



Fall 2015

# Walking Together: Living Fearlessly, Loving Boldy

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# Walking Together: Living Fearlessly, Loving Boldly

## **Abstract**

In this paper, I give an account of my capstone for the Religious Studies major. I tell about the research project-turned-applied-learning, and how my research as a Mellon Summer Scholar '15 led me to start a prison ministry between Gettysburg students and the Adams County Adult Correctional Complex. I reflect on what I have done, how God has worked, and what I have learned. This is far from a typical research paper; then again, this was far from a typical research project.

## **Keywords**

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## **Comments**

Religious Studies Senior Thesis

GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

# Walking Together

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Living Fearlessly, Loving Boldly

**Anna Malone**

**Fall 2015**

In this paper, I give an account of my capstone for the Religious Studies major. I tell about the research project-turned-applied-learning, and how my research as a Mellon Summer Scholar '15 led me to start a prison ministry between Gettysburg students and the Adams County Adult Correctional Complex. I reflect on what I have done, how God has worked, and what I have learned. This is far from a typical research paper; then again, this was far from a typical research project.

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### *Special thanks:*

*To Chaplain Will, whose work at the ACACC and his passion for prison ministry made this project possible;*

*To Buz, whose encouragement helped me persevere;*

*To my fellow volunteers, who jumped in alongside me;*

*To the countless people I've interviewed and worked with, for teaching me about their world; and to the inmates at the ACACC, for letting us into their world.*

Every once in a while, we are given moments of clarity, times when we know for sure that we are, in that instant, precisely where we are meant to be. Over the past few months, I have had many of those moments, at a small, minimum-security jail ten minutes away from campus.

The first time I went to the Adams County Adult Correctional Complex (ACACC), I had scheduled a meeting with the chaplain. He took me on a brief tour, and then we sat and talked in his office for quite some time. I was so grateful for his generosity with his time, as well as for his honesty about needing more volunteers. While I was there, I asked what it would take for me to get involved with his ministry. We talked briefly about options before I left. As I drove away, I was overwhelmed by the feeling of certainty that something had just gone extraordinarily right. It was the beginning of July.

The next time the feeling arose was similar; I was with a classmate and we were leaving the jail after shadowing one of the chaplain's Bible studies. As we pulled out of the parking lot, I turned to him. "Have you ever felt- just... - right? Like you knew that you were exactly where God wanted you?" I asked, making a feeble attempt to describe that feeling of clarity. He smiled and said that was pretty cool, which was enough of an invitation for me to launch into an enthusiastic rhapsody of how I had long doubted the day would ever come that we were invited into the jail, but how God had astounded me by opening doors and changing hearts. It was the week before our first college-student-led Bible study in the jail, the last week of October – almost four months after that first moment.

This story began as a research project in which I hoped to better understand the impact of Christian service. I have certainly learned about that, but in ways far beyond anything I had ever imagined. What began as an out-of-the-blue research question has transformed into a partnership that I hope and pray will last long after I graduate. Of course, as I look back over the past

several months, it is clear to me that this question never actually came “out of the blue” – thoughts, events, meetings, and feelings fell carefully into place over time in such a way that I can only conclude it has all been orchestrated by Someone with a bigger picture than mine.

## **I. Phase 1: Research, or The Summer After the Summer of a Lifetime**

It was my junior year, and it was time to begin thinking about my next summer experience. I had spent the previous summer in Ireland – the summer of a lifetime – in which I learned more about myself, about the world, and about faith than I had anticipated. As I made my plans, I knew that nothing would really compare to that summer, but I thought I would apply to be a Mellon Summer Scholar. Being part of this program would allow me to research a topic of my choice while living on campus over the summer; I decided to go ahead and see what happened. My advisor (Dr. Charles D. Myers, or “Buz”) and I sat down to talk about a research proposal. My original idea had something to do with the health of a church and the role of the Sunday sermon, a broad and (to be blunt) rather boring topic. Thinking back to a conversation I had had with my mother, I asked Buz what he thought about my researching prison ministry. Forty-five minutes later, I left his office with a page full of notes on directions this could go. Needless to say, we agreed to pursue this topic.

