

# **Ministry in the Trenches**

**Juvenile Detention Chaplaincy  
Reflection, thought and prayer  
1994-2009**

A compilation of articles from *Ministering Together*, the newsletter of the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County California (formerly the Council of Churches), Walnut Creek, CA, by the Reverend Dr. Charles D. Tinsley, Juvenile Detention Chaplain and excerpts from letters to him from the kids themselves...

## Preface

I read somewhere that Franklin Delano Roosevelt once referred to the presidency as "the grandest job in the world!" I feel very much the same way about what I do. For the past fifteen years it has been an honor and a privilege to serve in Contra Costa County, California, as the chaplain for the juvenile detention system. This is not though, what I went to seminary to do. I thought I had been called, strictly and exclusively, to campus ministry. God had other plans.

*You shall go to all to whom I send you,  
and you shall speak whatever I command you,  
Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you*

Jeremiah 1:7b,8

In February or March 1994, a long-time mentor in ministry, the Rev. Dr. H. Eugene Farlough called me on the telephone.

"The chaplain for juvenile (detention) out in Martinez is retiring," Dr. Farlough shared, "I really think you would do well there."

"Teenagers?! I 'graduated' from working with teenagers a long time ago. Besides I know who's in there. I'm not emotionally up to going into a facility every day and seeing multitudes of (young people) locked up--no, I don't think so."

"Well, I really want you to think about it, I think this is a good fit for you, with your experience..." he continued.

"Is this a county job or is it one called by the church. I don't want to work for the

county."

"The chaplain is called by the Council of Churches of Contra Costa County," and he concluded with, "Please, think about it, pray about it..."

I thought about it, I prayed long and hard about it. I "dusted" off the resume portion of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Personal Information Form (PIF), completed the application, the supplemental questionnaire, requested transcripts, contacted seven references, among them Elder David Lew, Rev. Virstan Choy, and others around the presbytery. I wrote, I compiled, I prepared and submitted the materials but still I prayed...

*Oh my Lord, please send someone else.*

Exodus 4:13

On the afternoon of the first of three interviews, I walked the short distance from my car to the Council of Churches office. I put my arms in the air and I said, "Lord, you know I really don't want to do this. But, I've prepared the application materials, and I am ready for the interview. I don't want this, but if it's your will, let it be done... Just remember God, I really don't want to do this." God did, God's will was done. The rest is history.

*If you want to see where the spirit is, you've got to be located near where the pain is, where the cries are being heard.*

(Noel, James. "Reformed and Liberation Theologies From A Black, Postmodern Perspective." *Church and Society* 93. no.4) [March/April 2003]: 65-78)

I work with troubled young people. This is indeed the population of kids who have "been left behind." In the past several years I have lost more than one-hundred and fifty of these precious creatures to violent and senseless death. Very often I am asked

how I am able to do what I do. The standard answer is, "The One who called me to this ministry is the One who sustains me." I have been asked if I am ever scared "in there." The response is, "Of who? Of what? I know who called me to this. I know His hand is on my shoulder as I walk through these dreadful halls whether it's three o'clock in the morning or three o'clock in the afternoon!"

*And you, O mortal, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words. Though briars and thorns surround you and you live among scorpions; do not be afraid of their words, and do not be dismayed at their looks...*  
Ezekiel 2:6

*Rev. you need to know a lot of people have washed their hands of 'these' kids...*

A juvenile hall staff member,  
1995

November/December 1994

Thirty-two years is a long time! And, it is very difficult to replace one whose tenure has been so long. I am though, fortunate to have had the opportunity to spend time with the outgoing Juvenile Hall Chaplain, the Rev. Keith Spooner. Our appointments

overlapped on September 7, 8, and 9.

On those three days, Keith shared history, history and more history. We discussed philosophy, theology and the nature of the Juvenile Hall chaplaincy. Keith spoke passionately of his many joys and of his frustrations and occasional disappointments. He, indeed, had an awful lot to say. We agreed on many things, and disagreed on fewer. Thank you, Keith, and all the very best wishes for the future. Also thanks to the Council for allowing the "overlap" to happen. Over the past several weeks, staff and administrators at Juvenile Hall have been MORE THAN helpful, supportive and responsive. They have a difficult and unenviable job to do in the midst of chaos not of their own making. Dedicated lay ministry volunteers take MANY moments from their busy schedules to come in to comfort hurt and troubled young people at Juvenile Hall. This group, too, is to be admired and respected for their hard, productive and faithful work.

Incredible to me is just how time "flies." I am sure Keith shares this sentiment. In June, I began my 26th year working with children, youth and young adults, in a variety of capacities, in the church, in educational, recreational and institutional settings. I shall not be here thirty-two years! I doubt Mother Nature, Father Time, not to mention my wife will allow it! I am a "forty-something Boomer" who was fortunate to have had another profession before going to seminary. I am no stranger to this county, West County in particular. I served on the faculty of Contra Costa College from 1982 to 1989. Then, while in seminary, I completed a year-long internship in campus ministry there. So, in

essence, this is a home-coming, of sorts.

President Kennedy once said, "God's work must truly be our own." There is much work here to be done.... Wouldn't it be nice if our collective efforts resulted in no future need for juvenile detention facilities? IF ONLY...

In the meantime, however, I believe, where the kids of this county are concerned, we must keep in mind and in heart, what Jesus said, "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my father in heaven." Matthew 18:10

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Fall 1994 Heard in juvenile hall at mealtime  
"God is good, God is great.  
Thank you for this *county* plate"  
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Jan/Feb 1995

The past three months have been among the most remarkable in my life. I know why my predecessor was here so long. This is indeed an extraordinary opportunity to serve. I have often remarked to Juvenile Hall staff that there is ~ one job I would do here, AND (Thank God), I AM DOING IT.

They are, as I frequently point out to kids, not robots. Probation Counselors are people, people, who, as we all do, have feelings. They have lives outside Juvenile Hall - strange as it may seem to some of the kids. They hurt like the rest of us, experience the same difficulties and frustrations; they smile, laugh, cry, frown....

There are, though, some "unsung heroes" at Juvenile Hall who must be recognized. The folks who really are on the "frontlines" at Juvenile Hall are the Probation Counselors. These are people, as a group, who are responsible for several thousand, often fairly disagreeable, kids a year. They transport them, make sure they are clean, safe, and warm and fed. They accompany them to the nurses' office, supervise activities, get them to church - here in Juvenile Hall - on time every Sunday and they deal appropriately with young people's inappropriate behavior when necessary.

They are given, through the county juvenile hall superintendent and his staff of supervisors, the responsibilities of surrogate parents (with all the rights[?] and privileges [?] pertaining hereto).

They work long, often, extremely stressful shifts. At times, they endure verbal abuse from their charges, to an extent that you and I would be unwilling or unable to tolerate. Yet, daily and nightly, often only a few hours of sleep, these dedicated individual return in seeming high spirits, to perform necessary service for you, the residents of Contra Costa County. And friends, the vast majority of them do their jobs VERY well. This is my observation. I do get around.

All the folks who work at your Juvenile Hall in Martinez, deserve, not our pity,

but our respect and our admiration for jobs well done. Keep them in your prayers.

Mar/Apr 1995

I am often asked the question, "Why?" Recently, I received the following letter. It has been edited for sharing.

Dear Sir:

I really appreciate [sic] you taking your time to come see e' and talk to me... It's really hard to be locked up at a young age. I mean not haveing any freedom is very stressful...I really want to go back to school. I have my mind on walking a straight line because I want a good safe life.... I hope and pray that my goal comes true. But, if I put my mind to [it] anything can happen.... It's realy [sic] hard to turn a new leaf with all the peer pressure and all the fast money out on the streets. There's nothing too wrong about a job but the money is slow....

These days things are hard even if you have a trade-there still [aren't] enough jobs. And, if there is [a] good paying job that [doesn't] mean I'm going to get it. I just have to work hard and achieve my goals and leave my past behind. P.S. Thank you for your time, concern and honesty.

This was from the hand of a fifteen year old.

Another interesting letter shares:

Dear Chaplain,

I am writing this apology because I lied [to you] when I knew I should not have. You put



trust in me and I let you down. I know you are disappointed in me write [sic] now. I want to earn that trust back because I took something good and corrupted it. You know how much I want to strive to reach my goal.... [Blank] said I could open up to you but I already new [sic] that.... I'm very glad you are here for me....

Is, there any doubt, after reading some of my mail from Juvenile Hall residents, about WHY we are here and WHY we do what we do??

For the past troubles will be forgotten... Isaiah 65:16c

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June 13 From one in a group home

*...I been reading the Bible, and I'm trying to keep my mind focused on reality, and preparing for the future. Yesterday I was testest by a Psychologist. I had to put puzzles together, look at pitchures and tell him what they look like. One of the tests I had got 19 out of 20 right. That was one of the best scores he had ever seen. I can't wait to go to colledge...*

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A month or so into my tenure, first allowing for the "newness" to wear off; I began to seriously look at the direction of this program. From many comers, I had heard, IT was done this way or IT was done that way before.... This is normal and expected. Yet, I probably had not seen the announcement for this position since last May or June. And, as I recalled, the announcement was particularly informative and directive in nature. Eventually, within a couple of hours (or was it days?) I found the document on the bottom of a growing stack of papers. Several statements of the Council immediately caught my eye. The statements have provided direction; from them I am well informed.

The first statement reads: "Position Description For: Director of Pastoral Services, Juvenile Detention System, Contra Costa County." The second statement is the third sentence within the body of the document titled "Position Design". "The Chaplain shall work in the Juvenile Hall in Martinez and other juvenile detention facilities as directed." As many of the young people I encountered in Juvenile Hall began to be placed in the Orin Allen Youth Rehabilitation Facility (formerly the Byron Boys Ranch), I wondered, "How could nurturing relationships begun in Juvenile Hall be continued at Byron?" After some prayer, I was led to find the position announcement. My direction to go out to Byron, once a week on Friday afternoon, was and continues to be from God!

Seldom do fewer than eight to ten kids sign up each week to see the Chaplain. Continuity has been maintained with a number of kids since their leaving Martinez. Others have come, despite the fact they were unable to talk with me in Juvenile Hall.

And, friends, one of the first things kids said to me at O.A.Y.R.F. was, "We don't have church services here like we did in Juvenile Hall!" They do now. The very same groups that provided Sunday worship experiences in Juvenile Hall (some on the very same Sundays, "back-to-back"), trek out to the outer eastern reaches of the county to bring the Good News to kids at O.A.Y.R.F. in Byron.

The Spirit is **still** moving in and through Juvenile Hall. AND, the Spirit is moving and transforming THROUGHOUT the Juvenile Detention System of Contra Costa County!

*The Young People in the Juvenile Detention System of Contra Costa County, CA*

*Dear Friends:*

*This letter is a response to your Chaplain, the Reverend Charles D. Tinsley's request. I was pleased to learn that he has spoken of me often with many of the young people with whom he has come in contact. I welcome' this opportunity to address all of you. Like many of you, I encountered a variety of obstacles while I was growing up. The problems that you have undoubtedly faced are similar to those that I endured in Baltimore. Today, young people in our nation face hurdles in their daily lives that would seem insurmountable to most. However, I believe that with the support and guidance of one's family and community, many of these problems can be overcome. It was because of my family and community that I survived the turbulent period of my youth and changed my*

ways.

*The most influential person in my life has been my mother. Though she passed away when I was only sixteen I live by her adage, "It's not how you start in life that counts, but rather how you finish." Thus a great deal of my work in Congress derives from my own life experiences. These have instilled in me a commitment toward bettering the lives of all people. I have found that through my position in Congress I am able to make a positive difference in the lives of all Americans. It is my hope that you will make choices in your life that will benefit yourself as well as those around you. Whatever field you chose to enter, put in your best effort and you will find the greatest rewards. God bless all of you and keep you in all of your future endeavors.*

*Kweisi Mfume, Member of Congress*

September/October 1995

#### OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES

Wherever I am asked to speak, I am generally faced with the question of what can be done to "help" Juvenile Hall and the Orin Allen Youth Rehabilitation Facility in Byron. Among the things I speak about are the ways we can work together to keep kids out of these places. Several weeks ago I participated in the "Career Awareness and Culture Diversity Day" at Riverview Middle School in Bay Point.

I described for a sixth grade class the training involved in becoming a Presbyterian minister, and I talked about what chaplains do. Also I talked to the young

people about why it's not "cool" to go to Juvenile Hall. For "show and tell" I took along the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament. The kids, as one might imagine, had many questions!

An envelope arrived in the mail recently containing a thank you letter from each class member. Here are some of the more interesting comments: Each letter began with "Dear Rev. Tinsley:"

"I appreciate how you came on your spare time..." (Emphasis is mine!) "Thack fuer Koemyn" (neither Greek nor Hebrew?) "We really appreciate it that you took your time to tell us what happens down there...and for hoping you'll never see us there..." (Let us hope and pray.) On the Greek and Hebrew Bibles:

Thank you for bringing the books. I don't understand how you can read the writing. (My seminary professors had similar questions!) "It must take a long time to learn to read those bibles." (I agree.) "The books looked like pig latten." (Hmmm) "The Bibles you had were pretty neat and weird..." (O.K.)

