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The Newsletter of Prison Mission Association

Fall 2010

MINESHAFT CANARIES, THE BELL CURVE AND PRISON POPULATION

by Donald Sommer

In earlier days it was common for coal miners to take caged canaries down into mines with them. If poisonous gasses started to fill the mineshaft, the canaries being more susceptible to the noxious fumes, would be the first to die. If the miners saw that the birds were starting to keel over it would serve as a warning for them to leave as soon as possible and get into the fresh air. If they did not, the humans would experience the same fate as the much smaller creatures whose vulnerability indicated a serious problem which if ignored could become disastrous.

Warning Signs of Danger

There is a sense in which America's prison population is like those sacrificial canaries. The conditions and circumstances which lead so many individuals into behavior that results in incarceration should be a warning to our society that there are problems that must be addressed and rectified. In the case of the miners, they may not have felt any effects at first from the poisons that were infiltrating the mine, but if they ignored them long enough they would eventually be overcome by the increasingly deadly vapors. An analogy can be made to our nation as we have witnessed a seismic shift in cultural attitudes in the past 50 years which, like the deadly mine gases, destroy first the lives of the more susceptible

members of our communities, but eventually have devastating impact on the entire population.

The gasses in this case are the values, behaviors and attitudes that have been adopted by the general public since the 1960's. The loss of a common societal standard of morality and ethics which first emerged with the introduction of relativistic, situation based philosophies caused our culture to abandon restraint and moderation that characterized previous generations. These include the abandonment of sexual purity, the break-

down of the biblical pattern for families, unbridled materialism, acceptance of all types of deviant behavior and a general sense of selfishness that pervades our thinking.

Inmates represent a segment of society that is most vulnerable to the destructive forces of cultural degeneration. Simply looking at statistics clearly demonstrates that prisoners lack many of the fundamental tools that keep most people from avoiding devastating errors in life. Inmates are far more likely than the general

population to not have completed high school, to not have grown up with a stable male role model, to live in poverty, to have problems with anger, addiction and anti social behavior. So as the lifestyle of an increasingly hedonistic and self-centered worldview permeates society, more and more individuals will become victimized through disregard of the values and priorities of God that provide stability and order in our lives. For those least prepared to deal with the stresses of life, these destabilizing influences often result in criminal behavior. Although the majority of the population will



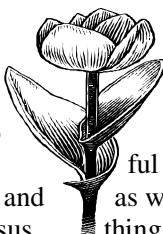
Continued on Page 5

KAREN'S KORNER

We've been in our new building for nine months now and we are loving all the space we have. Our correctors appreciate that they have plenty of elbow room and can spread their lessons out over the many tables in our large general area.

With sorrow and rejoicing we lost one of our long-time correctors. Kay Bodeutsch corrected lessons since 1996. She faithfully continued to do so until three weeks before her passing. Kay was an avid reader and she prayed faithfully every day. Kay was 86 years old. I'm so proud of her willingness to serve her Lord as long as she could. We have already missed her and know without a doubt she is loving her new life with Jesus.

I wonder what is your call is? How much do we understand God's call for each of us? What does it look like? Do we understand how holy God is? God is perfect, holy, complete and lacking nothing. That's the kind of God we serve. That's the kind of God I want to serve. How about you?



Holiness means "morally perfect, pure, set apart from all sin." We need to discover God's holiness. Our daily frustrations, society's pressures, and our own shortcomings narrow our view of God. Do we view God as high and lifted up to empower us to deal with our own problems and concerns?

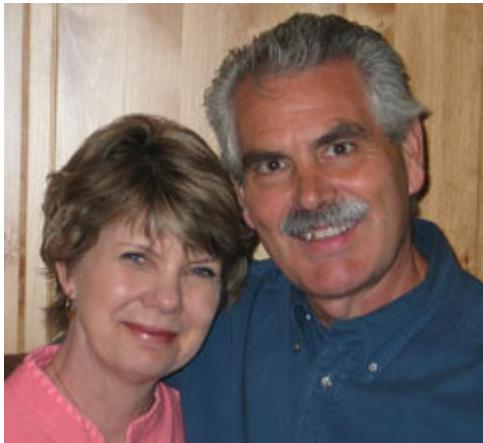
We all need God's grace and his forgiveness in order to stand before God in His holiness. We all need to want to speak God's truth and grace. We all have a mission, don't we? Who is God sending you to?

One of our students wrote, "It has been an eventful study of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and knowing as well, as understanding, God's grace has played something new upon my own mind."

