

Global Link

“LINKING PEOPLE, RESOURCES, INFORMATION AND IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVE MINISTRY”

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Meeting At The Sycamore Tree: Part I

Prison Fellowship's Sycamore Tree Project began in March at the Jester II Prison in Houston, Texas, USA. Named after the Bible story where the corrupt tax collector Zaccheaus climbed down from the Sycamore Tree and repented of his sins as Jesus walked by, the project brings together offenders and victims in an attempt to achieve reconciliation and closure through a series of meetings and discussions. It began with an intense weekend-long programme and will be followed by 12 weekly two-hour sessions. The second test site will be at the Arohata Women's Prison in New Zealand. Project director Lisa Rea spent some time with the Global Link newsletter to reflect on the first weekend and share some of her impressions.

After the first weekend of the Sycamore Project, what were your initial impressions?

I was greatly impressed that God was truly about this project. I'm convinced that those prisoners and those victims will be moving toward reconciliation in their own cases, if they haven't already. The pain of the victims is wrenching. We had already arranged some "mediations" between criminals and their victims. The Sycamore participants in Houston began by viewing video tapes of some of these mediations. In one particularly painful moment between a victim and the offender, the victim asked the offender with tears streaming down her face, "How long did it take for my daughter to die?" The offender did not remember, and barely got out a reply. She then described the gruesome and nearly unrecognizable condition her daughter was in as she was being prepared for burial -- The condition of her swollen face and neck, the fingermarks on her face. The inmate had very little response.

Were there any surprises during this pilot project?

We did not expect this much of an emotional response so soon. The emotions, the pain, the need, the hurt, the cry for help -- all these things were there in many of the offenders and victims. But some didn't show such a deep *visible* response and willingness to open up. They just weren't there yet, and perhaps some might not get there within the confines of our 12-week programme. I am in awe of how quickly God has moved within our "timeline," although I am sure that what God was doing in these lives began long before the retreat.

How were the participants selected?

We had virtually no hand in selecting participants and it was entirely voluntary for both the victims and offenders. But the Lord with his grace and wisdom chose the victims and offenders that are now with us in this programme. As staff, we were truly humbled by the great courage displayed by the victims who came in to share their most intimate thoughts and fears, revealing the depths of pain most of us cannot imagine.

Regarding the inmates, there was a last-minute surge of offenders who said words to the effect of they “really needed to be a part of this programme,” and they “thought it was time”. We couldn’t refuse, despite our original intention keeping a roughly equal number of victims and offenders. Voluntary participation was essential, and thus far, no inmate or victim has pulled out of the programme.

So what happens to the intensity of the sessions now that the weekend is complete and the meetings are reduced to weekly two-hour sessions?

There is some concern that no one person is guiding each subsequent Thursday night session. It seems possible that following the incredible three-day weekend marathon, the two-hour sessions could fall flat. But I’m confident that God will truly work through the four facilitators and that both the victims and the offenders will minister to each other and guide one another through the Holy Spirit. I pray this.

I believe that it is possible that the great interest/curiosity and oftentimes compassion already displayed will continue and grow through the 12-weeks. I did not think I would use the word “fellowship” to describe the contact between the victims and offenders but I see now that that might be already under way (especially after seeing the interaction during and after the church service). What an awesome God we serve that He would use us in this way to heal and to comfort each other.

Funny, I have heard certain victims and offenders say that they saw the need to minister to the other. Each, I believe, not aware that there was to be more healing and deliverance to experience and under the watchful guiding care of Jesus.

Is this programme for everybody?

Not necessarily. There remains a few victims (and possibly offenders too) whose hearts are not ready for this type of healing. One woman whose daughter was murdered was not only cynical about the criminal justice system, but deeply distrustful of the offenders’ ability to change and to turn around. At first it surprised me to see her direct her anger toward broken-hearted victims who have embraced God’s love and His desire for reconciliation. But this is not uncommon among victims. Part of this might be a fear that “letting go” would somehow dishonour or deny the memories of their loved ones.

This raises the question of why people who might not be ready for reconciliation would join the programme. I believe that it’s an attraction to Jesus Christ and He is pulling them toward Himself. It’s very much like Zacchaeus who climbed up the sycamore tree. Who knows what state his heart or mind was in as he climbed the tree? The point is he had to do it because Jesus was coming and he couldn’t bring himself to miss the event. At the end of the Sycamore weekend session one of the victims who was reluctant to participate and had considered dropping out shared with the group, “Even after three days, I still don’t know why I’m here.” It certainly seems as if forces beyond our power were and are at work. We will continue, and I eagerly await the marvelous things ahead as we continue through the next 12 weeks.