When I was awarded the Mellon grant, my proposal was to understand what impact one’s religious beliefs and experiences had on one another, in the context of Christian prison ministry. That is, I wanted to understand the experience of the ministers – those who voluntarily entered prison because of their religious convictions. What did they learn from their work? As I began the work, however, I found that I would be learning *much* more than just that. At the beginning of the summer, I knew almost nothing about the prison system; as I read sources and interviewed

people who had worked closely with inmates, I began to piece together a picture of an institution which had never intersected with my life before. I was becoming more and more amazed about the realities of prison and the great need represented by the prison system. My research confronted me with the fact that the problem is so much bigger than anything we can handle on our own, that healing of this broken world requires the Lord's intervention. I took refuge in the assurances of the Bible that because of His love, the Lord promises to heal the world and transform individual lives. We need God to step in and save us all.

Through my research, I learned that there are many areas of need that arise from incarceration. The first "stage" of prison ministry, if you will, is prevention, or keeping people out of prison. Very often, people in prison come from similar neighborhoods and socioeconomic backgrounds, and so crime-prevention programs that work with young people in those target groups to help their lives follow a path that does not lead to prison are very important. There are already some programs that do this, but there is always room for more. My research focused more on the second two stages of prison ministry: in-prison and aftercare. In-prison ministry is what first comes to mind with the phrase "prison ministry": Bible studies, prison chaplaincy, and the like. Aftercare, however, is also a huge area of need that often is overlooked. The transition from prison back into society is incredibly difficult; imagine having every decision of every day made for you, and then being released with the expectation that you will now make good choices. Inmates face this, and in fact may experience fear of being released for this reason. Thus, a strong support system when returning is very important, and is sometimes (but not always) provided through halfway houses, mentorship programs, or a welcoming, healthy community. Furthermore, the needs of incarceration include advocacy and justice – spreading the word about other needs and helping individuals have access to quality legal counsel. I also

found an epidemic of dehumanization throughout the entire legal system, the human habit of labeling some people as less than others. What all too often happens is that when people are locked away, we say that the bad people are in prison and the good people are outside of prison. Of course, there are several problems with that: there is less hope for rehabilitation when you have been labeled a “bad person”, there is a significant loss of human dignity, and this harms the “good people” as well as the “bad,” as Frederick Douglass warned. In one speech, he told his audience, “No man can put a chain about the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck” (Douglass 688); that is, we dehumanize others at the cost of our own humanity.

By the second week of my research, I began to realize that this summer – the summer that I had been calling “The Summer after the Summer of a Lifetime” to myself – was actually going to be just as life-changing as the previous one. Throughout that first month, I felt my heart stirring in a new way. Although I was grieved by the brokenness surrounding prison, I began to get excited when I thought about the opportunities to tell inmates about God’s love for them. My interviews with prison ministers were always invigorating and inspiring, as one after another told me what a privilege and undeserved opportunity to serve those in prison. They told me things such as, “I don’t know why He’s chosen to use me,” “I’m just getting in the way,” and “I’m so glad He’s asked me to serve Him.” Who were these people? Everyday, ordinary people. People whom, for some reason, God called to be part of His mission. We ought to ask ourselves why the Lord of the universe would bother calling ordinary people when He is fully capable of extraordinary things. It certainly cannot be for His benefit, so it must be for the benefit of the people He calls; indeed, I found that the benefits to the Christian are manifold. First, all of society is implicated when injustice is allowed to reign, so fighting that injustice benefits all.



Second, the Christian is given the opportunity to know God more, to learn about His character as they see Him work wonders. Third, ministers are offered the privilege of being Christ's ambassadors when they are really just getting in the way. Entering a prison allows people to see grace in a new context, to strip the gospel down to its bare bones, and to watch lives be changed radically. In this way, service is turned into a privilege and opportunity rather than an obligation.

I was flooded with the hope that what I was learning applied much more broadly than simply to engaging with those in prisons. There is so much that we stand to learn from engaging with all people, not just those on the fringes, because we other-ize people all the time, pushing them to the fringes of our lives and forgetting that they are just as human as we are every day. Perhaps this comes from a fear of loving that many human beings, or of being hurt (whether through injury or association), or of being too similar to the guy who killed his wife or the woman who sexually abused someone. *At least I'm not like them*, we Pharisees say of the tax collectors. After all, it is dangerous to choose to associate with them, and to invite them into a shared identity, a shared family. But the amazing thing about the message of Jesus is that in dying on the cross as a criminal, Jesus said, *I will choose to become like them*. Jesus, the great High Priest who is our advocate because He is at once God – the only privileged One who deserves that privilege – and He is also us – the privileged one who came to us so that not only would He know our needs and desperation, but that He could heal it. The truth is that He came for *all* of us, and *not* just the ones in prison; if we are being honest, those in prison may be more aware of their need than those of us on the outside are, but we need Him no less.

