COVID-19. Many of us hoped that by Easter or some other day in the spring, we would get back to “normal.” We are still waiting for “normal.”

In that spring, we were planning our bi-annual Calvin Seminary Conference – Loving Your Neighbor. I still remember the planning session where we decided we could not bring people on campus, but we made a commitment to move forward by sharing important stories and perspectives that form the basis of “Loving Your Neighbor: Forming Citizens Of God’s Kingdom In Prison And Upon Reentry.”

This FORUM issue brings you some of the key content of that virtual conference. We invite you to also go deeper and learn even more by going to https://vimeo.com/showcase/7340817 to view the conference session showcase.

I want to acknowledge and thank our Calvin Seminary Conference Planning Team which was blessed by the additions of Calvin Prison Initiative (CPI) Director Todd Cioffi and CPI Director of Operations Kary Bosma.

When you get close to prison ministry, you by necessity become a student because there is so much to learn. Prison ministry leads you to consider the following topics: the ongoing effects of racism, education policy, restorative justice, family systems, the value of mentoring, mass incarceration, sentencing guidelines and so much more.

We pray that the material presented helps you and others engage these vital topics. We hope you gain insights about what is happening in the Calvin Prison Initiative as well as in Canada. Our desire is to provide a beginning point of vital conversation and to continue to lean into the challenge of Micah 6:8 –

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.
When asked to spend a few moments leading devotions for the conference, the first thought that came to mind was, “Who, exactly is my neighbor?” Shortly after this, I remembered a scripture spoken aloud by Urban Doxology that had challenged me many times while driving out to Handlon prison. My “neighbor” on these trips was the incarcerated men who I would spend time with as their Spiritual Director. But, in listening to Isaiah 58, it didn’t seem all that important WHO my neighbor was, it was much more important to think about what kind of neighbor I WOULD BE. Read the following words aloud:

Cry aloud
Shout
Lift up your voice like a trumpet
Declare to my people their rebellion
Tell me what is wrong with their lives
They seek me daily
And delight to know my ways
They ask me
“What’s the right thing to do?”
They act like righteous people
Who would never abandon the word of God
“Why have we fasted, “ they say
“And You have not seen it?”
“Why have we humbled ourselves
And You have not noticed?”
“Why aren’t you impressed?”
Here’s why
It’s because you are fasting
To please yourselves
You fast, but you argue and
Fight over small things
You fast, but you attack those
Who don’t think and act like you
This kind of fasting will
Never get you anywhere
You go through the motions
Bowing your heads like plants
Bending in the wind
Dressed in clothes for mourning
Is that what you call a fast,
A day acceptable to God?
This is the kind of fast I’m after
To break the chains of injustice
Lighten the burdens
Free the oppressed
Cancel the debts

Share your food with the hungry
Give shelter to the homeless
Clothe those who need it
Don’t turn away from your
Own flesh and blood
They are your family
Then your light will break forth like the dawn
Your healing will quickly appear
Your righteousness will go before you
And the Glory of God will go behind you
You will call and God will answer
You will cry for help and
God will say, “Here I am”
Remove the heavy burden of oppression
Do away with the gossip and finger pointing
Feed the hungry
Help those in trouble
Then your light will
Shine out from the darkness
Your shadowed lives will be bathed in the sun
And God will guide you always
He will satisfy your needs in the
Emptiest of places
Restoring your strength
You will be like a well-watered garden
Like a spring whose waters never fail
Restore
Renovate
Rebuild the broken in your community
Raise up the age-old foundations
You will be called the
Repairer of the broken systems
Restorer of home and community
I found myself pondering questions like, “How could I restore, renovate, and rebuild the broken in this community”? What did God want me to do to “repair the broken systems” and “restore home and community”?

On the day before the conference, my father suffered a serious stroke. I spent the night in the hospital with him at his bedside. He had lost the ability to talk and suffered paralysis on his right side. In the dark early morning hours, I realized that for that morning my neighbor was not the men at Handlon, but the man in front of me. My father was “someone in trouble…in the emptiest of places” and he was crying out to the Lord for help. I felt that I needed to stay with him and suffer with him. After all, this was all I could do. In this situation, as in prison, I could not “restore the broken system” or “renovate” his ravaged mind. All I could do was stand with him, listen to his cry, and lament the devastation and tragedy that had just happened to him. My dad was caught in the prison of his mind. He couldn't talk or express himself. When I said, “Dad, the spirit groans with you when you have no words” he began to cry and cry. Like a young child, he howled and screamed. I even listened to him growl, letting out all of his anger and sadness, frustration and disappointment.

It was then that I remembered the times that I have sat with our students in prison, just giving them a few minutes and the space to express similar sadness and anger and frustration about their broken lives and the broken system that they are in. “Suffering With” in prison looks a lot like suffering with someone in the hospital. It’s painful, it’s exhausting, and it’s sacred. It’s a sacred, holy space. And it’s my privilege to be able to do it for the men at Handlon and it was an honor to be able to be there at my father’s bedside.

I was planning to give participants at the conference some time and space to reflect on “Who is my neighbor?” But after this experience I realized that the “who” might surprise us. It might be our incarcerated neighbor, but more than likely it is someone right in front of us, whether that person is incarcerated or not. It is not so important who our neighbor is, but how we respond to those who are suffering among us right now. My prayer for all Christians is that this ministry includes our incarcerated brothers and sisters. But I also pray that in all circumstances, we are open to suffering with our neighbors, whomever that may be.