On going to Juvenile Hall:

"I will never go to Juvenile Hall, so you will never see me in that place."

"It didn't sound fun in Juvenile Hall."

"Are people in Juvenile Hall scary?"

"You won't be seeing me in Juvenile Hall."

"I don't want to go to Juvenile Hall!"

AMEN and AMEN

November/December 1995

## RENEWAL

When I speak with young people in Martinez and Byron, I am often quite impressed with their thoughts, philosophies and perspectives on life and life as they have lived it to this point. Routinely, I ask kids to put thoughts down on paper. I wish to share with you two examples of this. I know you will be significantly moved. FIRST: "Before I came to Byron I really had no sense of what I had, I had no remorse, no patience, and I had no control over my anger. I am really grateful (sic) that I got the 'experience' to come here. Since I have been locked up I have realized that I just don't like the person I was being. I admitted to myself I had problems and that was the fust step to being a better person. I stopped arguing and started listening. I have learned to be more patient and easy-going. But most of all I had a lot of time to think, time to set a plan for myself. And goals. Because when I did well in here I could not get over the natural high when I achieved something. By setting goals I will keep that high. One other thing I learned is that I have great parents with a good home life and I took it for granted. Two words, NEVER AGAIN! I will end this in something I wrote:

There is darkness in here and in me it lerks (sic)

The darkness is pain and in me it hurts

Never before did I know

That I make my pain come and go  
The choice is mine and no one else's  
So now I know I put the pain on myself  
People would talk and I would not hear  
But now I listen and my mind stays clear  
The pain is no longer in me. For the first time I really feel free."

#### AND SECOND

"Since I've been locked up this time, I've changed. Before I got locked up I was in a state of mind that I didn't care what was going on. I mean, I knew that I was gonna mess up, and get locked up soon, so I really didn't care what I did, or who it affected. But since I've been locked up, this time, I've taken a long look at the mistakes that I've made, and the consequences that I'm gonna be facing. Now I care. Now I actually want to help people. Before I got locked up, my mother and I were talking about helping homeless people. I didn't care, I figured, 'Why help them, they never did anything for me.' Now I want to help people. I look at my life and just want to help young people that might be thinking the same way I was, (I don't care). I want to show them that you might not care now, you might not care when you're doing something wrong, but, as long as you have a heart or any love for the life on the outside of a cell, you will care once you get locked up. I promise that, and I promise that it isn't worth it. I know this sounds corny, because I thought it sounded corny, but if I were able to help one person realize that his or her life is worth more than a gang or whatever the crime involved is then I

would feel satisfied. Because I'm not only helping that one person, but also potential victims and...families. It would also help any true homies, 'cause they would see the change and think. "

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-what is good and acceptable and perfect.*  
Romans 12:2

January/February 1996

Shortly after my arrival here, I inquired about how provisions might be made for young people interested in taking college entrance examinations such as the SAT or the ACT. I was promptly told: "These kids are not college material." This statement was equally as promptly, ignored!

Soon thereafter, I met with the chancellor of the Contra Costa Community College District and the presidents of Contra Costa, Diablo Valley and Los Medanos colleges. All expressed more than a willingness to work with young people coming out of juvenile detention facilities. In fact, the presidents designated a counselor at each campus to work directly with the young people we refer.

Several young people enrolled at Contra Costa College just days after graduating from the Orin Allen Youth Rehabilitation Facility (OAYRF) in Byron, Others have expressed



interest in the other schools as well. One recent OAYRF graduate has been accepted at five major colleges.

Last spring, Ms. Gemma Pasto, the superintendent at OAYRF, allowed two young men to go “off campus” to take the ACT test. Another young man was allowed to take the SAT test in December. Recently, Ms. Pasto also permitted me to take three young men to visit Stanford University, California State University, Hayward, the University of California, Berkeley, and St. Mary’s College in Moraga. Of these young people, one has already graduated from high school with a 3.5 grade point average. All three have the potential to succeed at the university level. Not college material?

The trip to the campuses began with prayer at 6:30 a.m. Each young man led a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving before meals we shared. We returned to OAYRF at 8:30 p.m. after singing church camp songs during the last twenty miles of the trip.

I have known each of these young men for some months now, having first met them at Juvenile Hall. All will soon graduate from OAYRF. They speak often of how God has intervened in their lives. Their prayers reflect remarkable spiritual maturity and sincerity. They attend church and bible studies at OAYRF. All intend to continue to do so when they return to their respective communities and churches.

The prophet Isaiah shares: "This is what the Lord says... 'Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See I am doing a new thing!' " Isaiah 43: 14a, 18, 19a. Yes, indeed a familiar passage! So is this one from the Gospel according to Luke, chapter one, verse 37: "For nothing is impossible with God."

God Bless the children.

May/June 1996

#### TEARS AND MORE TEARS

"...Do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children." Luke 23:28b

This is written as an extraordinarily "teary" week comes to a close in the Contra Costa County Juvenile Detention facilities. The drying of eyes and the blowing of noses has resulted in the consumption of copious amounts of tissues this week. Tears were shed in my presence for as many reasons as there were numbers of young people who expressed their pain and anguish in this manner. The youngest of these was fifteen years of age; the eldest, just short of his eighteenth birthday.

One young man began to cry shamelessly when recalling the not-so-recent murder of a cousin. Growing up, they were very close, always wishing they could be brothers. Shortly before the death of the younger child, their mothers revealed to them that the two had the same father. They were indeed brothers! They were twelve and fourteen years of age. The surviving brother is still hurting almost four years later.

Another youngster lost all composure before leaving the courtroom where the juvenile court referee had, just moments before, determined that charges were so serious that the minor must remain in custody. He will soon be eighteen.

A third man-child cried in my presence and in that of his mother as he apologized to her for the trouble he has caused over the past couple of years. He is one of the very most articulate fifteen-year olds I have encountered in some time. Given the opportunity, this child could one day soar with the eagles.

I encountered another young person who had not been away from home and away from his mother for more than a week at a time. His tears came when he began to speak about how his mother supported him and comforted him during some particularly difficult family crises.

Every story is unique. The reasons young people find themselves in detention facilities, too, are different in each case. However, when tears flow, all are wet, salty, generally sincere expressions of confusion, pain, frustration and often, contrition.

Surely, the small, narrow minds of those who misunderstand and continue to oppose our presence in these types of facilities may never be significantly enlightened. Nevertheless, I know on whose behalf and upon whose behest I serve. I know, too, who walks with me through these halls where children are detained. And this knowledge gives me remarkable strength when I, too, in private contemplation and prayer, am moved to join other people of faith in weeping for ourselves and our children. Our children, the hurt and hurting babies of our community. There continues to be much work to be

done...If not by us, the community of faith, who?

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August 8, 1996 From one in the county jail  
*...It took me a moment in time to realize that my life does mean something to me and to others. Basically you could say I was feeling sorry for myself and I know I let a person who I care about in my life down by not doing the right thing. I guess I had to be my hard head self and find out the hard way. They say your suppose to learn from your mistakes and I had to do certain things on my own... You have been one of the only males in my life who have taken an interest in me and have had a major affect in my life. You as a black male have shown that you care about me and my future and I don't know how to repay you for this act of kindness...*  
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November/December 1996

A LETTER FROM PRISON

The following letter is one I received recently from a twenty-two year-old man in prison. He began to get into trouble as a teenager. He will be in prison through his middle twenties. I read this letter to the entire group at the Orin Allen Facility in Byron one afternoon following dinner. Food for thought, indeed. A brief period of silence followed the reading-then there was almost unanimous applause!

"Greetings, I'm sorry (I have not) written in such a long time, but what I'm really sorry about is that I'm writing you from the hole... [Solitary confinement]

"Three weeks ago I was in a really bad fight. Nothing happened to me but the nature of the fight is what did it. About eight people were involved in it. I usually bite my lip, but this time I didn't. I don't know what I was thinking. Well, that was the point-I wasn't. Now I'm in the hole waiting to ride to another camp [prison facility]. The only good thing about that is the camp will be much closer to home. ' .

"Well, before I got into this 'set back' I was doing excellent! At the time I was enrolled in college, majoring in business. This past semester, I made the dean's list with a 3.8. I had been in meat cutting school, but was kicked out when the teacher disrespected me, and I gave him a piece of my mind. But, I still know how to cut meat.

"I don't mean to be disrespectful to you for not writing back, but my pride got to me. I can honestly say that after two years of being locked up, I truly am starting to understand what it is to be a man. I spent almost a year exploring myself...I can't quit because I never stop growing, Along with understanding myself, I found out a lot of things I was involved in were not for me. You must work with me, a lot of my discoveries are only explainable through my actions. I did, though, come to a conclusion about religion. I don't study Islam any more. I came to the conclusion that God created everything and that He's just sitting back watching what we do. I don't believe He interferes with us, because if He did the world wouldn't be like it is, and He would not have given us the 'freedom of mind'. I don't know-it's just what I feel.

"I will put you on my visiting list when I get to the new camp. There's so much I want to explain but I'm running out of paper. I want to thank you for not giving up on me. I guess I should be happy that I didn't give up on myself. And with me in the hole, it's as you say 'a small set back'. I will write you when I get the proper writing material. Take care and thanks. Love,"

The author of this letter and I "met" when he was two weeks old.

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November 11, 1996 From another in the county jail  
*...I was doing kind of good at first when I got out [of the boys ranch] staying out of trouble and I had a roofing job, but then I found myself hanging with a few old friends, and then started doing old thing and found myself right back, for armed robbery...You know I remember when you use to tell [me] how people said jail was worst then Byron [boys ranch] and juvenile hall. It is true...*  
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March/April 1997

The question often asked of me is: "What are the kids thinking?" While going through some papers, hoping to throw some of them away, I ran across a very

provocative essay written by a young person. Although it was written two years ago, I am still in touch with the young man, so I asked his permission to share his thoughts with the readers of this newsletter.

Shortly after his “graduation” from the Orin Allen Youth Rehabilitation Facility in Byron, I asked the young man to write a two to three page paper on the topic “**I WISH**”. The assignment was a variation of one given to Cameron House (San Francisco) day camp leaders-in-training some twenty-five years or so ago. Now Cameron House Board of Directors President, then director of the day camp program, Jack Schaupp was probably the developer of “I Wish”. Giving credit where surely credit is due! Thank you, Jack. I use this exercise frequently, still, after all these years!

What follows are some expressions of the thoughts, desires and wishes of ONE young man, at least in partial response to the question, “**What are the kids thinking?**”

“I have lived 18 years, two months, 1 week and 6 days as of today 9-6-95. In these years, I’ve seen what I’ve seen, heard what I’ve heard and know what I know. Wishing is one thing you can do besides hope on something you would like to come about, have come about or just desire in any way. Only if it were that easy, to just wish and it become reality.

“They say be careful for what you wish for you just might get it. Well I hope that’s true. I can go on and on about things I wish for but that would do nothing but disappoint me until they become reality. But then again wishing can help some people in it’s deep conceptual meanings. For one I wish black people would wake up and smell the coffee of reality and not the sleep of ignorance provoke them to lag.

“People lag on taking care of what should be done because of the preoccupation with want. People are always doing what they want to do and not what they should do. I’m not going to put down nobody because I’m guilty of it too at times. But I realize there’s a lot more serious than worrying about how big “The Man” is or how cool you are.

“Kids looking up to the role model in society, I’m sorry to say most are the wrong ones. They’re looking up to the Gangsters, dope dealers, and the man

with the most women. Not all kids look up to the wrong role models. Sports stars, musicians, teachers and so on can be good role models.

“But in this backwards society a lot of the good role models are mislabeled as not cool and maybe even sellouts for moving away from the neighborhood or whatever it may be. I guess that all started with the miseducation of the black man. It seems people always want all the luxurious things in life but are not ready to take the right road and steps to *get* there.

“They will in a second take a short cut or will want to hop right into the fast lane and don’t even know how to drive right. The main idea some have is to show off and look good to the crowd. They will do anything also to get that material love but don’t realize that that’s only temporary. When you die you can’t take all that stuff with you. No one will probably even care that you had all those things. Maybe even some would wait for you to die so they can have what you left.

“Having nice things and living comfortable is great. But material things don’t care about you. Greed is waiting for them, waiting to cause problems. If people become your friend only if you are full of money and material things, they don’t care anything for the person under all that. All these goods bring temporary satisfaction not happiness.

“Some of the people with all the money will look down on the poor man as less of a person because they don’t have all the fancy things. If someone wants those things and is at the bottom and really wants to get to the top, do it. Do it right.

“Tribulations are there to bring you down but if there’s no weight on the bar, how are you going to get stronger? If it were too easy you may not value it as much as if you had to fight to get there.

“An example is the black man’s fight for freedom in America. Black people fought long and hard but yet and still some don’t take advantage of the things that came so hard to be. If some don’t wise up and take advantage of their rights it can be taken away or just die in vain.

“I wish people would wake up. Time keeps ticking and if they don’t wake up it will pass them by and they will wish they did.