Nonetheless, as I articulated the benefits of Christian prison ministry, I began to experience cognitive dissonance. I was growing in the conviction that an individual's faith would be deepened by responding to God's radical call to the fringes of society, yet I was only

reading about it. My interviews were fascinating, but I could only learn so much secondhand. I was confronted with stories of injustice and dehumanization, but had taken no action in response. The beginning of July saw me losing sleep and feeling restless; I had done much broad research but lacked direction. It was then that I was invited to the Adams County Adult Correctional Complex (ACACC) to meet with the chaplain. At the end of the visit, I asked about ways for me to volunteer, and he responded enthusiastically. I drove away, making plans to volunteer in the coming year and almost crying from the beauty of it all. I had no idea that this small application of my project would grow into something so much bigger!

I spoke with a professor about his experience in prison ministry, and he suggested that I start a volunteer group on campus as an outgrowth of my project. Although I responded politely, I thought to myself, *No, that will take too much work*. Naturally, the next day I was scribbling down ideas on how I could make it work and the opportunities it could create. The idea was taking shape as a chance for college students to better understand what it means to be in prison, as well as a chance for them to serve; their service would likewise be a chance to show inmates that there are people who care about them and desire to help, that there are people who do not consider them lost causes. I presented the idea to my advisor and to the dean in charge of the summer program, and they encouraged me to move forward with it. After much prayer, I decided to go ahead with it, believing that it was God calling me to the endeavor. But when I called the chaplain and spoke to him, asking him what he thought of the vague idea, he had many hesitations and pointed me to other organizations in the community that might be able to use a group of interested college students.

That conversation felt a bit like someone had popped a balloon that I had been holding excitedly. I was frustrated and discouraged; I prepared myself to back off the idea, afraid that I

had misunderstood God's will for me. Praise God for advisors, though, because Buz reminded me of the conviction that I had and urged me to keep trying. The success of this idea required perseverance, he told me, and so even though it seemed that the door was closed in our faces, we should at least knock again to see if minds had changed. I tentatively picked my hopes up off the floor, and agreed to not give up. We decided to draft a more airtight proposal and gain more institutional support from the college. And with that conversation with Buz, new hope – a slightly more cautious hope, maybe, but hope nonetheless – began to rise in me. We would do something, and I knew that God would somehow use it. He promises to; the psalmist writes, “I know the Lord secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy” (Ps. 140:12). As long as there are needy people, God will act. My dream remained: to bless the community in prison and touch the hearts of the future policymakers of America at Gettysburg the people who will be faced with “tough on crime” laws and will remember that their brothers and sisters will be locked in cages if they do not proceed with caution.

I ended the summer by drafting a proposal and planning the early phases of the project (see Appendix A for the proposal). It was time to see mountains move.

## **II. Out of My Comfort Zone: The Semester's Work**

I began the semester with a proposal in hand and eagerness to see things begin moving. My convictions were strong, but I was not sure that they would actually come to fruition. I often felt like a small child among adults, and was strongly reminded of the story of David facing Goliath; I knew the road ahead would be difficult, and in my more honest moments, I doubted that I could actually achieve what I had set out to do. Again, praise God for advisors and faculty sponsors and the prayers of my loved ones. Praise God for God Himself, because I knew that if I

was to face these giants, I would need Him (as always). David's challenge to the giant became my battle cry: "David said to the Philistine, 'You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied'" (*New Revised Standard Version*, 1 Samuel 17:45).

For the first month of the semester, my advisor, the prison chaplain, and I tried to schedule a meeting; this proved to be a difficult task, since our three schedules were quite full and very different. However, October 1 found the three of us sitting in Buz's office, talking eagerly about the burdens God had laid on our hearts for prison ministry. Our proposal to the chaplain was straightforward: we wanted to lead a small, discussion-based Bible study in which students and inmates wrestled together to apply the Bible to everyday life. The first year (2015-2016) would be a "pilot year", in which a few committed students test it out to see if the program would work. We talked about how important it is that people like me – with the privilege of attending a first-rate college – get a glimpse of what it means to live in a prison, and what it means to be locked up. The chaplain told us that there was a lack of programs in the Community Reentry part of the facility; because inmates in Community Reentry leave during the day for work release, it is difficult to get volunteers to run programs that work with the inmates' schedules. He was excited about the idea and worked closely with the ACACC administration to get us started as soon as possible. I named the project "Walking Together", because I held (and still hold) the deep desire that this Bible study would be a place where community could develop – where college students and inmates could journey through life together.