We are called to this ministry...to suffer with. And it’s costly. May we have the grace to live into this calling to “break the chains of injustice, lighten the burdens, and free the oppressed” wherever we are and wherever there are those who suffer.

Greeter, translator, and bridge-builder. Those were the words used by Calvin Seminary President, Jul Medenblik, to describe Bob Woldhuis, retired staff member from Handlon Correctional Facility, and the first recipient of the Loving Your Neighbor Service Award. Woldhuis served the Michigan Department of Corrections for 34 years. He served as a greeter, translator, and bridge-builder between Calvin faculty and staff and the students at Handlon. Todd Cioffi, Director of Calvin Prison Initiative shared, “I don’t know where we would be with the program, how we would have started the program, in the way we did, if Bob you weren’t involved.”

Present at the ceremony were Bob Woldhuis and his wife, Eileen, Jul Medenblik, President of Calvin Seminary, Dewayne Burton, Handlon Correctional Facility Warden, Todd Cioffi, Director of Calvin Prison Initiative (CPI), and Kary Bosma, CPI Director of Operations.

Upon receiving the award, Woldhuis stated, “whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. This is how I have tried to live my life.”

Thank you for your servant’s heart and years of service, Bob Woldhuis!
Rev. Gilliard’s first keynote was titled, “Mass Incarceration in the United States: The Past, Present, and Way Forward.” Gilliard set the foundation for this 75-minute presentation with a biblically informed challenge to rethink incarceration. Specifically, how might the Body of Christ enter into relationship with incarcerated people? While Christians are familiar with their need for grace (Romans 5:8) and that nothing can separate the redeemed from God’s love (Romans 8:38), it may not be forefront in our thinking that these truths are equally applicable to those behind bars. Rather than remembering the imprisoned (Heb 13:3), they remain distant in our day-to-day ministry activities. A recent survey of practicing evangelicals revealed just 22% attended churches that had raised awareness about criminal justice in the last six months. In response, Rev. Gilliard said, “We don’t know because we don’t go [to prison].”

Gilliard transitioned from this scriptural preface to an historical perspective on incarceration in the United States. Entering 2020, the U.S. had more people locked up in jails, prisons, and detention centers than any other country in the history of the world. Mass incarceration has become a lucrative industry with our criminal justice system plagued with bias and unjust practices. Looking back, Gilliard suggests that mass incarceration started not via the War on Drugs in the 1970s, but in 1877 after the collapse of Reconstruction.

With the removal of federal troops from the South, Reconstruction efforts dissolved and former slaves found themselves unprotected. This opened the door to authorities codifying pre-emancipation Slave codes into law. These new “Black Codes” led to frequent and widespread incarceration of black people. With this new subjugation of blacks to white “owners,” a program called Convict Leasing allowed private businesses to contract the labor services of incarcerated black men. Convict Leasing was legally terminated in 1921 but survived underground until 1941. Another historical contributor to incarceration and the specific oppression of African Americans was the lynching of more than 5500 black men, women, and children between 1881-1952. Black Codes, Convict Leasing, and lynchings are examples of a selective and unjust enforcement of the law.

Jumping to the present, Rev. Gilliard expanded the conversation about incarceration to include a discussion about women, noting that currently 80% of imprisoned women are mothers and more than 5 million children in the U.S. have an incarcerated parent (1 in 14 children). Gilliard also highlighted the likelihood of incarceration related to race and ethnicity. A black man has a 1 in 3 chance of being imprisoned while a white man 1 in 17. A Latino man is 1 in 6. The trend holds true for women with blacks having a 1 in 18 chance of incarceration, Latina women 1 in 45, and whites 1 in 111. Rev. Gilliard suggests data like this...
exposes the racism baked into our sentencing guidelines and the bias in our cash bail system.

As he finished his prepared comments, Gilliard returned to the Christian faith, reminding his audience that five books of the Bible were written from prison: Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, Philippians, and Revelation. His point being that God chose to work through his people—even while incarcerated. As the Church, our impressions of those in prison must change. We need to find a way forward.

In the second keynote address titled, “The Role and Response of the Church in the Age of Mass Incarceration,” Gilliard discussed the role of the Church as a social agent for restorative justice, posing the question, “How can the Church engage the prison system to make this an equitable, just and humane system?” He called on Christians to “pursue a just system that rebuilds community, affirms human dignity, and seeks God’s shalom” in order to provide opportunities for authentic rehabilitation, lasting transformation, and healthy reintegration into society. Gilliard also reminded the Church that while all congregations are called to this work, they are not called to the same thing; each should contribute in its own unique way.

What then is the role of the Church? Citing Matthew 25, Hebrews 13: 3, and the letter of Paul to the Colossians, Gilliard discussed the Church’s call to serve those in prison and provided four tangible and practical ways in which churches can be involved.