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January 9, 1997

From one in a facility of the  
California Youth Authority. (CYA)

*...A year left and im still standin strong. It was days when I never thought that I would make it threw alive and in the best of health but things happen for a reason so I must excell to the fullest with my second chance...*

July 14, 1997

From one in an out-of-state prison

*...I was sentenced to two counts of Agg. Sexual Battery which gave me a controlling sentence of 6 to 20 years. Then when the State of Kansas came out with the SB 525 "Predator Law" I was put under it because I had a sex offense... I've been here 4 1/2 years with I write up in all that time and have been passed over by the Board each time...I go again early next month...my public comment meeting will be held on the 30<sup>th</sup> of this month...*

September 4, 1997

*...I got my results yesterday...and it read 'on or before December 30<sup>th</sup> 1997, Parole to an approved plan with condition no contact with victim or her family... I do hope to see you at the front gate when I'm released from here...*

October 25, 1997

From still another in a facility of the  
California Youth Authority. (CYA)

*...I've been OK I guess considering the condition that I'm in. But sometimes I just lay in my bed and think. I'll think real hard about my life, what I'm doing with it, where its going and what I'm going to do with it when I get out. Sometimes I think that the Lord put me here for a reason to get closer to him. But it seems like every time I do get all into the Lord, something (meaning the devil and his evil ways) comes and distract my mind and I'll go off and start doing the same things I been doing...*

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Fall 1998

One evening in August 1998, eight young men and I flew a "red eye" flight from San Francisco International Airport to Ohio. The young people were, all but one, alums of the Juvenile Justice System. I rented a fifteen passenger van and loaded my crew and their cargo into the van. We journeyed across Ohio and into Kentucky. Now, Friends, if you have ever flown all night, driven all day (and well into the next night), and done it with a van load of high. energy young adults of eighteen, nineteen and twenty years of age, you can imagine the fatigue, in its most brutal form, that I felt at 2:00 a.m. as we pulled into the Best Western Motel in Corbin, Kentucky, where we spent the remainder of the "night." Several interesting things happened along the way. However, it is terribly exhausting just thinking about them, to write about them is... well, talk to me in person! Later that morning (after a brunch that cost about \$180 including the tip) we set out on the last leg of our journey. In the early afternoon of August 23, eight young Contra Costa County residents arrived at Knoxville College, Tennessee. The school, a Presbyterian Church, (USA) related institution founded in 1875, is one of four Black Presbyterian colleges in the United States. My group, nicknamed Contra Costa Alpha, enrolled as new freshman students. Ultimately two others joined the "Alpha" group a couple of weeks later. Still two more system alums enrolled for the first time in January. Not all of the group made it through the school year. And yet, the several who did have done well,

remarkably well in and away from school. Even now as I write this in the heat of early summer in Knoxville (I go to Knoxville once a month, yes, to check on the kids, but also to work on a couple of projects for President Barbara Hatton), I am reminded of a concern shared by one of the students. As I said my goodbyes after that first week of school, one told me he really needed to talk to me before I left. "Rev, these people down here are smart! I just don't know if I can make it here." "Young man, you are smart, too. The only difference between you and some of these kids is that, in many cases, they have been planning to go to college since the first grade. Only their perspective and preparation are a little different. Remember, just six months ago, you weren't even thinking about going to college." "I don't know..." "Look, Son, you just proceed to get your little butt in gear and keep that big head of yours up, because there is a future out there for you..." To bring you up to date, this young man maintained an "acceptable" grade point average (3.0 in the 1999 spring semester). AND he received a scholarship from the Contra Costa County Juvenile Hall Auxiliary; received a National Presbyterian Church Student Scholarship award; earned an endowed Knoxville College scholarship awarded annually to an "outstanding freshman student," was nominated for and received an award from the Contra Costa County Juvenile Justice .Delinquency Prevention Commission; and at this writing has been inter. viewed as one of four finalists for a scholarship given each year by Friends Outside in cooperation with the Superior Court. After scoring 279 on the GED (General Educational Development) exam last spring (only 225 is required to pass), he has accomplished all this in the span of one year! Yes, this

young man and I met in Juvenile Hall. That first night, I went home. He didn't. When he did, though, just look at what he was able to do. I have indeed been privileged to encourage, to observe, and to applaud these accomplishments. And best of all, he is only one of an increasing number (there is a Beta group) who are preparing themselves to "soar with the eagles." Mine is the grandest job in the world. Praise God!

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April 13, 1998

From one in C.Y.A.

*...Anyways though, I do feel that I am now ready to vacate these unhealthy premises... Now that I'm getting older, I'm starting to get scared 'cause I don't know how to react to getting out being a responsible adult and or a parent... I really can't tell what I'll end up doing. I have a lot of goals that I plan to achieve but I don't really know how to start off about going about it...*

July 20, 1998

From one a group home

*...Personally, and I'm not just saying this, but I think these white staff are racist because of some of the comments they make and the way they treat me. I mean the littlest thing is making a joke out of my hair... I'm the first black ever in this house, that should speak for its self... Just think about what I'm saying here Rev, and no lie, its harder than what it its suppose to be, I've been crying way too much, and I just don't cry...*

July 30, 1998

From another a group home

*...I am contemplating on days to come, as you know I'll be free soon and I wonder will I be able to handle this freedom that I will receive. Its been quite some time since I've been independent, and I just want to be able to do what's right... I hope I will be able to handle the obstacles that will be set before me, so I can stay out of situations and places like this...*

January 7, 1999

From one in C.Y.A.

*College! Man I never thought of something like that, well I did I just never thought I*

could go somewhere like college...

April 21, 1999

From one in the county jail

*...Rev, I've been thinking about a lot and I plan to put my thoughts into action when I return to my house, I love and miss you... P.S. How is everyone else that you've been working with, anything new as far as accomplishments or something positive? My love and support 'cause I know they need it, everyone does at some point...*

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May 1, 1999

From another in the county jail

*...Rev, I've been thinking hard and doing some 'soul searching'... Rev, I've done a lot of terrible things out there and in the process I've hurt lots of families... I'm in the process of repenting and turning away from SIN and all the negativity in my life and its hard but its something that has to be done, and I have to do it...*

November 14, 2000

From one in C.Y.A.

*...As you can see I made my way to C.Y.A. Well I opened the gates to come here in '98. I got out March 28, 2000 and now I'm back to do a little over a year. Then I free, with no parole or anything. The problem is I keep getting out and going back to the same community, with the same people, and the same lifestyle. I been in and out of the system since I was 10 years old and when I get out this time, I'll be 21 years old. That's 11 years I have wasted on nothing. I have tryed to turn my life around a few times but the pressure from the home and the streets won the fight...*

November 23, 2000

From one in a group home

*...I thought I should write you to let you know how I've been doing. There hasn't been much else going on for me other than school. Here is a copy of my report card also:*

<i>English</i>	<i>A-</i>
<i>Math</i>	<i>A-</i>
<i>U.S. History</i>	<i>B+</i>

<i>Fine Arts</i>	<i>A-</i>
<i>P.E.</i>	<i>CR</i>
<i>Basics of Work</i>	<i>CR</i>

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Spring 2001

The day began as most days do, hurried and hectic, with an agenda unlike that of the previous day. While no two days are ever the same, there is one common element. My days are, without exception, overbooked. Oftentimes, before ever reaching Martinez, I have transacted business in the car by telephone, in response to the always~ busy pager. This day was no different. It was going to be very busy. I had all the normal stuff facing me, plus I had to help a young person out of the Hall to catch an airplane to get to college in Tennessee.

Preparing someone to go away to school is in itself a monumental task. Packing for school, equipping oneself emotionally, physically and otherwise is difficult enough when one is at home, has plenty of time and is given encouragement. Imagine leaving Juvenile Hall after an extended stay, with no family support, few belongings, meager financial resources and going directly to the airport for a transcontinental flight! I was

rushing to put this all together, being careful to dot every single i and cross all the t's. It was an enormous endeavor.

The telephone rang as we were about to leave, for what we hoped would be this kid's final departure from the Hall. The voice at the other end of the line was frantic and unfamiliar to me. Although she initially identified herself, I still could not place her until she added, "You know, Ryan's mom." Ryan and I had been acquainted since very early in my tenure here. And, I had met his mom on several occasions. Although her tone of voice revealed otherwise, I was hoping against hope that the news she was prepared to share was good. It was not. The Sheriffs Department at the West County Detention Facility in Richmond had notified Ryan's mom that her child had committed suicide while in custody.

My first response was silence, born of shock and disbelief. Once recovered, I sought awkwardly to learn the available details, and then began to provide pastoral care and comfort. Such situations are always difficult, but especially so when the decedent has not yet reached his nineteenth birthday. Try to comprehend the arduous nature of such pastoral responsibility, considering that I had dried the young person's tears, hugged the then child in unpleasant times and in unpleasant places, and I had offered encouragement in some of the most trying and stressful moments of a young one's life.

Tragically, this was not the first time I have had a similar conversation with the mother of a dead young person. And most unfortunately, the numbers of such encounters seem to be increasing. Be assured that frequency has not yet made such situations less

difficult. Although I am rarely caught off guard, I was profoundly moved by this mother's final statement before ending our conversation. "Ryan said to me, 'Mom, if anything happens to me, make sure Reverend Tinsley does the funeral'." I did as he had wished.

In memory of Ryan Patrick Covarrubias 1982-2001

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April 2, 2001

From one in a group home

*Autobiography*

*I don't know where I was born--or I'm not sure. I think it was in Richmond... I lived with my mom for a couple of years... When I was 7 or 8 I did my crimes, robbing stores, stealing... When I was 11 I was being rude to my sister threatening her w/ knives... When I was 12 I threatened her with a bigger knife, then she called the police on me... we drove to juvenile hall...*

April 17

From one a state prison



*...I know your kind of shocked to hear from me. I know your upset at me for messing up the best opportunity I've had in my life. But you know like I know that I wish I was there (Knoxville College) rather than where I'm at now. I'm truly sorry for disappointing you. I think that's why it took so long to write you...*

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Knoxville, Tennessee April 16, 2001

Friends, you haven't really lived until you've taken young people on a cross country excursion by car! Two young men, both seventeen years of age, accompanied me on a trip that began on Wednesday afternoon, April 11. Absolute exhaustion well describes my state of being upon arrival here in Tennessee. While I drove the entire 2,530 miles, the young people occupied themselves a good deal of the time with sleep in the far rear seat of the rented minivan. They slept, that is, when not playing games on the laptop

or complaining about being bored because there was no TV or VCR in the van. (Beginning in the mid fifties, my family made many cross country trips in a car that had no radio, no air conditioner.)

These kids live in my home by court order. Four years ago I began to "finish" raising one of them. The other came to my home two years ago. To be frank, if they had always been in our home, biological children or otherwise, I would have been devastated by their behavior on what was merely the first leg of a 12,day trip. I was tremendously disappointed with both of the kids and I was ready to put them both on the next westbound bus or plane. Now that we have had the opportunity to rest a bit, my perspective has changed. Being the closest to a dad that either has ever had, I've had to step back, reflect, pray and thank God for what is (and surely will continue to be) an educational experience for them and for me. Despite the teenage hormones in high gear, despite a world view tempered by cluelessness gleaned from too much exposure to thug life, i.e., streets and ignorance, music and ignorance, ignorance and ignorance... they are precious, valuable, hard headed children of God.

As difficult as it is to do sometimes, I love them both very much. It's interesting though that often, when it's least expected, they say or do things that indicate they really have been listening. How I hope and pray we shall survive the rest of the trip that will take us, weather permitting, to Ohio, Indiana and Missouri before returning home on April 22. A talk to a church group in Cincinnati has been postponed.

By the way, the eight students we have here at Knoxville College are doing well, although they are more than a little homesick. Fortunately, only a month is left in the semester. These students are learning, growing up and becoming all that we know they can be. They are a long way from home, yet even further away from the narrow little world they used to know. We keep trying to work with them one at a time. More are on the way here in August! Thanks to you all for your support and prayers.

July/August 2001

David (not his real name) was eighteen years old, homeless and unemployed, and had recently spent time in a neighboring county's jail. He had not seen his mother for twelve or thirteen years. She had been in and out of prison most of his life. David's father is known for his work with youth and young adults in the East Bay, but not with David. In fact, father and son have had minimal contact. The young man shared all this during our initial encounter in the streets two years ago. He also told me that his nickname was "Savage." That day he accepted my invitation to come to church the next Sunday morning. David had been in the "system" since he was a toddler, first under the care and supervision of the social services department of his home county. As a young teen, he got into trouble and Probation took control of his case and his life. At some point, he was labeled SED (Severely Emotionally Disturbed).

David could not remember the last time he had cried. Oh, he had reason to cry.