Things took off quickly, and two weeks later, four other volunteers and I were sitting in the biannual volunteer training held by the ACACC. The next week we shadowed the chaplain's Bible study to acclimate ourselves to the environment; this was the day I turned to my fellow

student and told him we were exactly where we needed to be. In those few weeks, things had changed from moving slowly (to the point that I would wonder whether anything would happen before I graduated) to moving so quickly I could barely believe it. In spite of the sudden scramble to get everything together, I had my volunteers: three other seniors, Buz, and myself. We all entered with some apprehension, I think. I asked each volunteer to write a brief account of what they were thinking and feeling before beginning, and posted it on our blog.

Mia wrote:

*“When Anna first started telling me about her idea for the prison ministry, I was immediately interested. I thought it would be a good opportunity to help spread the Gospel to those that haven’t had an easy life. The idea that inmates are so much different from me is completely false, and I think it will be a good experience to gain a larger world perspective. I’m trying to go into this experience with very little expectations, and just hope that God moves in this place. I’m excited to engage with these individuals and listen to their stories and inputs into our conversations. I just hope that this will be a rewarding experience for both our team and the inmates.”*

Spenser wrote:

*“Going into the orientation session definitely made me anxious for the semester, coupled with my excitement to work through any passage of the Bible with others who often share different backgrounds and experiences which I’m sure I will run into in the Bible study. Having the Bible study in the work release center with the intention of Biblical re-acclimation to life outside of prison seems to me a great way to serve others, especially after the feedback from the Bible study I shadowed with Buz and Anna. One of my concerns for the Bible study is the fact that I am younger than some of the inmates, if*

*not all of them. Over the summer I worked at a Christian summer camp, and every week I worked with a new group of campers, age-range from kindergarten through high school. I think that a similar situation will unfold in the prison ministry as with the summer, in that I will be challenged greatly, and may end up learning more about myself and my faith than I ever expected. Just from hearing the things that the inmates had to say at the chaplain's Bible study, I cannot wait to get started with Buz Myers in the Bible study."*

Silvia wrote:

*"During the fall of my sophomore year, I took a course on the New Testament with Buz Myers. During that course, he mentioned an opportunity to do prison ministry at the Camp Hill State Prison. For some reason I can't explain, I became immediately interested in this opportunity. Throughout the semester, I had anticipated a visit to the facility, but things never worked out. From then on, the idea of prison ministry was pushed to the back burner and did not cross my mind until this semester.*

*When I learned of this opportunity, I was 100% sure that I wanted to participate and help in any way that I could. I cannot really articulate my desire to reach out to this group. I'm not sure why God has placed this on my heart. And to be completely honest, I haven't processed through a lot of my expectations for this ministry. I'm excited for a reason that I cannot explain. I have always had a heart for missions, and perhaps this is my call to mission close to home. And while I hope that Christ can use me as a vessel to show his love, I also know that I will learn more than I will ever be able to teach.*

*I know that the people we will be ministering to will be preparing to reenter the community and will be seeking to change and turn away from their old ways. I hope that*

*we can help point them to Christ and help them to understand that Christ is the way to redemption and renewal. I hope that we can let them know that Christ has redeemed us from sin and brought us to life. He has purchased us for a great price and he desires us to live in accordance with the worth he placed in us. I hope they can come to fully understand the gospel and I hope that they will continue to seek Christ once they enter the outside community. Christ calling to them to run into their arms. He desires his children to return to him.”*

Buz wrote:

*“In 2008 my wife, who is an ordained Presbyterian minister, became the Head of Chaplain Services at the Camp Hill State Prison, a maximum-security state facility that houses more than 3,000 adult male offenders. Since I am a trained biblical scholar who teaches courses on the Bible at Gettysburg College during the week and in local churches on weekends, she asked me to volunteer at SCI-Camp Hill where Christian inmates were interested in learning more about the Bible. Twice a week for the next six years I taught inmates the Bible and its application to life in the 21st century. But what I quickly learned is that I was the real student, for I came away from this experience more knowledgeable about the criminal justice system, profoundly touched by the depth of faith that my inmate students possessed, and moved by the thirst these men had to learn more about Christianity and how the Bible speaks to life today. This experience was so enlightening that on several occasions I took some of my Gettysburg College students with me to the prison to teach and interact with my inmate students. Unfortunately, the state prison’s distance from campus and its heightened security requirements have limited student access to the facility.*

*When Anna's research interests over the summer of 2015 shifted from studying the challenges related to incarceration and reentry to involving herself and others in some form of prison ministry, it only made sense to approach the nearby Adams County Adult Correctional Complex for permission to minister in that facility. Although Anna's proposal was not immediately embraced by the staff of ACACC, her persistence and prayer won the day. Hearts melted, doors opened, and students felt called by God to begin this pilot program.*

*Now, we have two teams of leaders—one male team for male inmates and one female team for female inmates—who are going to be working with Work Release inmates. I have no experience with this population who are nearing the end of their time of incarceration and are allowed to leave the facility during the day to work at jobs in the local community. We have learned, however, that when they return in the evenings, these inmates have little programming available to them. We hope to meet that need by offering them a form of Bible-centered, faith-based discussion that will focus on how to live one's Christian faith on "the outside."*

*While it may appear that Gettysburg College students have little in common with the general prison population, they actually have much in common with Work Release inmates. Both groups are preparing to leave an institution that they have called home for a time, where they have created a life for themselves and have grown comfortable in their environment. Both groups are facing the unknown future, so both groups are experiencing fears and anxieties about whether one will succeed and are hoping and praying that they are equipped for the challenges that lie ahead. As Christian sisters and brothers both groups are looking to God to guide and sustain them in their new life.*



*Therefore, I am confident that our students will have much to share with the inmates who come to their sessions. We will share what we know about the Bible, but we will also offer friendship, support, and encouragement to persons who society has often overlooked. In so doing, we will fulfill the command to “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them. . .” (Hebrews 13:3a). I also know that this experience will greatly enrich the college experience of our students. And if this experiment works this semester, then other Gettysburg College students in subsequent semesters can follow in the footsteps of these pioneering students.*

*I am excited about what God is going to do in the lives of those who participate in this program, and I am confident that the Holy Spirit will empower and minister to all who attend. We ask that you keep this ministry in your thoughts and prayers.”*

I offered my own reflections as well:

*“Wow, it’s hard to believe that this day is finally here. As I told everyone this week, I’m realizing that I never really thought this would happen! I was afraid of closed doors and mountains that could not be climbed - giants that could not be defeated. God has taught me so much as I’ve been bringing together all the pieces for this program, so I know that he will be teaching me even more as time progresses. I’m a little apprehensive about building trust with inmates; I really don’t want to project the idea that I’m the special college student swooping in to save the day. God has made two things very clear to me, however: that it is a privilege and an opportunity to serve him in this way, and that I can in no way get in the way of his workings in any endeavor. In the end, I’m hoping to be blown away by God’s greatness.” (“Walking In”)*

The weekly Bible studies began, every Wednesday night at Community Reentry: one for the men, and one for the women. Numbers varied week to week; we almost always had someone new coming out, and this semester we had as many as ten male and four female inmates at a time! Given the small size of the population this was open to (approximately 100 men and 25 women), we have been very pleased with the attendance we have seen. We also left every week, amazed at what the inmates had shared and at the conversations we had had. After each study, we would tell each other excitedly about what God was doing. The initial excitement I felt when I shadowed the chaplain's Bible study renewed itself every week, and I continue to thank God for this huge blessing. It has been one of the hugest privileges to see my fellow students develop a passion for prison ministry, and to see them join me as we think ahead to next semester.

