

# Volunteer Program at Powder River Correctional Facility

by  
Gary Dielman

## **Part 1. Volunteers.**

Fifteen inmates of Powder River Correctional Facility, most carrying Bibles, gather in the prison chapel, a room with benches around three sides, rows of chairs lined up in the middle, and, up front, a desk, podium, and a pull-down screen for viewing videos, plus a music keyboard in the corner. In daylight a golden glow bathes the room from four columns of windows of opaque gold glass on the east wall that grow in height following the slope of the roof. These ordinary but ascending golden windows and roof line give the room a chapel-like feel. The west wall of the chapel is only half high with the upper half open to a hallway that on its west side houses prison Chaplain Roger Haefer's office and the prison's religious materials library.

The inmates have come to attend one of many religious groups available to them at PRCF. According to the custom of this group, the inmates form the chairs into a semicircle around volunteer Roy Merriman, who is seated on a bench on the far side of the room under the golden windows. In rapid-fire delivery Merriman reads passages from the Bible and elucidates them with the same quick manner. It's hard to keep up, but the message is clear: Jesus is God who came to Earth. The most important message of God/Jesus for mankind is that you can't get to Heaven until you have faith in Jesus, until you have given yourself to Him. Man is controlled by sin. You can't be good enough to be saved without Jesus. If you're not a believer, you're God's enemy.

An inmate makes the observation that the people of America are afflicted with divorce, AIDS, etc. Merriman says, "From the days of Adam there has been a curse on all our lives. The Bible teaches that some people do better than others by following Biblical principles." The reason people in some parts of the world are living in such terrible conditions, Merriman says, "is because they don't accept God, they don't live lives according to the Bible." He points out that missionaries are there "to show them what went wrong in their lives." And that, no doubt, is the message Merriman hopes the inmates will apply to their own lives while at PRCF.

Merriman is one of more than forty volunteers, civilians from outside the prison walls, who regularly come to PRCF to conduct five weekly religious services and facilitate nine religious study groups. Another eight civilian volunteers from the community lead groups dealing with drug addiction and earning a high school Graduation Equivalency Diploma. Attendance at worship services and groups conducted by volunteers is voluntary on the part of inmates. Every couple of months inmates, if they wish, sign up for the religious service and groups that interest them.

Transition Services Manager Veronica Johnson says that, in spite of the large number of volunteers working at PRCF, the facility could use even more. There's especially a need for volunteers who can instruct inmates in the areas of parenting, life skills, corrective thinking, twelve step alcohol and drug addiction recovery, personal finance, applying for jobs (résumé writing, mock employment interviews, what to wear, etc.). Most helpful of all would be a volunteer to coordinate volunteers.

All of the religious groups are Christian except for Native American Circle (15 inmates). And all five weekly religious services are Christian. Due to a lack of local volunteers, three times per year volunteers come from Salem to conduct services for inmate followers of Wicca (8 inmates) and Asatru (15 inmates), both of which are loosely based on ancient heathen religions of England and the Scandinavian countries. Chaplain Haefer supervises some groups for which there is inmate interest but no volunteers. Prison rules do not allow inmates to gather without staff or volunteer supervision.

Some of the many volunteers from the community have been conducting religious services and groups for over ten years. Joe and Nancy Bush just rolled past twelve years of working with inmates at PRCF. Their Sunday religious service is one of the most popular with inmates. Sometimes over half of the 250 inmates are in attendance. The Bushes, who are retired, also lead twice-weekly Bible study groups. During their dozen years at PRCF they have seen over 500 conversions to Christianity. This summer at a full-immersion ceremony at Sam-O Pool, they baptized their 337<sup>th</sup> inmate.

Besides conducting religious services and groups, the Bushes are involved in the Home for Good in Oregon program (HGO), which links an inmate with a pastor in the community where the inmate will be released. The Bushes contact a pastor willing to assist the inmate in finding housing and a job, and then arrange a phone call from the prison, so the two can get acquainted. HGO is a faith-based program, but no inmate willing to participate is turned down based on faith.

Nancy Bush says, "We're like grandma and grandpa" to the inmates. The inmates call her "the hug lady," because of the big hugs they get from her when they show up for group. Their devotion to their prison ministry is not just in hours spent but also by financing out of their own pockets over 500 Bibles for the inmates. In addition, Baker City residents Larry and Peggy Pearson have provided about 300 Full Life Study Bibles for distribution to inmates. The Bushes frequently hear back from inmates after they leave prison. Especially gratifying is hearing that an inmate who was alienated from wife and children is back living with his family.

Volunteers Clifford Cole and Kevin Dyke have been volunteering at PRCF for several years. They team up to supervise the Overcomers group at PRCF,

which is a Bible-based twelve-step program. Cole, along with volunteer Gene Nelson, conducts the Sunday Nazarene worship service.

But that's not all Cole and Dyke do. Last spring Cole was honored as PRCF Volunteer of the Year for 2005-2006. While holding down a full-time job as a mechanic in Haines, Cole puts in around 65 hours per month volunteering at PRCF and Snake River Correctional Institution (SRCI) in Ontario.

Dyke, a farmer in the Haines area, also volunteers at both facilities. Dyke commutes to SRCI four Mondays a month in order to lead an Overcomers group at that facility. Two Mondays per month Cole and Bert Vanderwall join Dyke on the commute to SRCI, where they do Anger Management and Overcomers Outreach. They leave Haines at 5:30 a.m. and don't get back until after ten o'clock in the evening. Not only do they pay their own travel expenses, but they also supply inmates with books used in their groups.