"But the tears just don't come," he lamented during one of our conversations. He stopped coming to church, apparently because an elder made some insensitive remark to David about his attire. From the pulpit, I saw David get up and leave. He did not return. Many weeks passed before I saw him again. I went out into the streets at night several times looking for him, but his "partnahs" weren't talking. I suspected that he was back in jail. He was. Not yet nineteen, David was becoming as acquainted with the adult system as he had with the juvenile system. He was indeed approaching his law offenses with style, precision and skill. He was extremely proud of his reputation for being a fighter and for being fearless; thus the nickname. Nevertheless, he was beginning to change. Much to his surprise and even resistance, the change was pronounced and profound, however gradual. Months after our first meeting, David told me, "I've never been afraid of any man before, but that look, the look you gave me when we first met... you really scared me, you put the fear of God in me. . . "Well, it had been a busy day. I must have been tired and I probably was not prepared to tolerate a lot of foolishness that evening. It certainly was not my intention to frighten anyone. I still cannot imagine how the mere expression on my face could have caused such a reaction from an angry, tough, streetwise teenager. This hurting baby was looking past me and into the face of the One who called me to this special ministry.

David and I speak on the telephone fairly regularly, but we see each other infrequently now because last summer David moved to Ohio. He and his wife (they were married last fall) live there in a house my wife and I own. The house had been vacant for

several months when I offered David the chance to make some changes in his life. He hesitated. Understandably, he was scared. Still, he recognized a need to get away from the old ways and the old folks. He mustered great courage and made the move to a place he knew nothing about, where he knew no one, twenty-five hundred miles away from home. I am very proud of him.

Life there has not always been easy. He has been forced to grow up a lot in the past year. Work has not been steady. Just a few weeks ago, David's wife suffered a miscarriage. He has received help from us, from some of my wife's family there, and from some of the locals he met in church. Yes, he is back in church. And thankfully, the gold teeth are gone and the rough, tough facade of the past has mostly faded away. Most importantly, he has not been in jail! He is preparing to take the GED and hopes to enter college in the fall. He even speaks of seminary in the future.

Much good stuff has happened to him in the past year. The best part is, he knows from whom and from where the gifts have come. Ain't God grand?

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November 11 From another in a state prison

*...I'm pretty frightened with what's going on in the world today especially with all that war activity going on and me being in this situation and if something happens in California and me being in here and not out there to protect my family that's what's scaring me the most and the worst part about it I can't do anything about it at this time*

*but I still keep my faith and pray that the lord will see me throug this and keep me safe...*

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Fall 2001

On several occasions, I have shared in this space letters written to me by young people in trouble. Most of the correspondence was from youth and young adults in California Youth Authority (CY A) facilities. Some of the letters came from folks in adult prisons. The letter below is a bit different. It is a letter from a mother to her son. She wrote this as she prepared emotionally to leave Juvenile Hall and go to a California Youth Authority facility. Although her child is only about a year old, she sought to express her feelings to and about him in the following document.

The young woman, whom I have worked with for most of her teenage years, has experienced significant difficulty in her short life. Pray with her and me that she will indeed "turn her life around." Our most recent conversation (we have had many) was likely the most productive yet. It is unfortunate that it took a commitment to CY A for her to see what she was doing to herself and to others.

She graciously agreed to share these private and painful thoughts with us. Some day, when her son is able to understand what has been expressed here, I pray he will be in the

position to treasure his mother's effort.

*Dear Micah,*

*Hey baby boy. How are you doing sweetheart? Well, I know I should be there with you, instead of being here writing you. But I feel that you should know me as a person, & your mom has made a whole lot of mistakes in life and now I'm paying for every last one of them/ I honestly know that I should be home taking care of you, going to school, and working (legitly) like I was doing! .*

*I know I should have never ran away from my responsibility of taking care of you & handling my business. I'm very truthfully, honestly sorry for leaving you! ] am on my way to CYA unfortunately, to get my life together. There I will go to parenting classes, college classes, drug classes, and more! You need to know that you were never a mistake, you were actually planned. Micah I Love you and I only want the best for you. I don't want you to end up like me. I honestly love and pray to God that you will be better (a whole lot better) than I am & was because you have choices in life and there is two ways you can go. You can go the wrong, which involves making bad decisions (choices), letting the devil work in you basically! Your mind is your worst enemy! You need to become the best person you can be. Baby now that I'm seventeen (17) years old] have honestly realized that everything I've done was wrong. The reason why is because of them choices I have made! Everything in life is about choices, and God puts you through trials and tribulations to see if you can handle the test he puts you through/What I'm going through is a test to see if I pass or if I'll continue to mess up*

*I'm getting my life together cause] have a big responsibility to take care of and that's you! ] just hope you will learn from the mistakes I have made. If there is one thing I hope & pray that you will always remember that I Love You & I'll always be there for you as much as I can. But now it's time for me to go I will probably be gone to CYA in the next day or two (Monday or Tuesday). We'll always be as one till Death do us part. Love Always, Your Mommy*

AMEN and AMEN

March 2002

Eleven years ago while serving on the staff of the Unitas Campus Ministry Center (now Westminster House) in Berkeley, I took a group of Cal students to New York City.

The students volunteered in a homeless shelter's soup kitchen near Fordham University. We only spent a week and a half there, yet the experience was indeed quite an eye-opener for us all. The most interesting person I met on that trip was our "landlady." She was an elder in her church, an emergency room nurse, and the owner of a three-unit apartment building, the only building inhabitable on her block. The woman, a not-too-recent immigrant from Jamaica, stood about five feet tall, and always "spoke her mind." She could be described as "feisty." I was told that she was mugged several times on her way home from the subway. In each instance, she chased the mugger! She didn't tell me this; it was local legend.

Here, though, I shall share what she did tell me. Early one morning as the woman was leaving for work, she saw two teenagers, one male, one female, across the street. She knew neither of them. The kids were arguing. The quarrel escalated. The young man picked up a beer bottle lying in the gutter, broke it on the side of a building, and began to chase the young woman. That's when, in a leap of faith (if not foolishness), our hero ran into the South Bronx street after the six-foot-tall, male teenager, she had never seen before! Surprisingly, she caught up with the angry man-child before he reached his intended victim. She "snatched" him by the scruff of the neck and they stopped and stared at one another while she composed herself. "Why are you chasing that girl?" she inquired as she sought to catch her breath. "She said. . .and she did. . ." he snapped back. "Well, young man, just what are you going to do?" "I'm going to cut her," was the unashamed response! The kid may have known of the woman's reputation. It must have been clear to



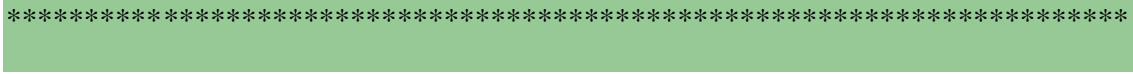
him that she wasn't particularly overcome with fear, and she was still holding on to him.

Certainly, the kid never imagined that such a little woman would have the courage or the chutzpah to challenge him in this fashion. And she wasn't finished. "Young man," she continued, "has anyone every told you they love you?" "NO!" He mumbled this and then put his head down. "Well, God loves you," she proclaimed victoriously, "and so do I!" The bottle dropped to the sidewalk and tears began to stream down his face. She hugged him and comforted him.

When speaking about our ministry to troubled youth, I have often shared this story. Usually, there are few dry eyes in the room when I finish. Most folks with whom I speak, thank God, are not among those who have never been told they are loved and respected. They cannot, in their wildest dreams, imagine being discarded as so much refuse, beaten and battered by their supposed-to-be "loved ones."

Most unfortunately, though, so many - too many of the kids I encounter daily are quite familiar with this brand of pain and suffering. Yet, through it all and despite it all, it is an almost indescribable joy for me to witness the response of a "hard" kid who hears, maybe for the first time, that he or she is worthy of respect and is indeed loved.

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November 24, 2002 From one in C.Y.A.  
*...But anyways it's a lot different here they come at you like we in the Army or at boot camp you just got to suck it up in ride it out I just turn my mind to god and ask him to help me make it through the day...*



Winter 2003

"Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray."

Proverbs 22:6 [NRSV]

For almost nine years, in the capacity of chaplain serving the juvenile detention system of Contra Costa County, California, I have taken young people in custody on court approved "temporary leaves" from the several facilities. Although an accurate count has never been kept, 800 to 1,000 such leaves is a safe estimate. "Alums" of the system also continue to participate in activities, sometimes years after their terms of confinement.

Young people, male and female teenagers, have been taken, to church; to school meetings in the community; to take GED, SAT, ACT tests; for college visitations, locally and in other parts of the United States; into the community for "wrap-around" meetings; for medical appointments; and most importantly for most, out to eat. They have been taken, while in custody, from the three facilities presently maintained by the Probation Department (Juvenile Hall, the Orin Allen Youth Rehabilitation Facility and the Edgar

Transition Center) and the two facilities maintained by the Mental Health Department along with the Probation Department (Summit Center for Boys and the Chris Adams Center for Girls). Additionally, numerous "leaves" with young people on Home Supervision (HS) and/or Juvenile Electronic Monitor (JEM) have taken place.

Most "temps" last for several hours, (e.g. 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., for church and after church activities). After church activities have included, following a meal, basketball, trips to the beach, bay cruises, trips to museums, car trips... Too, the court has allowed in the past day-long trips for several kids to Los Angeles and trips of longer duration to Atlanta, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Ohio...

The very most common "temp" is an all day leave on Sunday for church. Typically six to eight young people accompany me to church. The number varies according to: 1. the young person's behavior during the week in the facility; 2. the young person's behavior while with me during the previous week; 3. if the young person is not in custody, behavior during the week at home and at school; 4. whether I am "up to" dealing with an admittedly work intensive activity that week. Never is poor behavior rewarded with the "privilege" of leaving a locked facility to go out into the community. The composition of the group varies from week to week. Some group members come only during their time of confinement. Others, as stated above, have continued to participate in activities for years afterward.

In addition to church trips, for the past five years, I have taken young people to

visit, and to prepare to enroll in, college. Fifty-five young adults have been recruited and have attended (for varying periods of time), Knoxville College (PCUSA affiliated) in Tennessee. I have made 19 trips to Knoxville since April 1998. In the past year, I have taken 15 groups, ranging in size from 2 to 12 young people, to Butte College in Oroville, CA. Too, over the years, several dozen trips have been taken to other college/university campuses in the Bay Area, in the Los Angeles area, in Atlanta and in several Midwestern states.

Before embarking upon any excursion, always, the "rules" are shared with "first-timers" and serve as a reminder for "veterans." Usually, however, the "veterans" are asked to share. I expect the following:

1. Exemplary Behavior
  - a. there is no profanity.
  - b. we do not listen to the radio, rather we engage in discussions about current events, contemporary issues...
  - c. we do not talk about the facilities, people there, whether peers or staff; no talk about cases, the court or any aspect of "the system."
  - d. no slang.
  - e. use of proper grammar.
  - f. pants must be worn above the waist and with a belt.
  - g. in most cases rubber bands may not be worn in the hair of male participants.
2. If I ask someone to do something, it must be done, no arguments, no backtalk.
3. Participation, when in church, in worship, including reading scripture from the lectern. During/after all trips, verbal (sometimes written) evaluation of the activity, self-evaluation, assessment of what was learned, prayer before meals. Table manners are taught and stressed.

Although this is often times radically different from these young people's past patterns of behavior, those who have participated only once or twice before are able

to share "the rules" with newcomers. Participants understand the terms, generally comply, and seek to come again.

Young people expect to be treated (and are) with respect, with dignity and with trust. They are out with a Christian minister, not a probation staff member. They are in their own clothing; not in restraints. They are in the "care" of not in, as I view it, the "custody" of "the Rev." They come to expect correction (dreaded lectures), in private rather than public humiliation. And, they know that the consequences of misbehavior may include not being asked to participate for a period of time.

Young people have learned to behave in new, often radical (for them) ways, more in line with "mainstream" social practices. A process I have called, "tongue-in-cheek," DESTREETIZATION, begins most often, first in one-on-one encounters and continues when young people come out in groups.

Hair must be well groomed; no rubber bands in males' hair; pants with belts must be worn around the waist; dress shirts must be tucked in the pants; no excess cologne; no profane or otherwise inappropriate dress or accoutrements; everyone has the opportunity to pray and to speak publicly.

It is obvious to the participant that the old ways just do not work. If they did, individuals would not have been "locked up." They might have stayed in school, been able to get a job...

Various elements of popular culture, "Thug life," old immature life perspectives based on limited exposure and therefore profound lack of life skills are necessarily

critiqued (and even deliberately attacked). There is indeed a new way. Adding (unapologetically) the value judgment, there is a better way of conducting one's life.

I seek to "train in the right way..." and with God's help "they will not stray." With this group, it is indeed a matter of life and death.