Part of the project has been to keep a blog about what we are doing. I wrote one post as I reflected on the journey to this point and how much God had worked:

*One night, as I was getting my things together for the prison Bible study, I began praying in my apartment. I asked God to work in us and through us; I asked Him to bring more inmates out. I asked that He would give us words when we needed to speak and the wisdom to keep quiet when necessary. I wanted to go in with the confidence that He would be at work.*

*As I left to meet up with the other student volunteers, I realized that this whole endeavor has been characterized by those prayers: quick prayers in the moment, long prayers as I pleaded with the Lord to move mountains, always desperate prayers as I considered how inadequate my abilities are in this ministry. At every turn I've been asking for prayers from my friends and family, and I myself have devoted prayer time to this topic. Yet I don't do this for other areas of ministry. What's so special about this?*

*When it comes to prison ministry, I am very aware that my knowledge is limited. It is so clear to me that God has called me here, not because of any merit of my own, but because of His grace. From the beginning of this project, I have felt like a child among adults - like a little girl facing giants. I've felt lost and discouraged and very incompetent. If it weren't for the people God placed around me, I would have given up after my first disappointment. My research this summer has given me a limited understanding of the prison system, but I've been so lost as I've tried to understand how things work at the ACACC. We haven't been able to directly reach out to inmates to invite them to our Bible studies, so we've had to pray that the Lord brings people out. I've been stumbling around trying to lead and encourage my fellow volunteers, and I've been so lost when it comes to choosing which passages to read at Bible study.*

*And you know what? I've never been more confident that a project will succeed. This idea was born from the Holy Spirit moving in my heart; God gave me a dream to see college students walking alongside inmates at the ACACC, and that is what has happened. This dream was never mine to begin with. Why should I do anything but trust that God will bring it to fruition? Whenever I would get discouraged and be ready to give up over the past several months, God would push me just a little farther, and I would be blown away by the way He worked in spite of my little faith. Even this past weekend, I took a couple of the guys who had wanted to volunteer but were unable to this semester and we went to visit another county prison for a chapel service. I had no idea what it would be like, or what we would be doing, but I knew that God would work - and He did!*

*Why am I telling you this? Because I want you to see the beauty of what God meant when he said, "My power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). See,*

*if I felt competent in any part of this endeavor, I wouldn't have covered my efforts in prayer. If I hadn't done that, I wouldn't have been so convinced of God's great power and great love for people like you and me! What a waste of a semester that would have been. It is only by the grace of God that I've been called to this place of being in over my head, and that for some reason He has used it to draw me closer to Him. Because I have felt at the end of my rope in most of these situations, I have had to rely on Him - and praise God for that!*

*The only difference between the prison ministry and my other efforts in life are that, by God's grace, I've been desperately clinging to Him and listening to Him in all of the prison ministry because I've known my own shortcomings. In other situations, I may forget - but the truth is that at the end of the day, we're always called to the end of our ropes, where God waits to astound us with His great power. At the end of the day, I need to desperately cling to Him all the time. And it is my prayer that this experience will help both you and I do that more fully in our lives! ("At the End of My Rope")*

It was with immense joy and gratitude that Silvia and I left the ACACC this last week of the semester. Visiting the prison has easily been one of the highlights of my semester, and organizing this project has stretched me in ways I never expected. A year ago, I never would have thought that I would be so familiar with the inside of a jail, or even that I would have developed such a passion for those in prison.

### **III. Letting Go: Next Semester and Beyond**

This semester has proven to us that there is a desire for this kind of Bible study at the prison, and that college students are able to serve, and serve well. The next step, then, is to get

more students involved – students who will be around after the four of us graduate. Our project for next semester is to make this endeavor more sustainable. We will need to recruit younger students, get them cleared to volunteer in the prison, and begin training them. This will include some lengthy discussions with the ACACC administration to possibly adjust timelines for our volunteer clearances; because there are currently only two volunteer orientations each year, and our semester schedule does not work well with them, we would like to see if adjustments can be made. We also hope to lead discussions about mass incarceration and spread awareness on campus about the issues surrounding the prison system. Furthermore, we will need a new student coordinator to lead the group after I am gone.

This next phase – this letting go – may be the most challenging stage yet. I have poured so much into starting this program, am so passionately invested in its success, and will soon be graduating and thus unable to serve as the student coordinator. It has been strange to know that I was setting up a program that I would need to let go of in a year's time; now that the time has come to make that happen, it is unsettling. All along, the clock has been ticking, and now I must act accordingly. What is interesting, however, is that God has been teaching me all along to let go of my own plans and trust His. When things looked bleak over the summer, the answer was to wait and pray. When things were moving slowly at the beginning of the semester, the answer was the same. And when things started moving much more quickly than I was ready for, the answer was, yet again, wait and pray. Although waiting looked different in each situation, the invitation has consistently been to eagerly anticipate God working in surprising ways. Likewise, I can trust that God will act awesomely as I let go.

