

Called Behind the Walls

Written by Carl Wake in. August 1999

You are to be commended for considering volunteering within an institutional¹ setting. A word of caution, however: ministry to those living or working behind the walls can be a most difficult, taxing and frustrating task. Reflect well on the following and count the cost. Only the right person will find it personally rewarding and fulfilling.

What is your motivation?

A deep conviction that Christ has specifically called you and a profound, unconditional love for the sometimes unlovely are both appropriate motivators. Too many volunteers have come and gone away disillusioned and disappointed because of their own selfish ambitions.

It is your calling...

The call to institutional ministry should not be taken lightly. It is your calling which will carry you through WHEN the tough times come. When the residents and staff misunderstand you, and do not give you the welcome you feel you deserve. When your well-laid plans get derailed by the inevitable unforeseen emergencies of any institution. When you realize that someone has just used you against your will. When that person you have been ministering to dies unexpectedly or returns to jail for the nth time. When ... (well, you get the idea. It is endless).

It is your calling which drives you to be faithful to your commitment despite the personal sacrifice. Better not to promise a thing, than to break that promise and thus give that person the one final reason for never trusting a Christian again.

It is your calling which humbles you enough to joyfully follow such institutional rules as refraining from proselytism, no "bad-mouthing" of other faiths, or leaving tracts all over for others to clean up. Remember that you have, in effect, been invited into someone's home. Every word and action demonstrates Christ. Obeying rules, no matter how senseless, allows you to represent Him well.

It is that love...

The love that is necessary does not spring from the human heart. You must humbly allow yourself to be a channel for that *agape* love which flows only from the heart of God. It is that unselfish love which will give you the ability to listen. Residents and staff experience a whole range of situations and emotions that one standing outside the walls could never imagine. They need someone to walk with them a while on their journey. To listen and not be shocked by what is said. Just being there is such a powerful ministry.

¹ "Institutional" is understood by this author to mean a prison, hospital, nursing home, or any other place where the residents are usually not there by choice, but compelled to be by circumstances.

It is that unconditional love which will allow you to accept the residents and staff as they are. To see past the sin, and love the sinner. To sit with the outcast and be unashamed. To be patient and kind to the staff who ignores you or chews you out for no apparent reason.

It is that self-sacrificing love which will help you to be in it for the long run. To endure the heat and drought of persecution and ridicule. To sow the Seed without hope of seeing the harvest. To humbly reap what others have sown in tears. To hope when all others have given up.

Is this for you?

This is not for the faint of heart. New or immature Christians will fall by the wayside. Prayerfully consider whether you have a true calling and that *agape* love. Humbly consult several trusted advisors who are not afraid to tell you the truth. Be brutally honest with yourself.

If you are still convinced that this is for you, then watch as God opens the doors in His own time. Seek out others who are like-minded. Pray for wisdom as to what exactly will be your unique form of ministry together. Then approach the chaplain or pastoral care coordinator of a local institution and get involved.

May you experience the richness of God's blessing, as you are obedient to His call behind the walls.