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January 31

From one in a state prison

*...Lord knows I've learned my lesson in this place, I mean I honestly made a change. I didn't go out there and try to go back to robbing people or selling dope or anything like that. I tried to do it the honest way and I still failed... Some things just don't make any sense. Sometimes I just wish I could die and come back, do it all over again...I was about to go back to school this semester. But I'm locked back up amongst society's most rejected, as they like to call us. Society's rejected ones!*

May 29

In juvenile hall

*...I need help...I don't know in what way. I am lost and am not really sure what the lord is doing to me...I wish time could be turned back or what ever...I feel so mixed up and lost and not sure what is going on. I am going to be sent away for years...Please come and visit soon...*

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May/June 2003

Over the years in this space I have occasionally shared the poetry and prose of young people with whom I work. Two young men in custody wrote the following works. Both are acquainted with, and have experienced, tragedy and profound pain during their short lives. "Reach for Beyond" was written by a young man who recently completed a program at the Orin Allen Youth Rehabilitation Facility in Byron. He is back in school and intends to complete high school and then go on to college. The author of "Life" spent more than a year in a group home. He completed his program six months ago, about the time of his eighteenth birthday. Please pray for these young people and all who find themselves in similar situations in life.

(Spellings and Punctuation as Written by the Young Authors)

Reach for Beyond Within this clouded sea of once,  
Spiraling down through trees and trunks,  
Behind the face in times of brace Echoes to be heard, everlasting from all graves. What  
would be known of our days?  
Times of all only to age, Seemingly silenced, forbidden life with praise?  
Broken minded imposters search for truth which stays  
Enslaved, depriving supposed rights.  
Bold Look for stars among locked nights,  
Against the pin-ups wage pure fights.  
What do they obtain that can wash the stains?  
Surely not here, where good brings pain.  
Withholding power for altered means and times,  
The abused seek the shrine.  
We rowan, emerging to see the skies.  
Does what we see prove sturdy?  
We're content as it's always what we perceived it to be.  
No, Grasp this Luck!  
Reach for beyond, you will find: Truth is the edge to control minds,

Knowledge, our savior from this race.  
He welcomes us, presented in white robes  
Refreshingly scented, honey tastes. We have strayed none too far:  
Thoughts become so when revealing the soul.  
The sun falls then rises, unveiling the world. -E.

#### Life Poem

What is life.  
Do you know what life is.  
Will you ever know what real life is.  
Me my self has not yet seen or had a real Life that I can not lie.  
I will have to trust Befor I will see it.  
Trust is a Big part of life.  
Life is buityful if you beleave and trust.  
Life is buityful if you realy live it. Buitful in everyway.  
Time goes fast and you feel as if you Have not lived it.  
Well you can live real life if you have One thing.  
One thing. "God"  
With God you can have true life. Without God you will never truly Live.  
God is live and to have Him is to live.  
The end.  
By S.

July 2003

Last week I received a telephone call from a colleague in Richmond who could not, did not feel the need to conceal her anger. She had just received the news that the incumbent chaplain at the West County Detention Facility would not be given the courtesy of an interview for the position he has held for the past twelve years. Apparently, Rev. Harold Wright's theology and philosophy of the chaplaincy ministry are not quite in step with those of the new contract holder.



Certainly, choosing to exclude Rev. Wright from consideration is their right and their prerogative. However, having served this county and in this county for more than twenty years, I know people in every part of Contra Costa. I know, too, that in this community, people value something called "loyalty." As old-fashioned as it may sound, I believe loyalty is still a virtue.

Yes, Rev. Wright is a friend. He has been an important part of my support system since coming to this ministry nine years ago. He was a member of the team that interviewed me those many years ago. His thoughtful, cool and calming manner remind me, based on what I have read and heard, of one of Dr. Martin Luther King's closest assistants, the Rev. Andrew Young. Their apparent similarities (my perception) in approach to life and ministry have caused them to be standouts in their individual arenas.

Chaplain Wright will be missed. He will be missed by the constituency at West County Detention Facility, which has come to know and respect him. He has served with grace, dignity, love and integrity. These things will not soon be forgotten. Nor will what has been perceived by many, make no mistake about it, as a "slap in the face." Not a very good way to begin a working relationship, I think. Perhaps their reputation in the community is not an important issue for the new contract holder.

My colleague from Richmond had called to share "Bad News!"

August 2003

“Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them...”

Hebrews 13:3a [NRSV]

Quite often I am asked the question, “What do ‘*they*’ think?” Of course the “*they*” are the young people with whom I work. That question is almost always followed by, “What do ‘*they*’ want?” Although I cannot (would not attempt to) *speak for* the several hundreds of young people I have encountered over the past nine years, I have been a “bit-more-than” casual observer of the “scene.”

“What do ‘*they*’ think?” Many may agree that human “thought” is shaped, modified, governed to a great extent by our experiences in the world (nurture) and by the cognitive abilities we inherit (nature). Far too many (*maybe* a majority) of the young people who find themselves in a state of incarceration look at the world, and think about the world and their relationship to it and in it, in drastically, radically different terms than those who may have occasion to read this essay.

First, importantly, I think, many of “*those kids*” are presently *unable* to even read this, because many are functionally illiterate. A former juvenile court school principal once shared, the average reading level of “*these kids*” is about third grade. Remember, these are teenagers. As this is written, more than half of the young people in juvenile hall, documented, are “special education” kids. “And,” as one teacher commented, “those are only the ones we know about...”

So now we have a group of people, “locked up,” certainly not a “natural” human state of being, too many, who can barely read, write and compute, who may have hurt other people, but who were, in so many instances, hurt first, “trashed” sometimes even *en*

*vitro...* Add to *all of that*, as if *all of that* were not enough, many have not been in school. *Too many possess* very limited appropriate social skills. *Too many* have received *too much* of their “nurture” *and* the basis for an interesting philosophy of life from the “streets” (often referred to as “thug life”) and from a popular culture that seems to exude comprehensive “clueless-ness” as an art form.

Tragically, unfortunately for “*them*” *as* well as for the rest of society, in far too many instances, these poor babies who are on the very threshold of adulthood, literally “do not know their anuses from a hole in the ground!” Simply put, however disastrous and distressing for *them* and for *us*, at this point in time, *they* are ill-prepared and unprepared to compete in the “mainstream” of this society.

“What do ‘*they*’ want?” That’s easy. “*They*” want what *everyone* else wants. “*They*” want to be happy, safe, and have, possess, own, lots of stuff... In other words, the “American Dream” particularly as defined by “Madison Avenue.” “*They*” watch television and go to the malls; their heads are not in the sand. Virtual *salvation* resulting from the accumulation of things, and more things, a cultural lesson beaten into us all from an early age is not lost on *these kids*, hardly. *They* too have been taught that we find satisfaction and even fulfillment in fine (“phat”) houses, luxury (“tight”) cars, designer clothing and lots and lots of money. This is indeed a lesson of this culture and society “*they*,” as everyone else, seem to have learned extremely *well*... Yes, many come with considerable “baggage” resulting from an often times dreadful past *and* present, but “*they*” are not stupid.

Then comes the problem. One lives in one of the most, if not the most, competitive places in the United States (and therefore, the world?), where post-secondary training is almost an absolute necessity, in order to *succeed*--to get and to have all those components and elements of fulfillment. Yet, one cannot now, at age seventeen, read, write or compute at a competitive level. This, along with all the other profound and very real deficiencies, just what are the prospects that *those ones* will (ever?) be in the position to *attain and have all the stuff necessary to be fulfilled*, to embrace that so-called American Dream, through *acceptable, legal, moral, right* means?

What do *you* think?

September 2003

A picture taken on September 7, 1994 hangs in my office. Standing next to my white-haired and white-bearded predecessor, the picture shows, on that first day here, that I had not one gray (certainly not white) hair on my head or in my beard! Yes that has changed. Indeed.

What an absolutely extraordinary, remarkable, *often* challenging opportunity this has been to do (to *really* do ministry, now, for nine years. The time seems to have just flown by. This has to be (and *has to have been*), through the good and the bad, the very most humbling, yet fulfilling experience of a lifetime. I have often shared the story of my

initial reluctance to even pursue the call to this ministry. *THIS* was not why I went to seminary. God had other plans and ideas, as God thankfully, so often does. For that I will be eternally grateful.

Over the past nine years, it has been my privilege to serve literally hundreds of young people, oftentimes also their families. I have, in so many cases, seen them I at their very, very worst. Yet, joyfully, I have witnessed much better times in some of their lives. Some have gone away to college Significant I orders - among others. Some have earned the GED and even the high school diploma. I have baptized one and I participated in the Bar Mitzvah of another. I have officiated at the weddings (and sadly, at the funerals) of several. A couple have lived in my home (due in great measure to the continuing love and indulgence of my wife). Some call from time to time, others have been "under my wing" for years.

One of these exceptional young people recently wrote to me, "You are more than just a mentor, chaplain, pastor, you're greater than a friend. You're our father...when the biological fathers could not be there physically or mentally for whatever reason...even though we are not the richest, best behaved, not always nice smelling, troublesome, mostly hard headed, mischievous individuals, you continue to be there...we thank God for his love and thank him for what he has given to you, because it helps us to become better at who we are... "

Just how does one top that? What can one say but thanks?

I thank God for nine marvelous and wonderful years. I remain in a state of awe.

Too, I join the kids in thanking you who read this, for your prayers, your kind thoughts and your steadfast support in and for the conduct of this special ministry. Your efforts are much appreciated.

November 2003

“I've seen your tears and I've seen your smile. I like your smile a whole lot more.” I have occasion to say this to kids frequently. "J" has heard this more than once over the past year. J is an eighteen-year-old who resides in the Summit Center in Martinez.

The Summit Center is a therapeutic group home for boys located in the juvenile hall complex. Administered jointly by the county departments of mental health, probation and the juvenile court schools, the Summit Center program (along with the Chris Adams Center for girls) provides young people and their families the opportunity to address and effectively deal with mental health/emotional issues which have caused significant problems in their lives.

J is a young person who has come with me to church on Sunday maybe a dozen times in the past five or six months. When I was serving the Hillside Presbyterian Church in Oakland, he and others from the Summit Center accompanied me nearly every Sunday. They participated in the worship service as liturgists and sometimes as members of the choir. When I finished my commitment at that church at the end of June, the kids went with me to Sojourner Truth Presbyterian Church, in Richmond. Initially nervous and reluctant to speak before the congregation, J is now a "seasoned" public speaker. This is

part of the training. Just a month ago, J and three other young people went with me to San Francisco where they spoke before an audience of more than fifty people at a church-sponsored gathering. J and the others spoke most eloquently, passionately, and with first-hand experience about how youth are affected by "the system. J's mother came to hear the kids speak; she was in tears for the duration of their performances.

J's mom also began to attend church with us on Sunday mornings at Sojourner Truth Church. The very first time mother and son went to Sojourner Truth Church, I was preaching elsewhere. I was told he got up at the appropriate time and introduced himself to the congregation. "I'm one of Rev. Tinsley's kids!" Mother and son have not missed worship in a couple of months. In fact, several weeks ago they decided, together, to join the church. Although the mother had been previously baptized, "J" had not. The Rev. Dr. James Noel, a professor at San Francisco Theological Seminary and pastor at Sojourner Truth, and I baptized "J" a couple of days before this was written.

When kids go out with me, the reputation goes, they gain weight! We go to church, yes. We go on educational outings, yes. And we always eat well! We are known (and loved) at all of the "all-you-can-eat" establishments in four counties. Consequently, the suit J wanted to wear for his baptism no longer fit him. I know the feeling; I have a number of suits that no longer fit! Remedy: I gave J an old suit of mine. Problem: The suit coat was a bit too large and the pants were a lot too large. J's mother wanted to buy him a new suit, but J refused. He was determined to wear "my" suit. And, he did. Maybe some time in the distant future he will "grow into" the suit, but this past

Sunday morning, with the help of a belt, several large paperclips and on-the spot "fabric re--distribution," we prepared this precious young person for his special day. The trousers were a little baggy but I made quite sure they were worn up around his waist!

After J was baptized and had been greeted by officers of the church, J joined me in the chancel and we hugged one another. As we hugged, this newly baptized, eighteen-year old in the size 48-Long suit was, along with his proud mom, in tears ... tears of joy.

Those tears I like and enthusiastically endorse.

Blessings

December 2003

A common question asked of me is: "What is it that you do?" My "tongue-in-cheek" answer comes in the form of a question: "What is IT I don't do (within the context of this ministry)?" IT, meaning this ministry, certainly has its moments.

I am composing this aboard an eastbound airliner cruising at 36,000 feet. It is not yet seven in the morning, Pacific Time, but the sun is rising out over the horizon. Sixty hours ago, I received a telephone call from a young person in Knoxville, Tennessee. He is among many from "the system" here who have gone there to attend college. Although he is not presently in school, he and a half dozen other former Knoxville College students from Contra Costa County have chosen to live and work in Knoxville. My young friend was crying uncontrollably over the telephone. Unable to make himself understood, he



handed the telephone to another "Contra Costa kid" who was equally distraught.

Finally the second young man was able to calm himself enough to share some tragic news. Just minutes before the phone call, another young man from Contra Costa (a current student at Knoxville College), had been involved in a serious automobile accident. The telephone was passed to the EMT on the scene who told me the accident victim was being prepared for transport to the hospital. Throughout the evening and into the wee hours of the morning, I received updates from the hospital where the first two young people were joined by another Contra Costa native.