Prevention: The church can play a key role in preventing young people from entering the prison system through what is called the “school to prison pipeline.” Gilliard suggested that churches can disrupt this pipeline in several ways, one of which is by adopting underfunded and under resourced schools in their geographic proximity, which have high numbers of students receiving free or reduced lunches. Adopting and serving these schools may take the shape of tutoring students who are behind in math and reading; getting involved with children in foster care systems; volunteering with programs like Big Brother/Big Sister; contributing to summer and weekend feeding programs for children from food insecure homes; and even welcoming children with incarcerated parents into their homes. These efforts demonstrate the expansion of the meaning of family from “biological to baptismal family,” Gilliard said, and they are a “tangible way to love children and to invite them into our families to disrupt the cycle of incarceration.”

Ministry to the incarcerated: Citing the call for Christians to “…continue to remember those in prison as if you yourselves were suffering” (Heb. 13:3) Gilliard gave several practical examples of ways in which churches can support, minister to, and remember those who are incarcerated. Gilliard advised churches to make initial connections with local prisons through prison chaplains in their locality. Once these initial connections are made, Gilliard encourages churches to offer bible studies behind bars; serve as a vocational mentor to help incarcerated people prepare for reentry into society; and to provide tutoring for GED or college prep. Other training can include resume writing; financial management; and development of skills that help them to return to society with potential for employment. Through these efforts, churches walk alongside the incarcerated not only to encourage them but to also help them prepare for re-entry once their terms are served.

Walking alongside the families of incarcerated loved ones: In addition to churches ministering to those behind bars, Gilliard pointed to the significance of serving families of those incarcerated. He explained that constant contact between family members and their incarcerated loved ones is a key predictor of whether the restorative nature and rehabilitation of a person behind bars that not only serves as a reminder to them that they have value but also helps them to reintegrate into a loving, supportive community upon reentry into society. Ways in which churches can walk alongside families include but are not limited to: providing child care for spouses to enable them to travel and visit their loved ones in prison, providing meals to families of incarcerated to show them that they are seen and cared for, inviting families to meals to show them they do not have to walk this journey alone, and participating in programs like Prison Fellowship’s “Angel Tree,” making it a year-long project rather than a once a year activity. Angel Tree programs become opportunities to broker relationships with families of those incarcerated and they become a gateway to building relationships. Gilliard notes that these are “tangible expressions of love,” and ways “to express faith in love that meets need in more affirming ways.”

The work of re-entry: Last and certainly not least, Gilliard notes the importance of churches in the work of re-entry. As citizens reenter society from prison, he notes two key things they need for success outside prison: access to sustainable jobs and to stable housing. In many instances, on release from prison, reentering citizens are only provided with a bus pass and modest funds, which would not meet their needs. Gilliard calls upon churches to consider helping reentering citizens with food, shelter, workforce development opportunities, and mental health and medical care resources.

Gilliard reminds churches that while all are called to minister to those who are incarcerated and to their families, each church is called to serve in its own unique way. He summarized this call by encouraging churches to recalibrate and reimagine their role so as to lean into the pain of the world and to love these incarcerated neighbors in sacrificial ways.

Rev. Dominique DuBois Gilliard is the director of racial righteousness and reconciliation for the Love Mercy Do Justice (LMDJ) initiative of the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) and author of Rethinking Incarceration: Advocating for Justice That Restores, which won a 2018 Book of the Year Award for InterVarsity Press and was named Outreach Magazine’s Social Issues Resource of the Year. He also serves on the board of directors for the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) and Evangelicals for Justice. (https://dominiquegilliard.com/)
Canada’s crime rate has been dropping for decades. In fact, the nation’s crime rate is down by half since peaking in 1991. Strangely, despite this steadily declining crime rate, the number of people incarcerated across the country is at an all-time high. With an incarceration rate of 110 people per 100,000 population, Canada now has the 16th highest rate of incarceration in the world.

The picture becomes even more disturbing when one digs a little deeper into the numbers. While the admission of white adults to Canadian prisons declined through the last decade by almost 14%, the incarceration rate of Indigenous persons has been surging. In fact, the rate has been climbing steadily since the early 1960s at which point First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples represented only 1-2% of the federal prison population. Ivan Zinger, Canada’s Correctional Investigator, reports that 30% of Canada’s prison population is presently made up of Indigenous persons, despite the fact that only 5% of Canada’s general population is Indigenous. In the case of women, Indigenous rates of incarceration are even higher at 42% of the female prison population. These numbers led Zinger to conclude that “the indigenization of Canada’s prison population is nothing short of a national travesty.”

For those addressing the asymmetric jailing of minority populations, the U.S. is often the go-to example. There, black men are six times more likely to be imprisoned than white men. In Canada, however, “the Indigenous incarceration rate is 10 times higher than the non-Indigenous population – higher even than South Africa at the height of apartheid.” The situation is most dire in the western prairie provinces. In Saskatchewan, for instance, an Indigenous person is.
times more likely to be incarcerated than their non-Indigenous provincial counterpart.

Canada’s Supreme Court has declared that Indigenous people regularly face direct and systemic discrimination throughout the entire justice system. The Court attributes the over-representation of Indigenous people in the prison system to the impacts of colonialism, including poverty, poor housing, addiction, unemployment, underemployment, and especially the residential school system which persisted in Canada into the 1990s.

There is no shortage of examples across the nation that seem to underscore the assertions made by the Supreme Court. This past summer, for example, a Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officer used the car door of his moving vehicle to knock down an Inuk man in Kinngait, Nunavut. Earlier in the year, First Nations Chief Allan Adam was violently arrested over an expired license plate. Adam was bloodied during the arrest after being thrown to the ground and punched.