Cole tells inmates that they have three choices. "They can remain as they are, change, or commit suicide." Bringing about change in inmates, says Cole, "is like building a cathedral. It's a process."

Volunteer Dave H. has been leading the Narcotics Anonymous group twice a week for over five years. Like Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous is a twelve-step addictions program, and, like AA, it appeals to a higher power for support. Dave says he owes his life to attending AA and NA meetings. Once a month, he also leads a Native American ceremony. Dave has been off drugs for ten years now. He says, "I'm real open with inmates. They know I've made a lot of mistakes." He adds, "The men in here are no different than me." In order for change to occur, he says, "You have to be sick and tired of being sick and tired."

## **Part 2. Inmates**

Several inmates I interviewed for this article feel fortunate to have been chosen for transfer to PRCF from the institutions where they began their incarceration. For them, and for all inmates at PRCF, the transfer process began when they volunteered to enter one of three Department of Corrections (DOC) Alternative Incarceration Programs (AIP). The AIP program at PRCF is designed for treatment of drug addicted inmates and is conducted by the staff of New Directions Northwest of Baker City.

Among the qualifications inmates must meet before transfer to PRCF are: qualify for assignment to a minimum custody prison; no less than 10 months and no more than 36 months remaining on sentence; not convicted of certain person felonies, such as murder, kidnapping, rape, arson, and certain sexual crimes; and ordered into the program by the sentencing judge. Early release from prison is the carrot. Upon successful completion of the treatment program, the inmate goes into the community on a 90-day transitional leave under the supervision of a

community corrections department in the county of release. Those who successfully make it through the 90 days, see, on average, about thirteen months disappear from their original sentence.

All inmates interviewed for this article are full of praise for the volunteers. Inmate Lee Jackson, who plays guitar and leads singing of religious songs for one of the groups, is one of two inmates who assist Chaplain Haefer and work in the prison library. Jackson says he likes the treatment he's receiving at PRCF but adds, "It's the volunteers who provide love and forgiveness. I've learned to love myself. You can't love others unless you do."

Inmate Patrick Higgins says he "sought the Lord at Two Rivers (Correctional Institution near Umatilla) and the Lord blessed me with this program." He praises the anger management and parenting classes taught by Chaplain Haefer. And he's especially impressed with the attitude of inmates after being baptized at Sam-O. "The inmates," he says, "all come back from baptism with a new spirit." He estimates that about half of the inmates are involved in Christian worship services and groups. Higgins believes that "recovery and relationship with God go hand in hand."

Inmate Kevin Fonseca participates in Native American Circle, which includes a three-hour sweat. Participants meet in a shelter especially equipped for the sweat/circle gathering. "I haven't missed a sweat yet," Fonseca says proudly. A goal he's set for himself is to see if he can get funding, perhaps from Native American casinos, to help defray the costs to families of traveling long distances to visit incarcerated loved ones. Fonseca attends the Smart Recovery group instead of AA/NA, because it does not appeal to a higher power. He feels he's "practicing good medicine," when bettering himself in the treatment program. For several years Native American Circle has been supervised by volunteer Larry Haney. But his employment has recently taken him away from the area, so Chaplain Haefer has been filling in as supervisor.

Inmate Colin Fisher says that when he first arrived at PRCF he found the program—the Accountability Model, which requires inmates to hold themselves and fellow inmates to a rigid set of behavior rules—to be "overwhelming." He says, "It starts out as kind of a shock. The accountability system makes you feel like you're being judged by everybody." But he feels "each week it's a step closer to the positive." Fisher was raised Catholic, but at thirteen his parents turned the decision about attending church over to him. "I chose sports instead." As an adult, he says, he's "found a different spirituality in nature." One of the things he likes about the program at PRCF is time spent on a crew working in the Baker City watershed in the Elkhorn Mountains less than ten miles from the prison. During breaks he's able to sit by a creek, which, he observes, "is a real good thing for me." Fisher likes to keep busy. "What's great about the program," he says, "is there's not much free time."

Fisher is right about that. Between rolling out of bed at 5:00 a.m. and lights out at 9:15 p.m., inmates have very little personal time. The intervening hours are almost completely filled with either treatment, education, or work. In 1994 the voters enacted a constitutional amendment via Ballot Measure 17, Inmate Work Act, which requires that inmates in Oregon's prisons engage in full-time work (40 hours per week). But up to 20 hours of education or treatment for drug and alcohol abuse may be substituted for work. However, the treatment program at PRCF is much more rigorous. Inmates spend 14 hours per day in work, education, and treatment.

Inmate Eric Quam attends Smart Recovery, which appeals to him, because it doesn't appeal to a higher power. Although he was raised by a Lutheran father and a Catholic mother and attended a Lutheran boarding school for two years, he's not a believer. His daughter asks him periodically, "Have you found God yet?" Quam says, "I make my own destiny. I'm here for treatment. There are great things going on here."

(Anyone interested in volunteering at PRCF should contact Veronica Johnson at 523-9549, ext. 266. This writer worked four months in a temporary position as a substitute horticulture teacher at PRCF in 2001 and can attest that working with inmates is a very rewarding experience.)

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