They held vigil all night and most of the next day in the ICU waiting room. These young people referred inquiries from the hospital staff to me, because the injured party has no biological family that I am aware of. He calls me "Dad" or "Daddy" because I am the closest thing he has to that. In the twelve hours following the accident, my phone was kept busy. The hospital social worker called seeking the next of kin. The hospital business office called to discuss financial arrangements. The president of the college called to make sure I knew what had occurred.

I am now reflecting on many things, including the scrutiny of my person and my belongings required by the TSA. Obviously, I am worried about the poor kid who sustained extensive head injuries and remains unconscious. I would not subject myself to what I went through this morning for a mere "weekend get-away." Yet, I am so very proud of the young people who found and assisted the accident victim. They were the comfort-givers until medical assistance arrived. They wept for their friend and brother. I

explained over the phone to the hospital social worker that these courageous young men have proven that they are indeed the victim's brothers and should be treated as such. Yes, I am very proud of them. I have told them so.

Over the years, I have been aware of and witnessed some of their poor, even abominable, behavior. But the way they behaved in this tragic and difficult instance speaks volumes about the character of these special young people. They have indeed changed in significant ways. So, one of the marvelous things I get to do is to witness transformation. I am fortunate. Grace and Peace,

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January 30, 2004

From one in C.Y.A.

*...Pray for me. I've been having problems with institutional staff. They discriminate against me because of my charge. They say I don't deserve the chance to go home. They don't want me to get out in 4 months. So instead they are sending me to another institution to do more time. My situation is stressful, how long will they mourn me...*

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March 4, 2004

From one in juvenile hall in  
another county

*...this is the only chance to prove to the ones that stated or thought I was never going to amount to nothing... I sincerely want to thank you for being a father to me, you never have to take off your time to help me but you do so... I've seen a major change in my behavior. Every time I do something wrong and go to jail, I think of new things, things*

*that I didn't do the last time I was free. I think that has made a big difference. My anger is getting a little better in so many ways...*

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Spring 2004

The Contra Costa County Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Commission is planning its 16th Annual Juvenile Justice Awards presentation. A memo, dated February 27, 2004, from the Commission, addressed to "Interested Individuals/Organizations" proclaims: "We are honoring individuals and programs /organizations in Contra Costa County who during 2003 have substantially contributed toward making our county a better place to live for juveniles. Awards will also be given to individuals and programs directly related to the prevention and intervention of juvenile delinquency." There are eleven award categories. Number ten on their list is Juvenile Offender Success Story: A youth who has changed his or her life for the better.

This year, as in the past, I have submitted multiple nominations for this award. In this space I wish to share what I have written about each of the three nominees whose names I have sent over to the Commission. At this point I will only identify them by their initials. Of course, should they be selected to receive the Commission's recognition for

achievement, all are welcome to attend the ceremony in May where these exceptional individuals' initials will be attached to names and faces!

And the nominees are:

"B", 18, spent time in juvenile hall, in placement and at the Orin Allen Facility in Byron. His parents are now, and have been for some time, absent from his life. Last fall while at OAYRF, he earned his GED. He is currently pursuing his high school diploma at the Martinez Adult School. "B" is scheduled to take the ACT test in April and is applying for admission to Barber-Scotia College, the University of Houston, and Contra Costa College.

"D", 18, spent time in juvenile hall and successfully completed a program of the electronic monitor (JEM). Additionally he completed 150 hours of community service. He returned to his high school where he has excelled academically and athletically, in football and track. He has managed to maintain a B+/A- average. "D" intends to go on to Los Medanos College following high school graduation in June 2004.

"L", 18, graduated from high school while completing his program at OA YRF in Byron. Last fall, as he put on his graduation robe at the county office of education (CCCOE), he said to me, "Rev, I never thought I'd be here!" Literally within days of his release from the Byron program, he was on an airplane to North Carolina where he enrolled at Barber-Scotia College. Barber-Scotia College is a historically Black college affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (USA). "L" is successfully and enthusiastically completing his first semester of college. Please join me in wishing these special

individuals the very best in all their current and future endeavors!

"But be transformed by the renewing of your minds" -Romans 12:2b

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April 18, 2004 From county jail  
*...Me, I'm becoming stronger. My faith with God is one of the only things that is keeping me sane in this world of lust and war. I'm writing you to let you know that I'm doing OK and I refuse to give up the fight. 'Life is a war, which can and cannot be helped'...*  
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\*\*\*\*\*  
June 10, 2004 From a group home  
Needs  
*Soap (Deodorant)  
grease, face towel  
hair brush (hard)  
pants 3 pair  
CD player and CD's  
Sketch book with pencils, marker  
All white shoes (air force ones) Low 10 1/2 there on sale  
Dress pants and shirts  
boxing gloves  
boxing shoes gloves need on Monday  
and boxing shorts  
socks*  
Haircut

\*\*\*\*\*

July/August 2004

This is a year of anniversaries. Very special anniversaries! In the spring of 1969, the Reverend Herbert Tweedie talked to me, at some length and with great passion, about the benefits from, and the virtues of volunteer work (as House opposed to paid work during the summer - right, for money) as a leader in the Cameron House day camp program in San Francisco. Donaldina Cameron House is now the one-hundred-thirty-year-old Presbyterian center in Chinatown. Some of my friends thought I had lost my mind when, even surprising myself, I said yes. "How could you let that man talk you into working for no money? Are you crazy?" I remember one of my, what the kids now call, "partnas" saying to me at the time. Jobs weren't really that scarce that summer, so why that?

On the third Monday of June 1969, I walked, for the first time, down Clay Street from Powell Street. A group of us had taken the cable car up the hill from Market Street. Halfway down the hill between Powell and Stockton Streets, directly opposite Commodore Stockton School is Joice Street (then called Joice Alley). We turned right on Joice Alley, walked the short block toward Sacramento Street. To our left, there it was, Cameron House, in all its splendor (?). I remember looking up and asking, "God, what have you gotten me into?"

That summer, following leader training, I worked as a volunteer in the Cameron House Day Camp and in one of the several Cameron House "satellite" programs, based at the Ingleside Presbyterian Church in the southern part of San Francisco. When the summer program was over, I vowed never again to work with these "rotten little kids"! Yet, after a brief respite, when the telephone rang and the caller asked me to volunteer to work in what was called the "Best-Day-of-the-Week" program during the year, again I said yes.

More importantly, though, on the penultimate night of the summer program, on an overnight camping trip at Kirby Cove (now part of the Marin Headlands Federal recreation area), I discerned the call, yes, the CALL, to ordained ministry. The following year; I was asked to serve as co-director (for money!) of the Ingleside program along with a woman who turned out to be a not too-distant cousin. When she decided not to return after one year as co-director, I was hired as director of the program. I did that job for three more years.

On June 21st of this year, it will be thirty-five years since I began working with kids. In the beginning, I was five to ten or so years older than those with whom I worked. Now the difference in age is thirty (plus) to forty years! In September 1984, I was a member of the faculty of Contra Costa College. I earned my tenure that year; could conceivably still be there now... It was during the first few days of classes that fall semester of 1984 that I ran across a shy, nearly eighteen-year-old, recent Kennedy High School (Richmond) graduate who had enrolled at the college.

Having seen him a couple of times on the campus, I said hello to him one afternoon in the college library. He was attending to some business at the circulation desk. I was on my way out. I passed him hoping to share some words of encouragement. as I commonly tried to do with new students. As I passed and spoke to him, I put my hand on his shoulder. He froze. I actually could feel a definite chill run through his back. "Wow," I thought. "I'll never do that to him again. Somebody must have really done something to him...he seemed truly scared:" Of course, I never thought I would ever see him again, much less talk to him.

To make a very long, yet exceedingly and wonderfully pleasant story short, we did talk again, and again. God had caused our paths to cross for a reason. Several years after that first awkward encounter, he and I along with my wife and my attorney, appeared in Superior Court in San Mateo County. The judge asked maybe a half dozen questions of us, and then having determined that all was in order, he signed the adoption papers making Leland Johnson my son.

Two or three years later, the process was repeated with John. Same attorney, same court house, different judge, same result. Leland and John have five children between them, three and two respectively. Leland's eldest, my oldest grandson, will enroll this fall as a freshman at De La Salle.

Twenty years have passed rapidly. Last, certainly not least worthy of note and celebration is a ten-year anniversary. It is almost unbelievable to me that on September 7, 2004, it will have been ten years since I came to serve this remarkable ministry. What an



absolutely extraordinary blessing the past thirty-five years have been. Truly, truly awesome. As the kids would say, "Hecka" awesome!

This message comes to you from Cloud Nine. Cloud Nine is indeed where I find myself after having the distinct honor and privilege to attend five high school graduations in a matter of two weeks. Although this is written in June, and you shall not read this until late August or September, I hope to still be under the influence of this wonderfully natural high!

The first graduation took place at the Martinez Adult School. The kid there had earned his GED at the Orin Allen facility in Byron last year. Upon release from that program, this determined eighteen year old told me he wanted to complete his high school diploma. Despite not knowing the whereabouts of his parents, and having to ride the bus from Richmond to Martinez daily for several months, he completed the requirements for his diploma. He plans to attend Butte College this fall. When the Martinez ceremony concluded, I rushed to the Oakland airport where I boarded a flight to Dayton, Ohio.

The next evening, in my hometown of Richmond, Indiana, I attended the Richmond Adult School graduation. The youngest child of one of my cousins finally earned his diploma (he will be twenty-four years old in August). This young man had his share of difficulties during and after his high school years. He had called me to ask if he should accept his classmates' nomination to speak during the ceremony. My response was

simple and to the point: "Get your little butt in gear and prepare that speech!" His talk brought tears to the eyes of the many, including the principal, the superintendent and the mayor.

Mere days after my return, I attended graduations at both Deer Valley and Antioch high schools. Six of the seven hundred or so graduates at Deer Valley were kids I worked with while they were in the system. Several others were the girlfriends of young men I have known in the hall and the ranch. Before going to Antioch High School, I stopped at the home of one of the graduates where I was invited to open the after graduation gathering with prayer. By the time I got to the commencement at Antioch High School, I was forced to park almost a mile away from the school. The walk was worth it; I was able to witness another so-called at-risk kid walk across the stage.

I was honored to speak at the high school graduation at the Orin Allen facility in Byron. Usually no more than one or two kids earn high school diplomas each year while in custody at that facility. This year six young men received their high school diplomas during a ceremony, and those earning the GED and other awards were also recognized. Join me in wishing the very best for and praying for all these special young people.

They accomplished something few thought they would or could accomplish.  
Amen.

September 2004

Four or five years ago I shared with you in this space, the challenges (even travails!) of traveling with teenagers. At that time I had taken two young people on a six-thousand mile automobile trip. For both kids, I had been appointed surrogate parent for education purposes by the Court. Additionally, both kids lived in our home. Remarks those years ago were, I recall, prefaced by: "You haven't lived until you have. . ." traveled with teenagers, particularly those who have experienced profound difficulty in life and who you have not raised to this point. Well, déjà vu all over again!

This is being written in a hotel room in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania on the morning of Friday, September 3rd. On Tuesday night two young people and I boarded a flight from Oakland to Washington, DC. Also kids for whom I have been appointed educational surrogate, these two, ages 16 and 18 had never flown before; had never been far away from "home." We spent all day and well into the evening in Washington, DC.

Over the years I have taken more than fifty young people to visit and to study in our nation's capital. Regrettably the place is under siege. The police presence is unlike anything I have ever witnessed. Sadly, one must even pass through a metal detector to enter the main public library, named for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in downtown Washington. We endured; saw many sights, often at a distance.

Yesterday, Thursday, we traveled by car to the Pine Forge Academy near Pottstown, P A. I very much want to enroll the sixteen year old in that college prep

boarding school sponsored by the Seventh Day Adventist Church. The tremendously impressive rigor of the academic program of the school is best reflected in the fact that 95% of graduates go on to colleges and universities.

We spend today in Mechanicsburg, just outside Harrisburg. My brother, a Foreign Service Officer of the United States Department of State, has begun graduate study at the U.S. Army War College at Carlisle. He and his family have been posted out of the country for the better part of the 'past twenty years. After his classes today, my brother and I will "catch up" a bit.

Tomorrow morning the kids and I will go back to Washington where we will sight see until flight time. We are scheduled to arrive back in Oakland at 9:30 pm, Saturday. Challenging enough? Invigorating enough? Sunday after church, the eighteen year old (nineteen at the end of this month) and I will pack all of his belongings and travel by car to Los Angeles. This young man has committed to one year of volunteer service through the Young Adult Volunteer program (Y A V) of the National Volunteer Office of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

He will serve as a mentor to inner city, at risk, school age youth at the Hollywood Urban Project. He will live in a communal setting with other volunteers in the heart of the Hollywood community, far from the glamour and glitter usually associated with Hollywood.

As I conclude, I glance across the room where the clock reads 10:58 am. The two kids are still asleep. Theirs is a deserved rest. And, as I perceive these precious, silent,

angelic figures across the way, I wonder. I wonder what they are dreaming. I wonder about their dreams...about dreams that might have never been. Amen.

