

WHERE ARE THE YOUNGER LEADERS?

By Don Smarto
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I was recently looking at the obituary of Rev. Consuella York from December 1995. Mother York, as she was affectionately called, was a prison ministry leader of compassion who ministered to inmates for 43 years, in Chicago. It was difficult for me to believe she has been gone for thirteen years. Her death created a leadership vacuum. I still miss her encouragement and words of wisdom.

In the past few years, other prison ministry leaders have gone to be with the Lord including Chaplain Ray, Frank Costantino, Jesse Mathes, and Nick Barbetto. I have observed that many of our current prison ministry leaders are grey haired, white haired, or balding (ladies excepted) which is to say growing older.

Do not misunderstand me; I greatly admire leaders like Wayne Benjamin at age 78 and Weldon Fox at age 85, who are going strong. There is no "retirement" in the Bible from Christian service. Although society in general recognizes age 65 as a time for retirement, the AARP card arrives in your mail box at age 50, and some even retire at age 55, many of my friends in prison ministry do not recognize such arbitrary distinctions. Rev. York was 72, visiting prison cells daily when the Lord called her home. She and others "died with their boots on" because to put it plainly, when God calls you to share the Gospel, you keep going until He tells you otherwise.

I am inspired by my friends in prison ministry who shun a rocking chair for weekly, even daily preaching of the Word to prisoners. There are roles for men and women in their 60's, 70's, and even 80's in prison ministry. Arthritic knees may prevent walking into a jail but not being an active pen pal. A fixed income may prevent traveling hundreds of miles to prisons but not sharing one on one at a local juvenile detention facility. Pain may prevent sitting across from an inmate on a hard bolted metal chair, but not grading a Bible correspondence course in a comfortable chair at home. Many beyond retirement write curriculum, write newsletter articles, speak to others about prison ministry, train and teach.

But the question must be asked: *where are the younger leaders coming from?* I do not often see volunteers in their twenties. Few college students join the ranks of consistent volunteers mentoring young prisoners and leading Bible studies. Young pastors are not exposed to prison ministry in most seminaries. Christian colleges will take students to Africa to dig a well and build a chapel but not take them to a juvenile facility ten miles away from campus. Large churches will organize young adults to go on mission trips on the Mexican border or upstate New York traveling hundreds of miles in multiple vans but not share with young prisoners in their own city, from nearby neighborhoods.

There is a popular notion that "real" ministry must be far away. For some, ministry must have adventure, danger, and aimed at "unreached peoples". Actually, prison ministry often includes these factors. Ministry begins in our own backyard (Jerusalem). We must render visible the homeless, the hungry, the orphan, the drug addict, the dying AIDS victim, and the prisoner. It is clear from Matthew 25 that Jesus identifies with those many overlook.

During my years teaching Criminal Justice courses at Wheaton College, my students went into prisons and juvenile facilities with me as part of their learning. I am pleased that several former students like Christian Henderson in California and Peter Bailey in New York are doing great work in prison ministry, today. They are both in their thirties, near the age I was when I was their professor.

We must all work harder to influence seminaries to include prison ministry in their courses. We must recruit young volunteers in order to mentor them for future leadership. Pastors should be encouraged to lead mission trips to their own backyards. God will raise future leaders but we must do our part to educate, encourage, and train young adults for a future in prison ministry.

Wayne Benjamin, Weldon Fox, and the late Consuella York all share something in common. They not only heard God's call to minister to prisoners, they responded! None of them used age as an excuse to sit on a rocking chair and let others go into the jails. They are true servants of God and shining examples for all of us.

I am richer for knowing them.

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