"Woe to me!" I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty'" (Isaiah 6:5 NIV).

by God's grace,
Karen

Reaching Out by Reaching In



Tim and Judy Heath

Editor's Note: Tim and Judy Heath have been in ministry for over 30 years. He has served as a pastor in Leavenworth, WA; Palm Bay, FL; Addy, WA and five years ago they returned to Leavenworth. In the early 1970's he worked with Joe Mason in the PMA office, which at the time was in Riverside, CA. The Heaths recently were accepted as missionaries with Things to Come Mission and will minister in the nations of Southeast Asia, being based in Malaysia in 2011.

Our living room is filled, wall to wall, with people. Several couples have come out of a drug background; several others had been far from God, though raised in the church. There were some who were living together - at the start but who are now married and growing in the Lord! How did it all start? How did these people ever come together with such different backgrounds from that of my own?

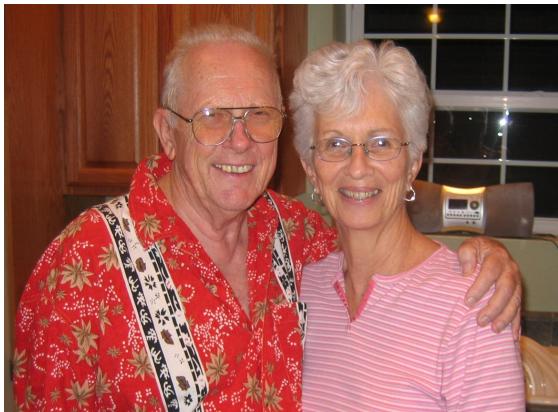
As a pastor for more than 30 years, I have struggled with how best to disciple new converts and I've tried a number of methods. It is horrible to admit it but I worked at one time with PMA, saw people's lives changed from the lessons but never used them in our church. I have no real answer for why I failed to do this but it is the truth. Until this one couple started coming to church.

She had grown up in the church here in Leavenworth; he had not. In fact, he was made to go to church occasionally when younger as a punishment for misbehaving. But here they were - in church - listening to my preaching. They did not come to any other meeting but the worship service and I was burdened for them.

My board gave me the go-ahead to have a Bible study in my home just for this one couple and we began to meet. God seemed to hit me across the head and get me to think about the great job PMA had done with the Bible lessons, so I downloaded the PMA introductory lessons from the internet.

For four or five months, Judy and I met weekly in our home, with this one couple across the table from *Continued on page 4*

THE SPANISH SIDE



This report comes from Arnie and Sally Selfors who direct the Spanish speaking ministry of Prison Mission Association. They live in Largo, Florida, and Arnie ministers weekly at the Pinellas County Jail to around 50 inmates.

The letter below was received by the Selfors from an inmate that is enrolled in the Spanish lessons that are offered by Prison Mission Association.

Hi, my name is Billy. I am 24 years old and for 7 years I was affiliated with one of the largest and most dangerous gangs that spreads across Central America and Mexico. I would like to tell you what God has done for me, but first, let me tell you about

this gang, which I am not able to name.

When a young child is too great a burden for a poor Latin home, he is pushed out into the street to fend for himself. I would estimate there are millions such children, many more than you can imagine. That child needs food, lodging and companionship. A "gang" member finds this child, nurtures him with some sort of food and maybe even some clothing, and gets that child to trust him and depend upon him, so that the gang can begin to use him (or her...it doesn't matter!). When the child is a bit more secure and a speck more "savvy" in the ways of the world, the gang uses him to deliver or sell drugs. At times there are actual wars with other gangs, fighting with fists, knives and guns. Often these "children" never see their families again in this life, and the families never dream of what is occurring in their child's life.

I married very young and had a son, but was becoming more and more involved with the wrong kind of people. I soon lost my wife and actually only saw my own son two or three times because of my drug addiction. Now I say, "what a tragedy!" My addiction soon took me closer and closer to this dangerous gang. I became engaged again, after I knew that my wife had taken up with another man who could give her some security. I even lost this treasure of a woman, who could have helped me, but my addiction was so strong that I "blew it." She wanted nothing to do with me when she found out about me.

Yes, I became involved with the gang, it is too dangerous for me to even tell you more about it. I will say that I am out of that gang now, ONLY because I am in prison. If I am released, I will either be obligated to return to it, or be killed. There is no release from this group. And of course, I got caught one night, but it was only by God's grace.

I can honestly tell you that I am thankful I got caught, and that I ought and am willing to pay for my debts to society. However, I am being accused of ALL the things that this gang had done that horrible night, of which I was NOT a participant. I have been given 60 years to life. I am asking God to give me justice, pay for my part in some of the horrible things I have done, but not have to pay for it all.