Although change is long overdue, there are signs of hope on the horizon. Provinces like British Columbia, for instance, have created several Indigenous Courts. In these sentencing courts, offenders generally sit in a circle with the judge and lawyers. The circle may also include victims, First Nations Elders, and support people. Participants discuss the offending behaviour and its impact. Offenders are given time to share their backgrounds and special circumstances. Together, they create a healing plan that can be incorporated in the judge’s sentence. The healing plan often includes both traditional as well as restorative forms of justice, such as probation, attending sweat lodges, addiction treatment, or reconnecting with community.

In a number of other provinces, such as Ontario, the government funds the production of “Gladue” reports. Named after a landmark Supreme Court decision in 1999, these reports are prepared by writers working for Indigenous organizations and provide judges and lawyers with information on the background of the offender being sentenced and often suggest alternatives to incarceration.

In Manitoba, the Onashowewin Justice Circle provides diversion services for the Manitoba Crown Attorneys’ Office. Onashowewin incorporates cultural understandings and traditional teachings in their restorative justice approaches. Capacity-building workshops, mediation, conference circles, and Cultural Advisory Counselling sessions are some of the resources Onashowewin provides to aid in the healing and reparation of harms.

It’s a beginning, but there is much work still to be done. In its calls to action, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has called on federal, provincial, and territorial governments to address the root causes that have contributed to these ills, and to eliminate the over-representation of Indigenous people in the penal system over the next decade.

In Saskatchewan, for instance, an Indigenous person is 33 times more likely to be incarcerated than their non-Indigenous provincial counterpart.

What if learning in community didn’t have to mean leaving your community?

Join a community of diverse learners from around the world while continuing your ministry where you are.
From Joseph’s imprisonment in Genesis to Satan’s in Revelation, references to prisons fill the Bible. Jesus even goes so far as to say that to visit the prisoner is in fact to visit him. No wonder, then, that over the centuries Christians have sought how best to respond to crime, punishment, and incarceration.

More recently, Chuck Colson and the ministry he started, Prison Fellowship, brought much attention to those incarcerated and the need for churches across America to make prison ministry a priority. Of course, access to prisons is highly limited and most ministry comes in the form of letter writing, Bible studies by way of correspondence, and the occasional pastoral visit or worship service. While such efforts are praiseworthy, it is not clear what the long-term effects of these ministries are. It remains the case that recidivism rates are high, nearly 70% nationally and almost 30% in Michigan, and the quality of life behind bars is questionable at best. Though we are told to visit the prisoner, we are not told how best to equip those incarcerated for a life filled with meaning and purpose, whether in prison or upon release.

Interestingly, for those of us at Calvin Seminary and Calvin University, the answer was right under our noses all the time: education.

VISIT THE PRISONER

– AND DON’T FORGET TO BRING BOOKS, EXAMS, AND PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

TODD V. CIOFFI
What we have discovered is that higher education in prisons has a dramatic effect on transforming prison culture and preparing men and women for highly productive lives once released. Indeed, according to the Rand Corporation, which is a nonpartisan thinktank dedicated to providing some of the best information for policy makers, higher education in prisons lowers recidivism rates by over 40% and dramatically improves the quality of life within prisons. Furthermore, Rand shows that for every dollar spent on education in prisons four to five dollars are saved in incarceration costs. In Michigan, the annual budget for the department of corrections is just over 2 billion dollars, one fifth of Michigan's annual operating budget. Imagine how much money could be saved if Michigan had robust higher education programs throughout Michigan's prisons. Of course, one can only imagine if we applied such an approach across the country. As of 2016, 2.3 million people were incarcerated in America, basically 698 per 100,000 people, at an annual cost of 83 billion dollars. Should we embrace education as the key to addressing mass incarceration in this country, we could possibly see a 75-80% reduction in incarceration costs, or 50-60 billion dollars in savings annually.

At one time, America did take the approach of providing post-secondary programs for prisoners. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, we believed rehabilitation was the key to addressing crime and punishment and a key component to rehabilitation involved education. Across the country, efforts were put into GED and higher-education programs. As we made college education more accessible to people in general, so too, we made college education more accessible to those who were incarcerated. The passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 expanded federal aid for college participation nationwide, including America's prison population. While such efforts peaked in the late 1970s, they also began to decline. By the late 1970s, crime became more sensationalized, especially in regard to illegal drug use. In short order, politicians declared a “war on drugs” and vowed to get “tough on crime.” By the 1980s and early 1990s, the war on drugs resulted in mass incarceration, and by the 2000s one in every thirty-one Americans was either in prison, on parole, or on probation. To put this in a wider perspective, although the United States makes up approximately 5% of the world's population, the U.S. incarcerates 25% of the world's incarcerated.

Needless to say, America changed course when it came to crime and punishment, shifting from a rehabilitative mindset to a punitive one. And with that change came an end to most higher education programs. The death knell, it seems, came in 1994 with the Clinton administration and the issuing of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which banned those incarcerated from receiving federal Pell Grants. Only those prisoners who could afford college-correspondence courses could receive a college education, virtually eliminating college programs from prisons across America. In terms of state and federally supported college programs for prisoners, the American Enterprise Institute found that by 1997 only eight college programs existed in the country.

