

# Looking Beyond the BARS

Jesus calls us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, and *visit those who are in prison*. Often that last directive is forgotten or overlooked. Yet, with 1.6 million people serving sentences in U.S. state and federal prisons, and another 785,000 people in local jails (according to the latest U.S. Department of Justice statistics), the need and opportunities for caring for prisoners is greater than ever. As the Covenant's Commission on Christian Action brings a resolution to this year's Annual Meeting, calling the church's attention to criminal justice issues, the *Companion* highlights the stories of three Covenanters who are involved in prison ministries in their own communities.

## Jules Jacob Face to Face for Thirty Years

By MARIANNE PETERS

**W**hen it comes to serving God, age is not an issue for Jules Jacob.

In 1979, Jacob had just retired from his supervisory job at a steel mill in Youngstown, Ohio, where he was a member of First Covenant Church. While attending a men's retreat soon after his retirement, he learned about ministry opportunities with inmates at Mahoning County Jail in Youngstown. After years working in the rough-edged world of the steel industry, Jacob was not intimidated by the prospect of talking with and relating to prisoners. He's been relating to them ever since.

Today Jacob, who will celebrate his ninety-third birthday in August, continues his ministry with incarcerated men, meeting with them one-on-one, praying with them, and offering them a listening ear and a comforting word. Now living at the Holmstad in Batavia, Illinois, a Covenant retirement community, he and his neighbor, retired pastor and teacher Pembroke Taylor, make the drive to nearby Kane County Jail every Friday morning to share the love of Christ with one of society's most marginalized populations.

Jacob is a people person, a trait that enables him to empathize with inmates who are separated from their loved ones. No experience is as isolating as prison, Jacob believes, even if the inmate is eventually released. "It really shakes a person up, being in prison," he says.

Jacob believes that sharing the gospel with prisoners face to face is God's calling for his life. "Jesus gave us a command to be ministers of the



Jules Jacob

word," he says. "He gave that command to *all* of us, to spread the good news."

When he started in prison ministry, Jacob met with groups of inmates who would come to hear him share. Now he meets one-on-one with individuals who request an appointment with him through the prison activities coordinator. Jacob meets with them in the visitors' room. He prefers meeting with individuals, he says, because he knows he has their full attention.

"I feel many of them really miss the outside contact," says Jacob. "Jail is a hard slap at your emotions. You are shunned. Even inmates' families ostracize them sometimes. We're there to give them hope."

Jacob observes that many of the offenders he meets have a church background but have drifted away and want to get back on track. Jacob studies the Bible with them, helping them "pump spiritual iron," as he calls it. Application of biblical principles is really important, he says, so that there's less of a chance that the inmate will return to prison if he is released.

"We invest time in Bible study to provide a positive influence and help them live courageous Christian lives," he explains. Jacob also encourages the inmates to pray for their families, even as their families are praying for them. "That way," he says, "they can be together spiritually, even if they're not together physically."

In Jacob's many years of prison

ministry, inmates haven't changed much, in his opinion. Some are men of faith looking for a spiritual mentor; some are just looking for a human connection.

"One of the inmates I corresponded with wrote, 'I don't know what I would've done without you,'" says Jacob.

"Love is so important, especially for those whose actions landed them in prison; however, inmates aren't the only ones who face temptation," he says. Troubles go along with life, he points out. "We all make mistakes. We should all expect the unexpected, and the devil's already there to tempt us."

"But," Jacob adds, "God's already there, too."

Even in a prison cell. ■

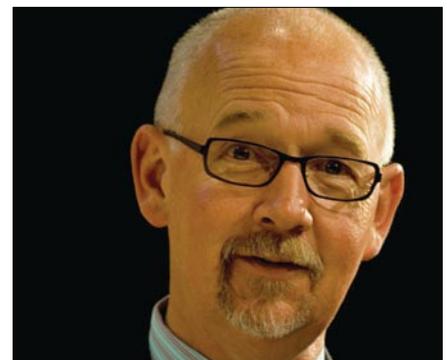
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Marianne Peters is a freelance writer living in Plymouth, Indiana.