I was put in a cell with one other inmate who did not speak Spanish. He gave me an English Bible, which I could barely read or understand. I would read a word or two, which maybe I understood and then have to ask my cell mate to help me understand what was written. Now I am in a Bible Study group here in the prison and also studying the Berean Bible Correspondence courses. I have received Christ as my Lord and Savior, and now have a totally different outlook on life. The Bible tells me that the Lord is Spirit, and where His Spirit is, there is liberty. How I praise God for that. I am free.

I plead with you fellow believers. Pray for all the beautiful young prisoners here and in many parts of this great USA, so many are coming to Christ here behind bars. What a wonderful job you are doing in getting God's Word behind these bars. Thank you. Billy

WCC—Shelton Revival 2010

As has been the case for more many years, a team of volunteers coordinated by Prison Mission Association descended on the Washington Correction Center in Shelton to put on a weekend event that gave every inmate in the facility the opportunity to listen to the stories of men whose lives have been changed through a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, to respond to an invitation for salvation and to enroll in PMA's Bible Correspondence Fellowship lessons. This year's event was held July 16-18 and was attended by more than 800 inmates. The numbers in attendance were smaller than in the past because there are significantly fewer inmates being held in the facility due to state budget cuts. Nonetheless, the excitement was high and enthusiasm strong among the workers that were able to interact with the offenders and share the Good News of the gospel with the hungry souls in attendance.

Many familiar faces joined us once again, the New Life Prison Ministry headed by John Thaler-Sanborn from Everett, WA, Man to Man Prison Ministry from Port Orchard and Geoff Arnold returned to help in various aspects of the program. A new addition to the team was Mike Pond and his band. Mike shared his testimony of deliverance from a life of drug addiction, alcoholism and violence in the world of motorcycle gangs. His straight to the point music directly touched the hearts of many of the men. Geoff Arnold did solo performances of original music that he wrote which spoke to the souls of the searching and thoughtful seekers in the group. New Life Prison Ministry helped lead the event in a separate section of the prison that is isolated from the main units.

On Sunday a team of 10 volunteers went in to lead chapel services in which inmates were given the chance to discuss the material in PMA's Introductory Bible Study lesson. Kelly Maples, a former inmate that found the Lord while incarcerated at WCC shared his testimony as well.



Volunteer Appreciation Picnic at the PMA Office July 15



Part of team that presented the programs on Saturday July 17



Chapel Service Team enjoying lunch together between services July 18

Continued from page 2

us. Early in the lessons the question is asked, "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior?" The young man answered the question in the negative. He was not negative but just had some questions and was not ready - yet! Toward the end of the Introductory lessons the question was asked again and this time his answer was different. With a smile on his face and an astonished look on my face, he said, "I had all my questions answered and know the Lord as my Savior now!" What a joy!

Soon after he came to know the Lord, another couple started coming, then others. The lessons encourage our people to work on them at home, then we discuss their answers and go anywhere they have questions. Our Monday night Bible study became the most exciting part of my week. Lives have been transformed! What a huge blessing!

As Judy and I plan to work out from Malaysia into the different countries in SE Asia, we hope to use these lessons as the basis for starting Bible studies, which can become new churches. The lessons allow quick transference of teaching. The student can take his lesson and immediately teach it to a group that he has organized. We pray that our hope will be turned into reality!

Why did I wait so long in using the PMA lessons in our church? I don't know! But I can say emphatically that I will never let that happen again! Thanks to all you who labor there at PMA headquarters!

Continued from page 1

not end up incarcerated, there is still a significant change in behavior patterns that result in progressively more people living desperate lives on the edge of self-destruction.

Shifting the Curve

In education, biology and the study of population dynamics there is a statistical observation which is called the bell curve. It is a graph that plots certain characteristics of a population such as height, lifespan, IQ, the size of an animal, etc. When these characteristics are put on a graph there is a normal distribution in which there are small numbers of individuals at the extreme ends of the graph and a large number in the middle. For example, when plotting the height of a group of adults there will be a small number of very short and very tall people. There will be a much larger group in the average height range. If certain stress factors are present however, it can shift the peak of the bell curve in one direction or the other. If the population were severely malnourished the curve would be shifted toward shorter heights, or especially healthy conditions might shift the curve the opposite direction toward the taller individuals.

A similar phenomenon exists in human behavior. Whatever the characteristic we may be measuring; charitable actions, work

ethic, violence, etc., there will be a peak number that is centered around what is understood by society as normal and expected conduct. There will also be those at either extreme, far fewer individuals that will display exceptionally positive and others negative behavior traits.

