

What hope do you have when you have no hope?

On November 8, 2008 a small group interested in prison ministry met at Kanata Baptist Church, Kanata, Ontario. The video entitled, "Ernie Holland's Hooked" was viewed then there was discussion around the video and the application of Prison Alpha at the Ottawa Carleton Detention Centre (OCDC).

The Ottawa Carleton Detention Centre (OCDC) houses some 550 inmates. The conditions there make it one of the most unpleasant places in Canada. Lock up that many inmates in an overcrowded facility, with a shortage of beds and resources, within a justice system that sees them appear in court on average eleven times before they go to their place of incarceration and you have a recipe for despair.

Day after day, the focus is the same: survival. Will I lose my mind? Will I be attacked by someone? Will I live to see another day? Will I even WANT to see another day? Despair. Crushing despair.

In the midst of all this, there is a light of hope, a light of love that shines on each and every inmate and with it comes a lifeline that is freely given and is there for all who want it. It is a lifeline born out of caring and love... an antidote to their despair. They need only ask for it.

Where Love and Justice Meet

Every week, Prison Alpha teams join with other loving and caring volunteers who visit the detention centre and interact on different levels with the male and female inmates who are present –inmates whose voluntary participation ranges from cautious curiosity to dependence on the visits. Those who are in a bad state in their lives are the most interested. The Prison Alpha teams also coordinate with the ex-offender aftercare and treatment agencies on the outside to assist with successful community reintegration of the ex-offender. This has a significant effect of reducing crime rates as well.

Three teams (one each in Minimum and Maximum Security Male units and one for Minimum and Maximum Security female units) of committed Christian Prison Alpha volunteers drawn from a pool of 30 work together to dispense caring and love, something that many inmates have NEVER experienced... even as children. While the volunteers' actions speak of THEIR love, the main focus is on the love of God which they present and discuss in the context of the Alpha program. They have two objectives: help the participants to meet Jesus and try to reduce recidivism that sees eight of ten reoffend. Over seven years, more than a thousand inmates have attended Alpha.

Through Alpha, the inmates learn that

+ God is the God of hope, mercy, and love - one inmate in the 21st year of his 46-year sentence stated, "I want to fall into the hands of God to be

punished for my sins rather than into the hands of man because God is merciful."

+ Christ can change anybody - an inmate told a volunteer that he looked up his Bible to see, "If two dormmates should beat up this guy. The Bible says we are to live in unity so we can't beat up the guy." Another told his mother in the week following his immersion baptism in prison, "Don't worry about me, Mom, YOU should read the Bible." One of the volunteers gave her a bible since she did not have one.

The dedicated volunteers in the Minimum Security Male area are able to touch 150 inmates every week... the 20, or so, who attend and the rest by way of the handout material that the 20 take back with them and share with other inmates. Guards are touched, too.

The prison's Co-ordinating Chaplain recently stated, "Yes, my prison is in revival!"

Clearly, God touches lives through this ministry. There have been many baptisms (60+) in the past 18 months, the first 12 of which were performed in June, 2007, in the exercise yard. The Lord must grin from ear to ear when he sees inmates publicly confirming their dedication of their lives to Him while being baptized in a prison... in a Rubbermaid laundry hamper!

Questions about this program or offers to help, in whatever form, should be directed to: Dave Brown