Some have argued that this is as it should be: those who break the law should not be rewarded with a college education. However, we need to keep in mind that 95% of all prisoners will someday be released. Couple this with the fact that while 41% of the population holds a high school diploma, only 18% of prisoners hold such a diploma. Moreover, although 35% of state prisons provide college-level courses, these programs serve only 6% of America's incarcerated population. In the end, the vast majority of prisoners being released are ill-equipped, at best, and setup for failure, at worst, upon reentry into society. But, it does not have to be this way.

In recent years, the political will for mass incarceration seems to be weakening, perhaps due to the enormous cost of incarceration, and in 2015 the Obama administration announced the Second Chance Pell Pilot program. This program allowed select colleges and universities, by way of application, to offer federal Pell Grants to prisoners. The result was that 67 colleges and universities partnered with 100 federal and state correctional facilities to enroll nearly 12,000 prisoners in educational programs. The Trump administration continued the pilot program, and in the last year, the Department of Education solicited more applications from colleges and universities, increasing the total number to over 130 colleges
Although the United States makes up approximately 5% of the world’s population, the U.S. incarcerates 25% of the world’s incarcerated.

and universities, one of which is Calvin University. According to the Department of Education, Secretary DeVos is recommending that Pell Grants be reinstated permanently for all eligible prisoners, opening up the opportunity for countless colleges and universities to offer educational programs in prisons across the country. With this in mind, it is easy to see why Calvin Seminary and Calvin University partnered to offer prisoners in Michigan a chance to earn a college degree. We have been well aware of the power of education to transform lives, and we have now seen firsthand the power of education to transform the lives of prisoners.

The Calvin Prison Initiative was started in June, 2015, at the Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility in Ionia, MI. We offer a B.A. in Faith and Community Leadership over the course of five years. Students enroll for three semesters each calendar year – fall, spring, and summer – and take three courses per semester, or nine courses per calendar year. Each year we admit 20 students, based on Calvin University’s application process, and over the course of five years we will have approximately 100 students. Students take the same courses that students take at Calvin University and Calvin Seminary, with a strong foundation in the liberal arts. All instruction is face-to-face, and there is a strong emphasis put on building a spiritual and moral learning community. Without a doubt, Handlon students are earning a full-fledged Calvin degree.

With degree in hand, our goal is to have students provide leadership in three areas, namely, ministry, academics, and peer mentoring. In regard to ministry, students have had several courses in Bible, theology, spiritual formation, pastoral care, and preaching. They are very well equipped to lead worship services, preach, offer Bible studies, and provide pastoral care to fellow prisoners. In fact, during Covid restrictions, ministry volunteers have not been able to enter Handlon Prison, and instead of those ministries coming to a halt, our Calvin grads have been able to continue these ministries. In terms of academics, Calvin students are trained as teaching assistants to professors, study group facilitators, tutors, and oversee a rhetoric center, which helps students with written and oral communication. The last category, peer mentoring, includes offering addiction counseling and mentoring to inmates struggling with mental health issues. Not only are our students and graduates transforming Handlon Prison from the inside out, but we are preparing them to transfer from Handlon Prison to other prisons and offer leadership in the three areas of ministry, academics, and peer mentoring. The goal will be to assist the staff and officers at these prisons and to begin new programs, increasing the opportunities a prisoner can have on his road to rehabilitation.

We are convinced that our prisons can be places of miraculous transformation and that robust educational programs will be key to such transformation. Indeed, to the degree that a Christian education can be offered, like Calvin’s program, we are more than convinced that God will use such a resource for the transformation of prisoners, prison communities, and indeed the wider society.
I do not have a lot of experience with prisons. I’ve never been arrested – so long as you don’t count a little event when I was 21. It was midnight, and I was on the Syrian/Jordanian border in the desert. But that’s something that doesn’t count here and can remain for another telling. But prisons and arrests are as far from my consciousness as the Tibetan community of Chicago: I know they are there but I have no first-hand information about them.

It wasn’t till I came to Calvin Seminary in 2017 that my consciousness was singularly raised. In my first week, a new colleague named John Rottman, stepped into my office and said, “You belong in prison.” This is an odd welcome to be sure and at that time I didn’t know that John was that rare person who could mix humor with a truth that was as arresting as a heart attack. John meant it. And from there he began to describe his many trips to Angola Prison in Louisiana (also known as the Alcatraz of the South). I’d heard that Angola was a maximum-security prison, the largest prison in the U.S., and I wondered what John was doing there. “Prison Ministry,” John remarked and this I figured was either a funny oxymoron or an invitation I should take seriously.

Of course, I knew the various passages in the Bible that referred to prisons and visiting them. I knew that visiting prisoners was one feature separating the sheep from the goats in Jesus’ parable (Matthew 25). I knew that the earliest Christians frequented prisons as inmates and as supporters of those who had been taken away (Acts 5:18-25; 8:3; 12:4-6; 16:23-27; 40; Ephesians 3:1; Colossians 4:3; Philmomon 1:1; Hebrews 10:34). Prison therefore was a common venue for Christian experience and Christian participation, modelled no doubt by Jesus himself who became a prisoner first to the Temple authorities and then to Pilate. I’ve always been intrigued by the stories of believing bystanders when Jesus ends up in custody: some flee for their lives (Mark 14:52), others remain in close proximity to him during his trial (Luke 22:54-58) and at the cross (Mark 15:40-41; John 19:25-27). Maybe spending time with prisoners is a test that really does sift the flock: the goats run for cover and the sheep head to Angola.