## Don Johnson Why I Go to Jail

**I**t started at a funeral service. The former governor of Minnesota, the Honorable Al Quie, was giving tribute to the deceased. We visited in my office prior to the funeral. I was nervous talking with a former governor, but he was as relaxed as an old shoe.

"What are you doing about visiting prisoners?" he asked. "Nothing" was



Don Johnson

**Santa Barbara County Jail  
where Don Johnson leads  
service each month**

my answer. “You want to have some fun some Monday night?” he responded. How could I say no? A couple months later I joined him at the Minnesota correctional facility in Lino Lakes, just north of Minneapolis.

Governor Quie has been a part of Prison Fellowship since its beginning with Chuck Colson in 1976. Colson initiated a community within the walls of the prison called the InnerChange Freedom Initiative where prisoners apply to live within a Christian community, giving up many of their “freedoms” to live a life of discipline, prayer, Bible reading, and school work.

That night with the governor opened my eyes to the spiritual vibrancy of prison ministry. Only one problem existed: no clergy were allowed to participate because it is strictly a lay movement. I could recruit people to volunteer, but I could not join.

When we moved to Santa Barbara, California, in 2005, I was approached by a county jail chaplain who basically asked me the same thing Governor Quie had asked, only this time he said he welcomed clergy as volunteer chaplains. After going through security screening and an introduction to the rules of conduct within a jail, I was assigned to lead a service about once a month (sometimes more). Another man in the community joined me early on, and we now work together as a team.

At the Santa Barbara County Jail usually teams of two men or two women are rotated throughout the jail for weekly services on Friday or Sunday nights. Our approach is that I am the teacher and my friend Chuck runs the boom box for our singing together. (The men really love to sing!) After about fifteen minutes of singing, I “teach” the sermon I preached at Montecito Covenant Church that morning, though without



any notes and usually from a photocopied handout of the Scripture text because many of the men do not have Bibles.

With about fifteen minutes left in our hour-long service, Chuck and I go to opposite ends of the room and make ourselves available for individual prayer with the men. They almost always line up for individual prayer for their families, their approaching court dates, sobriety, salvation, and forgiveness. I put both my hands on their shoulders and we “huddle” for prayer together. Often that is the most intense time of the service. When the hour is up, a guard leads us all back to the dormitory area where the men go to their bunks and Chuck and I make our way out through the many locked doors.

Why do I do this? First, because it is a direct command from Jesus (Matthew 25:36). It’s right there in black and white (maybe red). Doing what Jesus directly commands does something good to my heart.

Second, it balances my world. I can live in a pretty nice and insulated world. Our kids are grown, and our routine can become pretty self-absorbed. Living in Santa Barbara also exposes me to a lot of really nice things and distractions. Over the years

I have confessed that I can pay closer attention to those who have more than to those who have less. Being with these men brings perspective to my life in ministry. It pushes me out the doors of the church building and into a pretty dingy and desperate place.

Third, the men are hungry for God’s word. The services are voluntary, so those who come are ready. They sing with gusto, often standing with hands in the air and tears running down their faces. They long to worship, study, pray, and grow. Being publicly broken by arrest and wearing the blue jumpsuits and

orange socks and flip-flops is humiliating. There are no pretenses in a jail service.

While I do not have the spiritual gift-mix of evangelism, I have found that I am leading more men to faith in Christ in jail services than ever before in my life. It happens naturally and often in the prayer times at the end when I ask them if they have ever accepted the love and forgiveness of Jesus. If they say no, I ask them if they would like to. A number say yes and we pray. That does something for me as a pastor. It charges up my heart.

Fourth, each time I go to jail, the men teach me. On the Sunday afternoons that I have a service, I usually complain to my wife that I wish I did not have to go. I’d rather go for a walk, have dinner, or visit with friends. But every time I go, I end up feeling deeply grateful to God for the privilege of being with the men. They teach me about prayer, patience, suffering, and discipleship. They ask deep questions and often provide profound insights into life and faith.