The fact of the matter is that this idea was never mine to begin with. Looking back over the events of the past year, the call to prison ministry came out of casual conversations and

coincidental convergences of books that I was reading. The idea to start a prison ministry was one I initially rejected and would have abandoned many times along the way if it were not for the encouragement of people God had placed in my life. In reality, God has been carefully orchestrating the events of the past year to bring me in on a plan of His; I'm just along for the ride. I write that flippantly, but I do not mean to take my work too lightly. I know that my role in this has been large, but I also know that God could have called anyone to this place. As Mordecai warns Esther when asking her to save her people, "If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Esther 4:14). Who knows? Perhaps I was awarded the Mellon grant for such a time as this – which means that I can trust God with the future of the project, knowing that he called me to act at this time, when I only had a year left at Gettysburg.

Whether I am ready or not, in May of 2016 – in five months – I will leave Gettysburg and leave this project in God's capable hands. As for me, somehow the past six months have seen prison ministry become a passion of mine, so much so that I can only imagine I will continue to volunteer in prisons wherever I end up. I may even consider a career in prison ministry, whether it is working for an organization or serving as a prison chaplain. This semester has included (and next semester will include) many projects in which I learn about prison and wrestle with the issues that confront us when we consider the prison system. For instance, my senior thesis in philosophy (next semester) will explore the matter of dehumanization and the hope for redemption that Christianity offers.

As I look ahead, however, I am encouraged by the work God has done, and I am reassured that there is no need to fear the future. God has proven trustworthy in the midst of the

project's turbulent birth. This excerpt from my journal, written right after that first, failed proposal for the Bible study, is oddly appropriate for where I am right now:

*And so we are brought to the hope. God knows where I'm going – and I'm not talking the “God knows” with an eye-roll and hands thrown up in the air, exasperated. It's a “God knows” with hands clasped and me sitting in the Captain's quarters over a map, looking at the options we have and keeping my ears pricked. It's a “God knows and will soon tell someone,” because I know he “secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy” (Psalm 140:12, NIV), and there are many needy in prison. And so He will not let their cries go unanswered. I am sure that God is interested in caring for many who need love and are in prison - and on their way out of prison - and so I will continue looking for what the needs are right now. I will continue trying to meet those needs and raise awareness on campus and maybe, just maybe, we'll find a way to make both work together with my project... And I pray that I will learn to hold the plan more loosely than I have been, seeing as I was very unhappy with today's events. One thousand ways not to make a lightbulb, eh? All right, but I would still eventually (and soon) like to learn how to make a lightbulb here in Gettysburg. I'd like to start that ripple, before I leave. God, make this not about me, please.*

Indeed. God, make this not about me.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Always Learning**

And thus, what began as a project to research the influence of experience on religious beliefs in the lives of Christian prison ministers turned into an experiential learning endeavor. I have seen firsthand (I saw it even before I entered the ACACC) the impact that experience has

on faith when one responds to God's call. Through stepping into the unknown, I have been brought to my knees countless times. I have been humbled more by success than I ever thought possible; I have been blessed with the confidence of knowing I am where I was called to be, coupled with the humility that comes from knowing it is God, and not me, who has been doing the work of changing hearts and making things possible. I have learned that waiting on the Lord may sometimes be passive, but it is often an active gesture of faith, that every so often it can mean stepping out and waiting for Him to catch you while you are in midair.

As far as prison goes – I think I may have, after all this time, a general thesis: prison ministry offers a unique opportunity to Christians. They get to experience the love and power of God in new ways, and they are changed dramatically through it. I am beginning to think that it is *essential* to deepening our relationship with Jesus – to knowing Him more – that we step out of our comfortable, whitewashed faith and start chasing Him into the daunting parts of the world, that we start begging to go love the outcasts boldly and preach the gospel. That, as our love for Jesus grows, our lives will show it in how we rejoice in transformation. It is not essential that we visit those in prison, but I think it is essential that we stand up for injustice and seek to give life as we have been given life, in whatever capacity we are called to. With prison, it is not merely the injustice that is the issue. Plenty of people in prison “deserve” what they have gotten. But Jesus died for them just as much as he died for us on the outside, and maybe it is unjust for us to be willing to withhold that from them. And if we do not proclaim, God will still work - the very rocks will cry out (cf. Luke 19:40). This project, and all that will come after it, will be a constant lesson: He does not need us, but we need Him, and maybe we forget that too easily.