December 2004

Four or five years ago I became acquainted with Dr. Armen Serebrakian. An ear, nose and throat specialist and a plastic surgeon, Dr. Serebrakian is the director of the Bay Area Laser Surgery Center in Pinole. During our first meeting, Dr. Serebrakian shared he removes more gang-related tattoos than anyone in the Bay Area. He sets aside one day every eight weeks at the center exclusively for gang-related tattoo removal. The good doctor waives his professional fee and charges only for the use of the laser machine. For smaller tattoos the fee is \$50.00 per treatment; larger tattoos are generally \$100.00. In most instances four or five treatments are required. About 100 young people, all Contra Costa probation kids in and out of custody, have been served to date.

Initially I merely referred young people for treatment. But as the word got out, probation officers and probation counselors began to refer kids to me. Before long it began common for me to physically take young people in custody from the facilities in Martinez and Byron to the center for tattoo removal appointments. Until about this time last year the Juvenile Hall Auxiliary had generously *funded* the "program." However, so very many young people have decided to avail themselves of this extraordinary opportunity, the Auxiliary determined it could no longer afford the fees, *in total*, now

amounting to \$1200-\$1500 every eight weeks. The Auxiliary continues to contribute a significant amount. More is needed, on an on-going basis.

Simply put, this activity is the first step for many of these kids towards separating and detaching themselves from gangs and gang lifestyle. For most it truly is a matter of life and death. The majority, but not all, of the young people served are Latinos whose faith tradition is or has been Catholic. Most cannot afford, *financially*, to have the tattoos removed. In reality, none can afford, where *life and well-being* are concerned, not to have the procedure done. Following the reduction in support from the Juvenile Hall Auxiliary, small donations from individuals and churches have helped, but, more is needed...

January 2005

Eleven years ago, it seemed that a group of rather rowdy, loud, vulgar, misbehaved gang members were appearing daily on the steps of Donaldina Cameron House (San Francisco). The kids, all recent arrivals primarily from Southeast Asia, were following girls to Cameron House. The girls were inside Cameron House involved with

the program, a highly structured Christian program. The “gang boys” were not Christian, not well disciplined and they were scaring Cameron House’s Nob Hill neighbors not to mention many of the second and third generation Chinese American Cameron House staff, several of whom were elderly. This group of kids became known as “ma fawn” translated at the time for me from the Cantonese, as “the essence of danger.”

Folks at Cameron House were literally pulling out their hair as they sought a solution to the presence of the “ma fawn.” Cameron House had *always* worked with “at risk” kids in the past. Some of them had become Presbyterian ministers. But “these kids” were of a new generation, from places other than southern China. They were not responding to the old tried and true methods of the past, recent and distant past. And, most on the Board of Directors were opposed to calling the police. But a solution had to be found *soon*. An *ad hoc* committee of the Board met to discuss options. The question came up (Although I was a member of the Board at the time, I was not present), “Who is best qualified to work with *this* kind of kid?” I don’t know if mine was the first name mentioned, but I am the one they asked to work with the “ma fawn.”

*“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien.*

*The alien ...shall be to you as the citizen among you;*

*You shall love the alien as yourself,*

*For you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”*

Leviticus 19: 33, 34

The first kid showed up at 8:30 in the morning and promptly sat down on the sidewalk in front of Cameron House thereby blocking the tourist trade coming from Nob Hill into Chinatown along Sacramento Street. I sat down with him. Undoubtedly Cameron House staff was watching from several vantage points in the building. The kid was probably as surprised as the staff was when I sat down in the sidewalk with him. The “novelty” or the “thrill” of being a nuisance very quickly wore off for him; we proceeded to a place on the front steps where we could continue talking.

Others began to show up. Within about ten minutes, six or seven kids appeared. Their pants were sagging, they had to spit every few seconds, all were chewing gum, several reeked of marijuana, and it was obvious some had not bathed, at least not properly. I found out in short order that most had not been in the United States (this was “third country”) long, yet they had been in trouble with the law, were not attending school regularly, and really had no place else to go. They were born in places where they could not return. In all instances their parents spoke little or no English and they worked all day (and part of the night) with little time to “supervise” their teenage sons. “These kids” were headed down a path of ultimate destruction.

Nevertheless, I became tired of sitting on the stone steps of Cameron House. I was a member of the Board of Directors, so-o-o, I invited them into Cameron House, right into the room Ms. Cameron had used as her “parlor.” Mouths of the staff dropped when I brought the “ma fawn” into sacrosanct Cameron House. They just could not believe I



would *do* such a thing. The kids were sort of shocked too! (At least now “they” weren’t bothering the neighbors!) We all sat down to chat, a chat that lasted about two hours.

They were told, that first day, that they could not just hang around the outside of the building doing what they had been doing. The Cameron House club program was described to them and they were asked to consider participation “inside” rather than causing problems out in the street. In exchange for their better behavior they were told that the staff would be informed to no longer refer to them as the “ma fawn.” As a matter of fact in anticipation of their agreement to become part of the program, they would need to choose a club name. Ironically enough, by unanimous choice, they adopted the name: *JUST US!*

Work with the “Just Us” kids lasted a very short period of time. Rev. Dr. H. Eugene Farlough called. He told me that the long-time juvenile detention chaplain in Contra Costa County was retiring, and the position was open.. “I think this is something you should look into,” I was told. My initial response was a resounding *no*. Neither did I want to work on an on-going basis with teenagers, nor did I wish to work in locked facility. I had “graduated” from these things a long time ago. I was merely helping out at Cameron House. “Hard-headed” teenagers, especially those in trouble, no way! Once again, God had other plans...

May 2005

Let's examine the numbers.

According to figures provided by the California Youth Authority (*About the CYA: Summary Fact Sheet*, <http://www.cya.ca.gov/about/summarys.html>), the "cost to house a ward: \$ unknown as of this publishing, last reported in December 2003--\$60,000 per year." There are 4,222 CYA wards in institutions, 4,158 on parole--you do the arithmetic...

Selena Maranjian in a March 2002 article titled "How Much Does a Funeral Cost?" in *The Motley Fool*, Fool.com, reports the findings of a 1999 National Association of Funeral Directors ([www.nafd.org](http://www.nafd.org)). Average cost: \$5,778.16. However, Maranjian warns: "Some parts of the country will be more expensive...in addition you can spend a lot more or a lot less, depending on some decisions you make..." The funerals with which I have been involved over the past several years have cost more than double the reported average, here in California *and* elsewhere.

Two Contra Costa County "system alums" once juvenile hall residents and OAYRF graduates are enrolled at Butte College. Both earned the GED while in custody. One went on to earn his high school diploma-- "because I wanted to..." Given that they were wards

of the court through their eighteenth birthdays, the state community college fees (\$26.00 per unit) are waived. Dormitory fees are approximately \$7,500 per year. Books, supplies and others fees will range, conservatively, from \$1,000 to \$1,500. Financial aid, over and above the fee waiver, will cover about half of these expenses. At approximately \$10,000 per year, this educational experience costs \$50,000 less than a year in the California Youth Authority, as reported above. In the past three years alone more than 200 young people *in custody* have accompanied me on trips to Butte College alone, in seeking to explore new ways, better ways to conduct their lives, 170 miles *away* from old friends, old distractions, old influences and familiar environment...

The sixteen year old high school student who now attends the college preparatory boarding school in Pennsylvania is a Summit Center graduate. Moreover, he was a resident of juvenile hall for the first time (the first of many times) at age nine. His tuition, room and board, books and miscellaneous private school fees amount to nearly \$18,000 per year. Transportation, weekly allowance, clothing (uniforms), field trips are extra, maybe another \$2,000. At \$20,000 a year this marvelously exceptional, however *expensive*, private school education costs \$40,000 less than a year in the California Youth Authority. Even now additional young people are beginning to consider this as an alternative, an option superior to *any* others they have explored...

Every eight weeks kids *in custody* and *those no longer in custody* gather with me at the Bay Area Laser Surgery Center in Pinole. I drive a van load of kids from OAYRF and

often from the Summit Center. Many of those no longer in custody who began the four to five treatment regimen, while in custody, meet us there at the appointed hour. Treatment costs range from \$50. to \$100. depending on the size of the tattoo. Recently fifteen young people began or continued the process toward the removal of gang related tattoos. In most instances this is the very first step toward detachment from a dangerous and potentially fatal lifestyle. Truly a matter of life and death. On the day of our most recent trip to the center we spent \$1,400, generous donations from congregations, service organizations and individuals. If we were to spend this amount *six times per year*, as in every eight weeks, (\$8,400) we would still be \$1,600 short of the \$10,000 cost of the most recent *single* funeral in which I participated. Over the past three years several score of young people have availed themselves of this tremendous opportunity...

In the past half dozen years I have lost more than seventy (70) young people, yes, to violent death. If each funeral averaged \$10,000, at \$700,000, we could send 35 students through two years of community college *or* send 11 promising tenth graders to prep school for three years, with some change to spare *or* we could remove 1400 tattoos *or* a variety of combinations of these...

These numbers speak for themselves--do they not?

Friends, be assured, your continued prayers, kind thoughts, well wishes and the munificent financial support of this endeavor (these endeavors) are appreciated by me

and by those who benefit most from these unrelenting gestures of affection and love...

May 2005

Two young men at the Orin Allen Youth Rehabilitation Facility in Byron recently took time to reflect, write and share with me some of their inner-most feelings, thoughts, regrets and insights. The essays that follow are...

***In their own words...***

*I am 17 years old, I lost my father when I was 3 years old. I do not know to much about him only what my mom tells me. It has been hard growing up without a father around. My mother lost it when my dad die So she sent me to stay with my grandmother. So as time went on I was off and on with my mother and grandmother. When I was little I did not understand why my mom did not want me around her. When Christmas came around my mom was know were to be found. When my birthday came around she was know were to be found. As I got older I got use to it so I stop liking my mom, I did not want to stay with her no more. And id not care if she did not want me. But now that I am older and can understand it is hard for a Black woman to take care of her kid without a man around to help her I understand why she sent me to stay with my grandmother. She just wanted the best for me and at that point in her life she could not give that to me.*

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*My experience in the system. It's been hard ever since I got locked up. I've missed Christmas, New Years, Valentine's Day, and will be missing more important days. but one thing that's always on my mind is my family. My mom and my dad. I know it's very hard for them knowing that their child is going to be gone for a long time. That is really what I feel is my punishment for my crime. It's hearing my mom and dad crying on the phone asking themselves why? I could never find the answer of why I did it. Maybe it was for the bragging rights or feeling that you could fit in. But I never found out why, for what. But now I'm in the system and serving time at Byron Boys Ranch asking myself how I got here and how much I'm missing if I were out, like prom, senior trip, and more importantly walking across the stage ready to get my diploma to make my family proud. But it's been hard, I'm just taking it day by day til I get released home.*

Blessings,

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June 23, 2005 From a group home

*...I have succeeded in attaining my blue shirt, which is the second phase of this program. I am happy...I wrote to my judge, she wrote back with a small but reasonable response...You know Rev, I can do this!...I sure hope life turns out for me, my head is on right and I'm feeling more and more strong each day...*

June 26, 2005 From a state prison

*...Service was beautiful today, the music was uplifting and the Spirit was and is moving. A lot of men's hearts were ministered to and touched today. The love of Christ and the word of God is powerful and effective, Praise the Lord!...God bless you and keep you always...*

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June 2005

The young man was abandoned by his parents at an early age; their present whereabouts are unknown. He grew up, literally shuttled and shuffled from foster home to group home from juvenile hall to the Orin Allen facility in Byron. We first encountered one another there in Byron when he was fourteen years of age. On that evening some five, almost six years ago, the kid was shy, almost unresponsive--probably scared, although he will not admit it now. Yet he seems to remember more about our first conversation than I.

Following that rather inauspicious initial meeting, we saw little of one another. He was off to spend several years in and out of group homes. We met again in the hall just as he was preparing to take the GED. And, although he was approaching his eighteenth birthday he was destined for a return engagement at the ranch. After the stint in Byron, his probation officer shared with me, he really had no place to go. The kid's probation officer asked for my assistance. "He has the potential to succeed!" I was told.

Again we sat down to talk, this time in juvenile hall. Once we became reacquainted, we began to speak of the future, about his aspirations, his goals, his dreams...

Before he was released from custody, he passed the GED. That, however, was not sufficient for him. He approached me and shared his wish to go on to complete work toward the high school diploma. When the West Contra Costa Unified School District was unable or unwilling to accommodate his desire, he enrolled in the Martinez Adult School. For a whole semester the young man traveled from Richmond by "Westcat" bus

to school in Martinez. He was undaunted by several unpleasant episodes such as the one when, as he was simply walking from the bus stop to class, he was stopped by a Martinez police officer and asked, “What are *you* doing in *my* town?” The police chief was contacted. Through it all and despite minor difficulties he did go on to graduate.

At some point in the process I took the young man, along with others to visit the Butte College campus in Oroville. Over the past three years alone I have taken more than two-hundred young people, most in custody, to visit the campus and the dormitory in Chico. His initial response was more than favorable--he wanted to go!

