

At Angola Prison, Does Jesus Christ Save?

By Rev. Dr. Stan Moody.

My interest is always piqued when I hear of great success stories from evangelical ministries serving audiences that are literally captive. It is a common cynical cliché within prison culture to quip about "Jesus in the lobby" – that convicted felons say "Hello" to Jesus on the way in and "Goodbye" on the way out. Studies have concluded that there is little evidence after 3 years following release that regular attendance at Bible studies while inside has a measurable effect on recidivism¹.

That is not to say, however, that Christian conversions within prison walls are not life-changing or even legitimate, as there are numerous sociological and mental health factors that contribute to re-offence. It simply raises the question of the long-term benefit to societal order of in-house Bible studies. It also demands an assessment as to what kind of mentoring and discipleship programs are available to the former-incarcerated. Our Columbia Street Project is intended to focus on such programs while offering life-skills training.

Over at [Solitary Watch](#), award-winning journalist, Jim Ridgeway, writes a provocative piece on soliciting jailhouse conversions. At Louisiana State Prison at Angola, one of the most notorious abusers of Solitary Confinement in America, Warden Burl Cain has been an advocate for jailhouse conversions as a means of keeping order within the institution. While Cain's program of Christian education has been widely lauded for its ability to reduce prison violence, Ridgeway thinks there may be another side to Angola's transformation. I'd tend to agree.

Between the glowing press reports on Cain's work, there are hints that gaining access to prison programming -- education programs, for example -- may be conditional on whether a prisoner is willing to embrace evangelical Christianity. The only college degree program at Angola at least through 2010, for example, has been in Christian ministry (through New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary), and requires a statement of personal faith in Jesus Christ for admission.

Nevertheless, Christian media has been quick to promote Cain's evangelistic passion as a new model for prison reform. Who could argue that hosting what may be the largest gathering of children and their incarcerated dads in U.S. history for [AWANA](#) ("Bringing Jesus to Prison") is not a positive project offering hope? Some 1,000 children have been gathering annually at Angola for games, food, crafts and pony rides and a chance to hear their dads say, "I'm sorry/I love you." Would that Christian churches in Maine would organize such a project!

There is a world of difference between "prison reform", however, and societal reform.

I wanted to learn more about what's happening in Angola, so I ordered Dennis Shere's supportive book on Warden Cain, *Cain's Redemption: A Story of Hope and Transformation in America's Bloodiest Prison*. It's full of heartrending stories of the warden's experiences -- from normal, everyday discipline to holding the hands of dying prisoners as they receive

¹ Johnson, Byron (June 2004). Religious Programs and Recidivism among Former Inmates in Prison Fellowship Programs. *Justice Quarterly* vol. 21, No 2. Pp329-254. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07418820400095831>.

their lethal injections. Cain says that there may be as many as 2,000 men at Angola who have committed their lives to Christ. He expresses concern that when he leaves, though, the prison will revert back to violence and despair.

He might be right. While there may have been 2,000 out of 5,500 prisoners at Angola who have repeated the evangelical Sinner's Prayer of repentance, the number of those who did so because it was in their best short-term interest is unknown.

Warden Cain's religious standards are decidedly Southern Baptist, known for its history of aggressively soliciting converts. (I attended a Southern Baptist Church many years ago as a law student in DC, and was stunned that being put on the membership rolls was as easy as merely raising your hand at the end of a service.) Cain is without question a committed Christian. He cares about the downtrodden and disadvantaged in a way that's sadly missing in prisons across the U.S., to say nothing of churches across the U.S. He has learned, through his own walk of faith, to value all human life, an attitude that can transform any prison, regardless of religion. And he carries within a deep concern for the eternal destiny of those who have fallen through the cracks of society.

I would caution Warden Cain to discern whether he is inciting prisoners to respond to his faith, his charismatic personality or, worse still, to the in-house benefits of submission. I also would caution him that imposed Christian values, Christian morality and notches on the old salvation belt are no more of a lasting hope for Angola prison than they are for America.

The latest news on Warden Cain is that he is contemplating a run for Governor of Louisiana². Hmm!

² http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2014/12/angola_warden_burl_cain_mullin.html