

*"To injure no man,
but to bless all mankind"*

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Evangelicals reach out to prison population

By Jane Lampman
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Rocco Morelli knows what it's like to get caught up in crime and go to prison — and how God can turn your life around. Now he's trying to help others find that same "change of heart."

Mr. Morelli is sharing his story with Michigan inmates this week as part of an ambitious, nationwide prison-outreach program launched by a coalition of evangelical Christian ministries.

With the US incarceration rate the highest in the world (1 in every 150 residents), and the re-arrest rate for released prisoners also high, the coalition has created its own crime-reduction effort — Operation Starting Line — to encourage inmates to find faith and an ability to restart their lives successfully outside prison walls. They aim to reach "every prisoner in every prison in America over the next five years."

The initiative — spearheaded by groups such as Prison Fellowship, a Bible-study and counseling program led by Chuck Colson, and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, led by Franklin Graham — comes at a time of growing recognition that the emphasis on punishment in US prison systems is not turning out ex-offenders ready to adjust to society. Justice Department statistics show that 62 percent of ex-offenders will be charged with new crimes and more than 40 percent return to prison within three years.

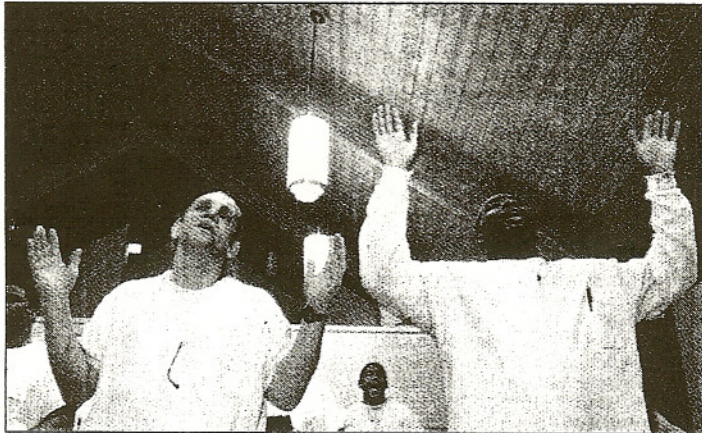
It also comes as faith-based programs are being touted as more effective in many social areas, although evidence to support those claims often remains thin.

Morelli and his colleagues, however, believe they have an answer. They say social scientists have found one of the few

predictors of reduced future criminal behavior is "a change of heart." Morelli himself had always wanted to be a cop. But growing up in a Pennsylvania community known as "Little Chicago," where the Mafia controlled everything, he slipped into the corruption and began selling drugs. When his partner became a snitch, the mob offered to make Rocco a full Mafia member and crime boss if he would "take him out." "That same night I was about to kill Tony," he says in an interview, "I got saved." He ended up at a gospel meeting his mother urged him to attend and heard the testimony of a man who had been freed from the criminal life.

While Morelli shortly went to jail for crimes already committed, he studied the Bible via a correspondence course and earned credits for seminary training. For five years, he's had a prison ministry.

Now he's working full time with Operation Starting Line, a combination evangelical crusade and two-year discipleship program for inmates who "make the decision for Christ." The program began in Delaware prisons on Easter Sunday. It



STEPHEN CHERRY/AP

CHANGE OF HEART: Inmates at Sussex Correctional Institution in Georgetown, Del., sing during Bible study. Operation Starting Line began Easter Sunday in Delaware prisons.

hits 21 Michigan institutions this week, and will move to New York, Missouri, Virginia, and Florida later this year. All 50 states are on the five-year schedule.

Inmates' first encounter with the program is a high-energy entertainment session involving Christian musicians, athletes, comedians, and ex-offenders.

"Some 80 percent of those in prison don't go to chapel," Morelli says, "so we do our program in the big yards where the guys are lifting weights or playing sports. We do it more as a concert event ... with of course a message of sharing Christ with them."

A key element is local volunteers from area churches who mingle with inmates and pray with them, and then pick up the ball for the ongoing ministry.

"Our statistics indicate that approximately 15 percent of prisoners will respond ... following the big programs," says Doug Redford, who heads the Michigan initiative. "So we're designing follow-up programs customized to each facility."

They are developing tools to support five 20-week programs to equip prisoners with a faith foundation and personal-development skills. "We also want to minister to the families of prisoners," says John Houchens, of Walk Through the Bible, another participating ministry. "And we want to build a network so that when prisoners are released they have a church family that will care about them."

Operation Starting Line draws on the experience of Prison Fellowship, and on its current InnerChange Freedom Initiative, in which it actually operates a minimum-security prison by contract with the state of Texas. InnerChange combines intensive religious counseling, job training, and mentoring that continues six months after inmates are released.

Presidential candidate George W. Bush has touted the initiative in speeches, suggesting it be tried in federal prisons. The 24-hour program is also

being introduced in Kansas and Iowa.

The coalition says faith-based programs are transforming the lives of criminals, and points to a study published in Justice Quarterly that showed that inmates who participated in 10 or more Bible studies were 66 percent less likely to return to prison.

Todd Clear, professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City

and author of a nationwide study on prisoners involved in religious programming, sounds some cautionary notes, however.

"There's not a lot of evidence — there have only been a handful of studies," he says. His 15-month study showed that 6 months after release, "the religious group was not going to church any more than those who hadn't participated, and there was no different re-arrest rate." He says inmates get involved in religious programming for all kinds of reasons, not all for spiritual growth, and many who don't participate have a stronger personal orientation to faith.

While religious programming is worth the investment, he says, no basis exists yet for claiming that it is more effective than other counseling. Dr. Clear commends Prison Fellowship, particularly for its focus on after-prison help, but says its program includes skill development "indistinguishable from the cognitive restructuring programs in Canada and a few places in the US that teach reasoning and ways of thinking and acting differently."

They have the same results, he adds, yet those programs have been closed down by legislatures. He is also concerned that religious choice be maintained. As for InnerChange in Texas, "I think it's great if you have a religious prison, but anyone should be able to go there and practice the religion of their choice, and learn something prisoners are not famous for, that is, tolerance."

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