Eventually I met the leadership team for the Calvin Prison Initiative (CPI) that is based at the university. They are a visionary, energetic crew who are thoroughly evangelistic about their cause. They told me about Handlon Prison about 30 minutes east of Grand Rapids. Interest in Handlon started when some Calvin Seminary faculty were granted permission to visit Angola Prison and observe a remarkable transformation that had come from ministry there (reducing inmate violence 80%). They returned to Grand
Rapids and concluded that something similar could work at Handlon Correctional Facility in Ionia, Michigan. Seminary faculty began teaching non-accredited courses; and in 2015, in collaboration with Calvin University, the first class of 20 students began a fully-accredited educational program. Handlon Prison, once known as “Gladiator School” among the inmates was transformed in a handful of years into one of the safest prisons in the state. And Calvin was at the center of it.

But it was here among those visionary CPI staff that I heard this ministry framed in a way that had slipped past me. When confronted by an inquiring Jewish theologian about the central commitments of faith, Jesus rightly answered with the great creed of Deuteronomy 6, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” But then Jesus did the odd thing: He added his own personal addendum. “And you should love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:28-31; Leviticus 19:18). After sorting out our theological orientation (loving God rightly) he quickly tells us to locate and love our neighbor. His parable of the Good Samaritan is likely his defining story to describe neighbor identification and service. The CPI staff asked: Is the prisoner our neighbor? Are the men in Handlon our neighbors? I didn’t have a satisfying answer.

Within a few months I was signed up to teach a summer intensive class on the New Testament at Handlon. In spring we received a bit of training by the prison chaplain (but never went inside the prison). By June 2018 I was making my first solo drive to Handlon and for the first time in a long time, I felt nervous. I’m used to classes and unexpected setups for teaching. I had no way to imagine what was coming next.

Everyone has their first memories of entering prison and I have mine. There are the continuous security checks, the grey-green paint on cinderblock walls, the clanking of steel bars as they open and close, the drab uniforms, razor-wire fences, the body searches. After making it through the first security barrier, you chat with a guard behind a bullet proof window who gives you a belt-worn alarm with a large red button. “In case something goes wrong in there or you’re scared, hit the button, we’ll find you and get you.” I’m not sure if he reassured me or added to my anxieties.

I then walked through another steel barrier and then out a normal glass door and onto the pavement that led across the prison yard. It felt like I’d entered a new world and the point of no return. I was now “inside.” I was ready for a menacing experience. But it didn’t happen.

The first thing that I saw was flowers. Flowers? Yes, flowers. I was dumbstruck. Landscaping is my hobby and as I walked up the path to the classroom building I could see at once that I was viewing a sophisticated, extensive, and remarkable landscape garden filled with beauty. I literally stopped walking. How could this exist inside of a prison?

I stayed on the path that led me to the Calvin classroom building (built next to the prison vocational school). Two guards checked me in and pointed to my room. I walked past the Calvin library, made a quick visit, and was amazed at the caliper of books. Prisoners in blue and orange were walking down the hall and filling the library carrying laptops, books, and prominently, Bibles.

How could this exist inside of a prison?

Do I acknowledge them? Do I greet them? I was a novice at prison etiquette.

I arrived right on time for my first class and there looked out at 20 men sitting at desks. They could tell I was nervous but their ready smiles and laughter put me at ease. We introduced ourselves to each other and I was simply astounded by their friendliness, transparency, and readiness to take a college-level class. Simply put, I became friends with these men and they permanently changed how I think about prison and who populates them. I learned early on that they never heard their first names uttered by guards or most of their friends. It became a gift of grace to shake a man’s hand, look him in the eye, smile, and say “It is good to see you Christopher.” He became a full person when my classroom door closed and I built a new reality inside.

I have continued teaching summer courses at Handlon since then. And I’ve attended some of their graduation ceremonies. Each time I came away impressed with what I saw. My students were eager learners and the papers they wrote matched the caliber of what I’d seen among the thousands of undergraduates I had taught over the years. They read the textbook so thoroughly that they started recommending edits for it. (I wrote their test and now it is in its second edition, improved by inmates at Handlon.) They asked penetrating questions of our faith and its application to the world – their world – inside the prison fences. Men opened each class with devotions and they prayed. And quickly I learned that with me were many men who were mature Christians whose presence in Handlon was perplexing and confusing.

Some told me their stories privately (although I never asked them to). It made me wonder about men who committed a crime when they were 17 and now at 45 were still incarcerated. If I was witnessing true transformation before me, what did that mean for the U.S. correctional system, the largest in the world? You can’t help but notice how many are African-Americans (3x their population rate). I started reading articles by authors such as Eric Schlosser (The Atlantic), Bryan Stevenson (The New York Times), and Matt Ford (The New Republic). I devoured Bryan Stevenson’s book, Just Mercy, and knew at once that something was wrong with much of the prison setup.

The fullest transformation for me was recognizing that these prisoners were our neighbors. Not just theoretically, but in reality. Moreover, the students coming through our program have complex, thoughtful lives and a spiritual maturity that might surprise us. They will shatter your stereotypes and, in some cases, their stories will break your heart.