Like with population curves, when other factors come into play the curve can be shifted in either

that reap the harvest for their actions. As the shift moves in a negative direction, as it has in our civilization for more than a generation, the impact on society will be significant. As the curve is shifted in a negative way there will be more and more people that are involved in deleterious actions, and more that will fall into the range of the most dangerous and antisocial behaviors

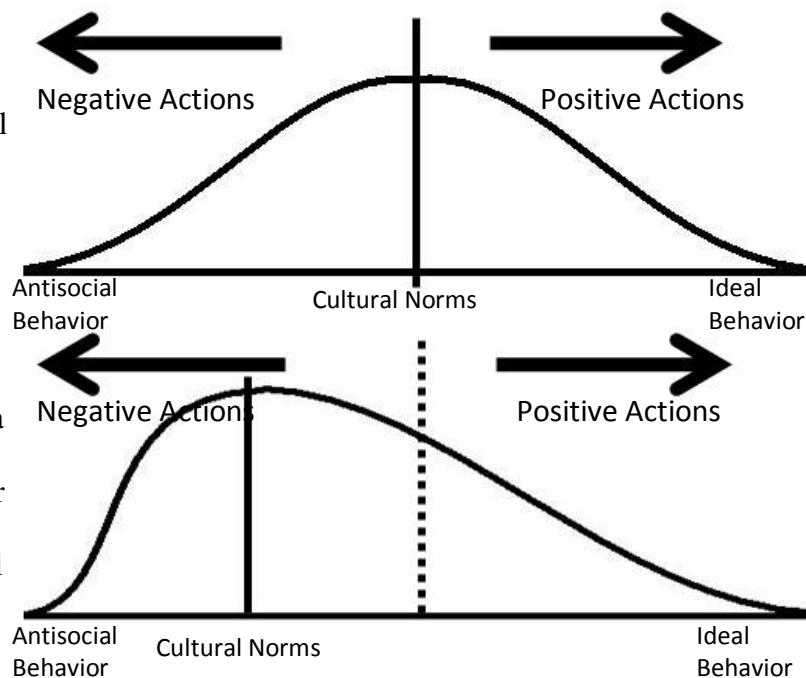
as well. With these changes the social and financial costs will be increasingly burdensome. At the same time the number of individuals who act positively will decline along with the positive cultural influences that their activities have on the community.

This is exactly what has happened in our society in the past generation. Our expectations for normal behavior have drifted further and further away from the standards that God has set for us in His Word, and the result has been dramatic increases in detrimental social problems

that include fractured families, sexually transmitted disease, drug and alcohol abuse, enormous personal debt due to selfish materialism among many others.

This is how the distressing characteristics of inmates' lives serve as a warning to the rest of society. The prison population represents one extreme end of the behavioral bell curve. However, when one examines the destructive lifestyle choices that are commonly

The Impact of the Shift in Cultural Norms on Behavior



direction. In the case of behavior, the factors that cause the shift in the curve will be societal norms and expectations. As the commonly accepted standards of behavior shift, so too will the actions of the population that recognizes those norms.

There are, however, consequences associated with our behavior. As the accepted norms change, in either positive or negative ways, so too will the numbers of people



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Inside This Issue:

MINESHAFT CANARIES
REACHING OUT BY REACHING IN
KAREN'S CORNER
SPANISH SIDE
WCC—SHELTON REVIVAL 2010

Continued from page 5

made by those that have found themselves incarcerated it should alert us, like the mineshaft canaries, that there are serious problems which if not addressed will eventually bring our whole social order crashing down around us.

This reality was noted several years ago by Chuck Colson, the founder of Prison Fellowship, the largest prison ministry in the world. He comments in his 2001 book ***Justice That Restores*** how he noticed a very dramatic shift in the perspective of inmates he worked with over his twenty-five years of ministry. He states that the younger inmates seem to have lost a sense of right and wrong; they apparently have no conscience. He cites evidence that crimes committed by such people are more random, cruel and heinous than those of earlier eras. He attrib-

utes this phenomenon directly to the change in worldview that came from the dramatic shift in the understanding of God and morality that began in the 1960's and is bearing its noxious fruit more fully a generation later.

This led him to spend the final years of his life trying to inform the Church of the importance of having a Christian perspective which can guide our behavior and inform the moral choices we are forced to make as we navigate the intricate maze of life. We can learn of this effort to impact our culture by exploring the work of the *Colson Center for Christian Worldview* at www.colsoncenter.org.

Like the coal miners of old, we need to pay attention to

the signs that there is danger around us. We must not pretend that we can isolate ourselves from the cultural slide that we witness each day. As attitudes, values and behavior that were once considered unacceptable by civil society becomes normal, we will find that the consequences associated with deviation from God's revealed will are going to impact our lives, and those of our family and loved ones in increasingly adverse ways.

**View a video about the ministry of
Joe Mason
the founder of Prison Mission Association.
Visit the PMA website and click the link "PMA History" and the video link at the bottom
www.pmabcf.org**