## Appendix A: Works Consulted

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## **Appendix B: Program Proposal**

*This was the proposal we drafted to give to the chaplain; many things were changed in the end.*

### **Walking Together: Gettysburg College and Adams County Adult Correctional Complex**

**Student Coordinator:** *Anna Malone, Class of '16*

**Faculty Advisor:** *Prof. Charles D. Myers, Ph.D., ordained PC(USA) minister and Religious Studies Professor at Gettysburg College*

**Faculty Sponsors:** *Prof. William Bowman of Gettysburg College's Department of History; Prof. Scott Hancock, Africana Studies and History Professor at Gettysburg College.*

**Program Description:** A weekly, Bible-centered, small-group discussion-based meeting of inmates and Gettysburg College students, designed to support participants in their faith journey. Unlike traditional Bible study groups where a leader teaches students, a College student will convene the group but all attendees will participate as brothers and sisters – equals – in the faith. Each session will consist of a discussion of relevant Biblical passages along with a time of sharing of concerns and joys and a time of prayer.

Please NOTE: This year (2015-2016) will be a pilot year for both the College and the Correctional Complex to gauge interest on the part of inmates and College students.

- Goals:**
- 1) Build community between college students and Adams County inmates
  - 2) Give inmates the chance to articulate their faith in a small-group setting

- 3) Give both students and inmates an opportunity to struggle together in their faith; to make sense of how Christian teachings apply to their everyday lives
- 4) Enrich the existing Bible study and worship experience of inmates with discussion time

**Format:** Two small groups, one for male offenders and one for female offenders, would meet each week. A team of three students (three female students for the female group and three male students for the male group). Number of inmates participating would vary, but the maximum number for any session would be twelve. Students would lead discussion time. Ideally would last 60-75 minutes (depending on what fits in the schedule)

\*This groups would not be content – dependent. It would be Bible-centered but not a traditional Bible study; it is specifically designed so that participants (students and inmates) can miss a week if need be.

### **Example of a 60-minute Meeting**

09:00 – gather and share what’s going on

09:15 – Read Bible passage and talk about what “sticks out” and what it says to one’s present situation

09:45 – share prayer requests and pray together

### **Administrative Details:**

- We will train our students so they are prepared to lead discussions
- We will select our students in time for the security orientation in October
- Students need to be sophomores, juniors, or seniors in good standing with the College

and need a faculty reference in order to be considered

- Our organization guarantees leaders the weeks that we commit to. If we say that a meeting will be held on November 14, we will be there.
- I will train an underclassman to take this over when I graduate.

### **Questions for Chaplain:**

- When would be a meeting time that would not conflict/compete with other Christian groups meeting?
- Would we be able to meet Saturday mornings? For how long?
- What would the best way to publicize this with inmates? At worship services? Printed publicity on display in the facility? Would you be willing to help us there?
- Maybe you know people who would specifically benefit and could invite them?
- Would it be helpful if our group knew what was being discussed in Chapel services so that we could focus the Bible study a little more?

### **Tentative Schedule:**

Saturday, September 26 – have student volunteers chosen (including back-up volunteers)

Saturday, October 3 – informal training at the college for student volunteers

\*10/10 = Fall Break for Gettysburg

? – October security training at the ACACC

Begin meeting every Saturday (subject to change depending on day/time that works)

November 28 – Closed for Thanksgiving

December 12 – last meeting of semester

Break

January 23 – resume small group meetings at ACACC

March 5 – no meeting; beginning of Spring Break

March 12 – no meeting; end of Spring Break

April 23 – last meeting of semester

## **Appendix C: Poster for on the Unit**

*We used this poster to advertise to inmates; the chaplain posted it on their unit (where they live).*

# **Walking Together: a journey of faith**

**What's it mean to be a Christian in today's world?  
Let's think together about how to apply Biblical  
principles as you re-enter society.**

**Join us to discuss the Bible in everyday life. We will  
share together and seek God together.**

**What: a Bible-based discussion  
group**

**When: Wednesdays 19:15-20:30**

**Who: Gettysburg College and  
Community Re-entry Program**