I think going to jail makes me a better pastor. It makes me fresher for the ongoing work of ministry within the church. It’s where I need to be. ■

**Don Johnson** is pastor of Montecito Covenant Church in Santa Barbara, California.

## Lisa Caridine An Assignment of Hope

By STAN FRIEDMAN

When Pastor Darrell Griffin gave Lisa Caridine \$100 and a “kingdom assignment” to do something meaningful for others with the money, she knew one thing—she was not happy about it. What she didn’t know was that her life was about to change.

“I was kind of taken aback,” she recalls of that day at Oakdale Covenant Church in Chicago in 2002. “It was like another thing to do.” Beside, she adds, “At the time, I didn’t think I was up to the assignment. “I thought ‘I am a kingdom assignment.’”

Caridine had no idea how she should use the money, but Griffin had told the handful of people in the congregation to whom he gave the funds that they should pray about it.

“I prayed five days before I knew what to do,” she says. She sensed God directing her to Black on Black Love (BOBL), an organization that helps women who have been incarcerated. Caridine didn’t know much about BOBL, but she had heard it mentioned a couple of times in previous years.

She called the organization and told the woman on the other end of the phone that “I was on a kingdom assignment and I wanted to plant a seed.” Caridine thought the woman would think her odd, but she understood and extended an invitation to visit the offices.

Deciding that she would give more than money to the assignment, Caridine spent a year checking into different BOBL programs, including motivational programs in the Cook County Jail, community outreach programs, and more recently a mentoring program for males. Caridine

liked what she saw. “I didn’t see just another program getting funds. I could see God at work.” Still, she adds, “I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. I didn’t know how I was going to fit.”

A labor attorney with the Chicago Public Schools, Caridine figured she probably would do administrative work, “something in my comfort zone.” Eventually, however, she became a mentor to a single mother in her mid-thirties as part of BOBL’s



Lisa Caridine

“My Sister’s Keeper” program. The woman had several years of college, “but she had made some bad decisions,” Caridine says, and wound up in jail.

Seven years later, Caridine serves on the board of directors of BOBL. She has helped the organization draw in funding from a greater variety of sources and has connected it with Oakdale Covenant Church and Well-Spring Center for Hope, a Covenant ministry to victims of domestic violence. Her family members also have become involved. Her mother, Pearl Robertson, is the chairperson for the mentoring outreach, and her aunt Edna Toney is a mentor.

Many of the women served by BOBL are desperate for change but struggle to believe a new life is pos-

sible, especially when others have lost faith in them. “Their families have given up on them; their friends have given up on them,” Caridine says. She adds that part of her task is to get the women “to look to God despite how the world looks down upon them. You have to get the women to hope.” It is important, she adds, to help the women understand that the past does not determine their destiny.

BOBL provides counseling and other services through organizations such as WellSpring to help the women get housing, learn life skills, heal, and obtain jobs. Mentors primarily befriend the women or act as “big sisters” and help them through the process, often just listening. “Many of the women have never had a healthy relationship,” Caridine says.

Eventually the women and mentors are both changed by their relationships. Caridine says women have told her, “I can’t believe you said you got something from me.”

Caridine says she has received far more than she ever expected. “It has blessed me. It helped me find healing and purpose.”

That purpose has led her to now serve on the compassion, mercy, and justice commission of the Covenant’s Central Conference. She also plans to get a certificate in justice ministries.

Caridine now encourages others who are unsure whether they possess the necessary skills to do what may feel uncomfortable. “Unless you step out, you will never know.”

Before that day in 2002, Caridine says she had been a “do-gooder.” She did volunteer work at various times. “But I didn’t do it with a kingdom perspective.” Until then, she had not become so deeply involved.

“This has been a journey,” she says. She has learned she was right about herself when Griffin gave her the money. She *has* been a kingdom assignment. ■

Stan Friedman is a staff writer for the Department of Communication.