

I was in prison, and you visited me

Neil is involved in Kairos, an ecumenical Christian Prison Ministry which presents programs of religious renewal to people who are incarcerated. Over four days a Kairos team will go into a prison, present a series of talks and meditations to a group of voluntary participants and lead discussions about Christian faith and life. Neil shared the following stories with me.

It is a miracle to watch what happens to the participants over a few short days, and how God works in all our lives. Some initially come for the food we serve. And they look upon us as a bunch of Christian 'do-gooders'. But as the program progresses they come to realise: 'Hang on, you're people just like us. Except that you have made different choices with your lives.' They come to see that difference as being Christ.

The program is demanding on the team. At night we stay outside the prison walls, but we are up at 4.30 am getting the breakfast ready. We spend 13 hours with the participants and then come away afterwards for a time of reflection on all that has happened during the day. By the end of the program we are exhausted.

Typically there are about 24 participants and over 30 of us who lead the program and act as 'sponsors' which means you are paired off with a candidate and get to know him or her on

a one-to-one basis. I recall one program where I was praying for my candidate even before I had met him. I was praying that I would see not the crime but the person. As it turned out, the man had formerly been a youth minister! He knew the bible backwards. It was amazing how similar our backgrounds were, except for our choices. He said to me: 'You guys don't realise what you're doing by coming in here. You're breaking all the rules. See that bloke – in here you don't dare look him in the face, you don't dare cross his path.' This gives you some insight into the toughness and mistrust of their environment. In prison, people constantly watch over their backs and trust nobody. Yet by the end of the program the guys are talking freely, even hugging each other. At the start, the table etiquette is like 'This is my food, my seat.' But by the end of four days they are saying to us 'Can I pass you a bread roll?' It's as if they are the ones serving us.

In prison people rarely receive many letters. As part of the Kairos program, we invite members of the community to write a letter to a participant and to support them in prayer. On average the participants receive 100 letters each! When I was on team, they sat there with their bags of mail, opening and reading their letters, many of them in tears. Some were from children. Some were from people who have done a past Kairos program.

I recall one man who had received a tiny little envelope,

obviously from a child who had probably only scrawled a couple of words. On the envelope was a child's drawing of a heart. This man got up, holding the tiny envelope and said 'I've broken a lot of hearts in my time. But this is one heart I am never going to break.'

The closing ceremony at the end of the program is enough to blow you away. We invite other volunteers and members of the community to come. So it is not unusual to have 200 people packing out a little hall. The participants are overwhelmed by the fact that all these people are there for no other reason except for them. It makes credible the Kairos message that we are all on a journey with God, with ourselves and with others.

One tough guy got up – covered in scars and tattoos – and said 'I agree with everything that has been said so far, except one thing.' Everyone held their breath. What was he going to come out with? These were raw, unscripted testimonies – anything was possible. The man continued, 'It was said earlier that Christ was on this earth 2000 years ago. But in actual fact, Christ was here today.' •

For more information about Kairos Christian Prison Ministry, visit www.kairos.org.au



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