Each time I walk down that path toward the prison education buildings I pause to admire the gardens. They are a metaphor for me. Flowers in a prison is no less astonishing than a New Testament class taught to incarcerated men. All of it is unexpected. And to a degree the flowers and the human transformations represent our mandate as believers in this world: in darkness we bring light. In prison we plant flowers. In our prison classes, we bring hope and possibility.

GARY BURGE
Dean of the Faculty, Visiting Professor of New Testament
When Nichols first began the five-year program, he wanted to accomplish something—anything—to feel that the years of his life amounted to something.

“I wanted to be more than the worst thing I had ever done,” he says.

Thanks to the generosity of supporters from around the country, Nichols and 19 other men joined the program in its first year.

Through the liberal arts education he received, Nichols describes learning in-depth about himself, others, and the world. Desiring to expand his worldview and refine his character, Nichols found immense value in learning under professors who wanted the same for him.

“CPI professors...remove the culture of dehumanization within the carceral context, helping prisoners reimagine what they could be and helping them grow into that change,” Nichols reflects.

This change was realized through dialogue and discussion, as Nichols describes: “The program is taught through a Christian lens, but professors encourage interfaith dialogue.”

Learning alongside men with other beliefs (Buddhist, Muslim, and agnostic, to name a few) only enriched Nichols’ experience in the program.

“Prison is like a microcosm of society,” he says. “You have to have dialogue across multiple lines of difference in order to transform a culture.”

That transformation, Nichols says, typically doesn’t happen naturally within prison walls.

“People might believe that the worst thing about prison is the confinement, but the worst thing is being held static over time,” he reflects. “In general, people develop, grow, build, and create—but you do none of those things in prison, you just get older.”

Realizing he wanted to make significant steps toward changing his future, Nichols’ educational goals soon became missional as he sought to become a living witness of what God had done in his life and the lives around him.

“Life is all about relationships,” he says. “The relationships forged during the program demonstrated a better way to live—how to treat people and interact with them. I wanted to be a part of that process for others by being an agent of change and renewal.”

Approximately four years into the program, Nichols received such a chance when he was released from prison and finished all remaining courses at Calvin’s main campus in Grand Rapids, resulting in his B.A. in Faith and Community Leadership. Subsequently, Nichols took a position as the CPI program coordinator.

In his work, Nichols writes grant applications, coordinates events, and everything in between.

He also helps other men who are navigating the re-entry process by driving them to appointments or helping them acquire vital documents.

“In working with students in the program on a daily basis, I find myself in a constant state of wonder at their motivations, their drive, and their desire to contribute to the flourishing of the community,” Nichols says.

He also values serving as a member of the tight-knit CPI staff.

“The work itself is less about what I am doing and more about what we are doing as a team,” Nichols shares. “I feel like I’m working with family.”

Nichols often finds himself reflecting on his past and how his life has transformed since being in prison.

“In the first half of my life, I wasn’t much of a witness. In the second half, I’m seeking to change that,” Nichols says.

“My story is a story of God’s boundless grace, and grace desires a response—a response lived out in service. It’s not enough that He rewarded me with an opportunity to get a great education or to grow in relationship with others; I’ve been given an opportunity to create that change for others—to be a steward in God’s Kingdom.”
Few political challenges are as polarizing to Christians in the United States as policies towards immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. In *Immigrants, the Bible, and You*, Amanda Benckhuysen, Professor of Old Testament at Calvin Seminary, presents the issues and offers biblical reflection for Christians who want to move beyond partisan rhetoric and connect these questions to their discipleship and witness.

“This book is an invitation to take some time to think deeply about immigrants in the context of faith,” she writes. The book is part of the Calvin Shorts series that provides brief guides to understanding global topics from a Christian perspective.

Benckhuysen describes the plight of many immigrants and refugees to the United States and the hardships they face. She critically examines the claims that immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers pose a threat to the U.S., and describes the ways they benefit communities.

By looking at the story of Hagar and other examples throughout the Bible of God’s mission of hospitality and protection for people who are displaced or exiled, Benckhuysen explores the implications of the reality that immigrants and refugees are image-bearers of God, and calls Christians to bold outreach, “from a posture of faith rather than of fear.”

**IMMIGRANTS, THE BIBLE, AND YOU**
**BY AMANDA BENCKHUYSEN**
**CALVIN PRESS, 2020**

The seven sermons of Revelation 2 and 3 are far more than just a prologue to the apocalyptic vision of the remainder of the book. Despite their specific ancient recipients and subtle allusions, each of these sermons carries a message for churches today. In this commentary, Jeff Weima, Professor of New Testament at Calvin Seminary, explores the meaning of these seven sermons and the path to preaching each text to Christians today.

**THE SERMONS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION: A COMMENTARY AND GUIDE**
**BY JEFFREY WEIMA**
**BAKER ACADEMIC, 2021**

The impact of the Reformation was felt across all areas of life in the sixteenth century, including in church, where people learned to worship in familiar but changed ways. In *Worshiping with the Reformers*, a companion volume to *Worshiping with the Reformers*, a companion volume to IVP Academic’s Reformation Commentary on Scripture series, Karin Maag describes how the rhythms of worship were transformed in the churches the Reformers led and influenced. Maag, Director of the H. Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies at Calvin University and Professor of the History of Christianity at Calvin Seminary, looks at preaching, prayer, the sacraments, music, and other aspects of worship in Reformation churches, helping worshipers today to understand the roots of their own worship practices.

