



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Insiders and outsiders: face to face, faith to faith

In a conversation with a young man who works as a “Change Agent” for an organization called Operation Gateway, I was impressed with his commitment to fulfill the group’s mission to “assist in navigating the barriers faced when re-entering society.” Those who are re-entering the community have been incarcerated, and each one faces the challenges that come with re-integration in an often resistant world, where misconceptions and fears cloud decisions. With past experience with chaplaincy in a county jail near San Quentin State Prison, I am sensitive to the obstacles and barriers we place in front of the forward progress these men and women seek.

This “Change Agent” reminded me of the essential elements sought by each person coming out of prison: housing, work, health care, education and support. Without someone alongside to companion them through the difficult process of stabilizing their lives, a person can feel like a permanent outsider (ironic, since they may have spent years as an “insider”). Yet, employers and landlords may turn away many who honestly reveal their “record.” Will they always be considered criminals or ex-cons, or can they find some degree of welcoming back after serving their time? Can we offer another chance at a productive, normal life? Once an offender, will they always be seen as offensive?

I suppose I’ll be “mining memories” from my years as a chaplain until the mental mine closes. It was primarily on-the-job training, since most of the theological preparation I received in college and seminary couldn’t adequately prepare me for what I found and who I encountered. When I “re-entered” society, after four years in a literal Christian Castle called seminary, oddly enough, I went straight into jail. As the first interfaith chaplain ever sent inside those county facilities, I had to face my own uneasy uncertainty, in the presence of person after person, day after day, year by year.

As I told the “Change Agent,” I was guided by an “eye to eye” philosophy of learning by listening, a skill that only comes from presence. Person by person this was a face to face and sometimes heart to heart practice. I would also add that I was regularly and pleasantly surprised to have a mind to mind encounter, when an inmate (detainee) engaged me in an enlightening intellectual discussion. Often I would draw from these stimulating conversations to bring ideas and questions into our weekly gatherings. Stirring, wide-ranging and

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respectful open dialogue among those inside could be deeply honest or lightly humorous, and usually a good mix of both. There was occasional tension in the air and an occasional argument, but by and large we always learned something from each other, and I walked out into the fresh air with thoughts to ponder. I took deep breaths, grateful to be free, thankful for the privilege to be among people shut away and shunned by most. I was saddened to know so many "outsiders" would never meet my "congregation," never hear their wisdom, their questions, or their stories. I felt the same in my work with mentally and physically challenged students and homeseeking (homeless) people. How much are we missing, how much more could we

gain, from listening and learning from those "on the edges" of our communities? (we might recall the outsider/insider Jesus said, "I was in prison and you didn't visit me," and the line from the Book of Hebrews: "Remember the prisoner as though in prison with them").

The "Change Agent" and I also discussed something that has bothered me ever since my chaplaincy days: those who preach to prisoners, and what they preach. Do evangelists see prison as an opportunity for mission, offering a kind of "spiritual liberation" through easy salvation? Do incarcerated women and men hear only one flavor of faith — "believe as I do and be free and forgiven"? I've known chaplains and religious volunteers who practiced this sort of missionary approach, but I've also known many who genuinely care about people no matter what they believe, or if they believe anything at all. Believing in oneself is fundamental, and having the practical support of people like

"change agents," who are focused on assisting a human being who has failures and flaws, like us all, in their personal quest for success.

Chaplains can help or hurt. They can preach personal salvation and restrictive theology, or practice a deep presence with an open ear, heart and mind. There are different kinds of spiritual comfort, and perhaps respect for each individual provides more than comfort, more a sense of dignity and belonging. Who knows what a person truly needs unless we meet them face to face, to listen, to learn? We may gain more than we give.

We can all be agents of change.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).