**WORSHIPING WITH THE REFORMERS**
**BY KARIN MAAG EDITOR, CALVIN THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL**
**IVP ACADEMIC, 2021**

The gap between Sunday and Monday often feels wider than it looks on a calendar. Many Christians struggle to connect their worship with their work. "Their gathered worship in the sanctuary and their scattered work in the world often feel as if they are a million miles apart," write Matthew Kaemingk and Cory Willson in *Work and Worship*. Willson, Professor of Missiology and Missional Ministry and Director of the Institute for Global Church Planting and Renewal at Calvin Seminary, and Kaemingk, Professor of Ethics and Associate Dean at Fuller Texas, contrast "worship that fails workers" and "worship that forms workers."

The authors explore illustrations of worship throughout the biblical story, from the Israelites to the early church, and how their worship reflected and strengthened their work. They then look at worship practices, including the Lord's Supper and the patterns of "gathering" and "scattering," showing how these practices can "engage work and workers in a divine dialogue."

**WORK AND WORSHIP: RECONNECTING OUR LABOR AND LITURGY**
**BY MATTHEW KAEMINGK AND CORY WILLSON**
**BAKER ACADEMIC, 2020**

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ANNIE MAS SMITH
DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

Annie Mas Smith was born and raised in Rockford, Michigan—which she still calls home today. She is the fifth generation on her mom’s side to live in Rockford. Annie’s father immigrated to the United States from Chile, so growing up she had both the small town and international, bicultural experience! Annie was fortunate enough to be able to travel to Chile each year of her childhood for weeks at a time. She is grateful that she was able to experience both cultures and families growing up. Annie was last in Chile in 2013, when her husband and son were able to join Annie and meet her Abuelita before she passed away.

Annie attended Calvin University where she served in many student leadership roles and was a part of student organizations and clubs; many with a focus on anti-racism, diversity, and inclusion. She studied social work and, after graduation, went on to serve the university for seven years in student development and residence life. During that time, she earned a Master of Education degree from Grand Valley State University. Annie took a brief hiatus from Calvin and worked at Cornerstone University until she returned to Calvin in 2017 to serve as Assistant Director of Campus Involvement and Leadership. Most recently, Annie served at World Renew: Disaster Response Services as their Communications Manager.

Along this journey Annie met her husband, Brad, and they have been married for almost 15 years. Together they have two beautiful children, Henry and Evelyn. They are a very active family and enjoy running, hiking, swimming, and being on Lake Michigan, especially in Northern Michigan. The family loves being within walking distance of downtown Rockford to take advantage of the White Pine Trail and all the hiking trails in the surrounding area. Annie wants the seminary community to know she is grateful to be able to serve here.

LOUISE SCHREUR
ADMISSIONS OFFICE ASSISTANT

Louise Schreur joined the Admissions Office at Calvin Seminary on November 2, 2020. She served at Calvin University for more than 30 years in a wide range of administrative roles, most recently as the Executive Assistant to the Vice President for Administration and Finance. She has earned a bachelor’s degree in business from Calvin University and an MSW from Western Michigan University. As hobbies, Louise enjoys caring for her many houseplants and laughing at the antics of her Siamese-mix cat, Sammy. She has enjoyed working with her colleagues at the seminary and looks forward to the day when students are on campus again and we can see each other face to face.

SHARI GARCIA
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF LATINO PROGRAMS

Sheri Garcia was born and raised in West Michigan. She is fluent in Spanish reading, writing and speaking. From a young age she has had a passion for racial justice and equality. By her own admission, growing up with a racist father didn’t stop her. By the age of 17 she was assisting the Latino community with filling out applications and driving them to appointments. This was where her education in Spanish began and flourished. Shari is currently pursuing an MA in Family Care at Calvin Seminary. With God’s help, she notes, she will complete her studies. Shari has also successfully completed two certificate programs, the Certificate in Family Care and the Certificate in Hispanic Ministries, in Spanish through Calvin Seminary. She is married with five children (four adults and a senior in high school) and eight grandchildren. She and her husband are pastors at Casa Del Rey Holland Church in Holland, Michigan, where they call home. She wants seminary students to know she is excited to serve the Latino community as the Assistant Director of Latino Programs.

REV. SAMANTHA DEJONG-MCCARRON
VOCATIONAL ASSESSMENT AND DISCERNMENT SPECIALIST AND LITURGY

Samantha DeJong-McCarron has been working in the Vocational Formation Office since 2016 and has transitioned into the role of Vocational Assessment and Discernment Specialist as of summer of 2020. Working with students as they are formed to lead God’s kingdom is central to her new role.

Sam has been working as an ordained minister in various church leadership roles for over a decade. She’s worked in Albuquerque, New Mexico as a co-pastor, as a church planter in Denver, Colorado, as a Vocational Consultant for the Christian Reformed Church of North America and as an independent Executive Coach. Her passions include unleashing God-given potential, encouragement, vocational discernment, and leadership formation.

She is a Chicago native but considers Grand Rapids her home. Sam is married to Nate, who also serves as a pastor in the CRCNA. They parent three amazing school aged children, Eli, Alex, and Ruby.

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