But, as the time drew near, last August, that initial enthusiasm began to wane. Fear, that quite normal and natural emotion, the fear of the unknown set in. In the days and hours leading up to departure time, his *every* excuse for *not* going was countered swiftly and firmly.

“Kidido, you have come this far, you *can't* stop now.”

“*But...I'm not ready...*”

“You have a GED *and* a high school diploma. What else do you need?”

“*But... I don't know anybody there...*”

“So, go out and meet them.”

“*But...I don't have a backpack, pencils, paper and a pillow.*”

“Rite-Aid does.”

“*But...I don't have a banking account.*”

“I'll take you there tomorrow. You can open an account.”

“*Will you go in the bank with me?*”

“No.”

“*Can't I just wait until next week?*”



“No, classes start this week.”

*“I’m just not ready...”*

“Son, everything will fall into place...”

*Everything* did.

He and I fondly reminisced and chuckled about the events of last summer. Joined by another prospective student and recent ranch “grad” we had breakfast together this morning, Memorial Day, in Chico. The once shy and reserved kid, the erstwhile reluctant student successfully completed his first year of college! He has indeed blossomed. I simply went up to Chico to bring him, along with a carload of luggage, “home” for the summer.

On the trip home both young people slept (soundly) all the way back to the Bay Area. At one point I glanced over at the peaceful angelic figure to my right. I could not help but think, over and over “His parents, wherever they are, just don’t know what they are missing...”

Grace and Peace,

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July 13 From a state prison  
*...I hope that all is well with you and your familey, anyhow I wanna apolagize for not*

*writing back sooner but at the moment we are on lock down and we have been for a couple of weeks and also at the moment I am lacking stamps but other than that I'm alright...*

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September 2005

It is always rather amusing when a young person shares, something along the lines, "I wish I had your job--all you do is just walk around talking to people..." Too young and inexperienced in life are they yet, to understand, I suppose, the "dues" one pays (must pay) in the preparation for professional service in the ministry, this ministry. Unaware are they, still, of the required education, training and life experiences that are and have been a part of that process, rather, THE PROCESS. Some of these poor misinformed young folk perhaps have the interesting notion that sans education, training and experience, they will be offered the position of CEO--just because they showed up at the jobsite... We have much work to do.

I was reminded recently of one of those memorable experiences of the past that indeed was part of the preparation for service in this setting. We don't always know at the time just what God is preparing for us or preparing us for, but as the years past we learn to wait and to be patient--it is hoped.

An old dear friend of mine, the Reverend Norman Fong, a parish associate at the

Presbyterian Church in Chinatown, (San Francisco), tells the story on occasion, with tremendous enthusiasm and animation. The written version here will hardly compare to Rev. Fong's graphic, energetic, verbal narrative of an incident at an annual Cameron Carnival of maybe twenty years ago. He and I were volunteer leaders together in the Cameron House summer program some thirty-six years ago. We have been friends for a long time. He is, therefore, allowed certain poetic license.

For twenty-five years I attended the carnival and usually volunteered my services from opening to clean-up. Generally I was asked to serve a fair number of security "shifts" during the course of the day. Yes, my size was the determining factor. After one such shift I was relaxing and talking to someone or to a group of people in Culbertson Hall at Cameron House. It had been a long day, but the carnival in those days did not close until 11:00. At that point it was probably 8:00. I had been there twelve hours and I had been there, with many people, the afternoon and evening before. Everyone was tired.

Suddenly someone rushed into Culbertson Hall looking for me. I was told Rev. Fong "needed" me (my height and girth) right away. Sufficiently alarmed, I followed the messenger out toward the main yard where the festivities had come to a virtual halt. Down in the yard, ten feet below street level, a group of teenage boys had congregated. Moving onto the steps leading from Joice Street down into the yard was still another group of teenage boys. The groups were exchanging those signs, the signals that

indicated to all concerned (and nervous) parties that the danger of a violent physical confrontation between the two groups was inevitable.

As it happened I had exited Cameron House onto the same stairway where the leader of the group was now moving quite expeditiously down toward the other group of kids. I found myself right in the middle of where the "action" was about to occur. But, I was not by myself--just as I never am here. I walked directly up to the leader of the group on the stairs. He was, despite the growling, the glaring, and the snarling, the so-called "mean mugging", a very young kid. He was relatively short in stature; he probably weighed little more than some of the "hardware" he was carrying. He could not have been more than fourteen years of age.

I walked directly up to him. He stared at me incredulously. I guess he figured I just didn't know who he was. Neither did I care. I am told my stares can be rather awe inspiring too. Without saying a word, I took the child into my arms. I embraced this poor kid who was so small I was able to touch my opposite shoulders with my hands. He was in shock as I whispered in his ear, "You really don't want to do this..." I cannot recall what else I may have said to him. Too, I do not remember what his verbal response may have been. More importantly though, he and his group, what some might call a gang, turned around, moved back up the stairs and disappeared into the night...

That's called experience. Some dues were paid that night. Part of the preparation. Of course I was just walking around talking to people...

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September 9, 2005 From C.Y.A.  
*...They took me yesterday. It is different than juvenile hall, much different. I'm worried about everything. I just sit back and watch others act up. I still have my goals, but it will be a while, until I get my level. Things are tense here, but I'm staying away. Everything is about norte or sur. They tried to scare me yesterday by asking me if I gang bang, but I said no. I'm not afraid, just nervous around new faces. I have faith in God that he will deliver me from this place...*  
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October 2005

My wife and I are “empty-nesters” once again. She was, some months ago, so exceedingly thrilled with the prospect of clearing the nest that she paid the first and last months apartment rental fees for the most recent eaglet forced to fly on his own (with much assistance!). Most interesting about all this is the fact that my wife never gave birth to any child, by choice, something she points out to me on a regular basis. And, “You have to stop bringing ‘your work’ home...” Further, “I am glad to have my house back...”

Years ago, before the call to this ministry, I adopted two young men whom I first encountered when they were seventeen years of age. There is a five year difference in their ages; the elder of the two is now nearly forty years of age. They each resided with

us for varying periods of time while attending college before going off to start families and careers. They came into our life *and* home following brief (and some not-so-brief) extended visits to our home by several members of my family and some of my homeless and down and out friends. The woman has put up with an awful lot... And, she thought she was done.

Almost nine years ago I encountered, late one evening in juvenile hall, a rather small young man who had only recently celebrated his thirteenth birthday. He could neither read nor write at the time. At that point in his stay at juvenile hall he had received no visits from home, collect phone calls had been denied, no parent or guardian had come to appear in court. In essence, there was no home at home.

During the fourth court hearing, the judge angrily told the concerned parties, "I can't just release this young person into the street..." The offense had been such that he had intended to send the kid home, only requiring the completion of a small number of community service hours as sanction for the kid's inappropriate behavior. Somewhat reluctantly, it appeared at the time, the judge declared the kid a ward of the court and ordered out of home placement. At that juncture I asked if I might take the kid out of juvenile hall for a temporary leave. The judge who had been so visibly hurt by the ruling he had been forced to make, smiled and asked me, "When do you want him, and for how long?"

Before the young man was placed in a group home he came out of juvenile hall more than twenty-five times, to go to church, to go out to eat... On his fourteenth

birthday I took him to Santa Cruz. Even after he was “placed” we remained in contact--for good reason.

If home had been a disaster for this kid, so were the group homes. The first group home was closed following numerous complaints from parents about the administration of the program. My call to the probation officer was one of the first.

The young man was re-placed, this time in a group home maybe a mile away from the first facility. Same school, same activities, same new friends. And, I knew the owner of the group home. As much as I respected the owner of the group home, a gentleman of enormous integrity, he could not be on sight twenty-four hours a day. Unfortunately, some of the man’s employees where not among the most reliable and stable. As a matter of fact, one of the “counselors” at the group home, using his fist, hit the young man in the face, knocking him to the floor of his bedroom. The group home was closed. Justifiably so. Although not his fault, the fourteen year old was returned to juvenile hall to await still another placement.

Unwisely, yet skillfully, the kid sabotaged a potential placement when he was told, at that facility, he could have no contact for sixty days with *anyone* other than his probation officer. Despite the dreadful state of affairs at home, I asked the Court to return him there under close probation supervision and with my continued contact and input. The Court agreed to the arrangement and ultimately appointed me surrogate parent for educational purposes.

Mere weeks into the duration of the kid’s return to the mother’s home, I received

a telephone call from her, early one Saturday morning. "Come and get this kid or I'm going to call the police and send him back to juvenile hall." The young man had engaged in "horseplay" with his younger brother; a less-than-gaping hole in the wall had resulted. My wife and I went and got him.

For much of the time since, he has resided in our home. We sent him to a private school in Martinez where his profound educational deficiencies were successfully addressed, at least moderately so. The young man has traveled with me all over the United States. He now has two beautiful, sharp children in whose raising he is participating to an extent far greater than his own father's participation in his upbringing. A good deal more polish is in order in his life, but he admits, "...I don't know where I would be if..."

Around the time we went to pick up this kid from the mother's home, I received an urgent call from a living unit supervisor in juvenile hall. She asked me to see a kid in her unit who was experiencing significant difficulties with his stay there *and* with life in general. His life theretofore had indeed been sad and awful. Although the fifteen year old kid's good judgment was often lacking and his logic was more often than not flawed, he was a cunning and smart kid. He was indeed clever enough to know a good thing when he saw it. Eloquently enough, this kid appeared before the Court and brashly told the judge, " I want what \_\_\_\_\_ has got!" The Court appointed me surrogate parent for educational purposes--which for him had the same effect as adoption.

Eventually he too came to reside in our home, for the better part of three years.



Yes, we had two extremely hard-headed, yet precious, male teenagers, for whom we are not biologically responsible, right out of juvenile hall, carrying a ton of baggage each, living in our home *at the same time*.

And folks wonder why my hair has turned so gray over the past eleven years. But, without question, my wife loves me. She must, she has stayed with me (and this ministry) this long!

Blessings

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*If not us, who?*

I had just purchased for the thirteen year old group home resident, originally from North Richmond, the new pair of tennis shoes he had been asking for. The old ones were well used and worn out. So after we left the store and got into the car he asked if he could change his shoes. Based on the condition of the old shoes, I told him, "Sure, let's just toss those in the trash." When the old shoes came off, I almost fainted.

"Young man when you take a shower, do you *wash* your feet?"

"No, I just let the water fall on them."

"No. You are not a little boy anymore. You have to wash everything, from head to toe, with a wash cloth and *soap*."

"Nobody ever told me..."

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November 2005

Following a recent revival service I was sought out by a member of the church who asked if I might participate in a “wrap-around” meeting two days later. Wrap-around meetings are facilitated by therapists employed by the county mental health department. This multi meetings, oft-times many months activity, is designed to provide support, to *wrap-around* with nurture, resources and projected positive goals and outcomes in the lives of at-risk young people and their families. The ideal result: offenders to go back to the community, to school and to the family and do not re-offend; at-risk potential offenders to stay in the community, in school, function within the family setting and to not break the law.

Over the years with scores of residents and former residents and families of the Summit Center for Boys and the Chris Adams Girls Center, I have participated in probably more than one hundred such meetings. Meetings take place in the home, and in the several county mental health offices and in the community. Churches and the YMCA in South Richmond have on occasion hosted meetings at my request.

I have accompanied therapists to rat and roach infested homes where kids returned following periods of extensive residential treatment. In one instance the front steps of one such home broke under the weight of the therapist and me. More than once upon my arrival, groups of young drug dealers have run over to greet me--all former juvenile hall/OAYRF residents! In far too many instances it is more than apparent why

and how the young person found themselves in trouble. The environment from whence they came and then to which they return is hardly conducive to staying out of trouble, detention facilities, the cemetery...

Still, the battle to *overcome* is engaged and is being fearlessly waged.

The church member whom I have known for many years asked that I participate in this particular wrap around because the family situation was so significantly dreadful and pitiful that those assembled for the first meeting desperately sought assistance outside their small group. Although I do not know the “client” for whom the wrap around is intended to directly assist, the kid’s older brother, with whom I *am* acquainted, is on parole from OAYRF.

The client, an undoubtedly at-risk pre-teen, along with two siblings, is being raised by their grandmother. Such an arrangement is regrettably far too common these days. In this case though, the grandmother is in a wheelchair. The apartment where the family resides is a small two-story structure where the bedrooms and bathroom are on the second floor. There is of course no elevator. The grandmother has not been in position to use the toilet or to bathe in the bathtub for over two years! And, since she cannot walk up stairs, she is hardly capable of supervising the activities of her pre-teen and teenage charges. They simply go upstairs with or without “associates” and out the window as they please.

A shared wall between apartments was recently broken through on the second level. The wonderful neighbors came through the wall and removed many of this poor woman's belongings. The wrap around team was told a close relative emptied the grandmother's bank account. When water pipes burst some months ago the apartment was overrun with rats and roaches. There is no ramp on the front step. Consequently should there be an emergency, even far less devastating than say Hurricane Katrina, earthquake, fire, chemical spill, if this woman is at home all by her lonesome, well... Get the picture?

The landlord has been contacted. A list of concerns and a *two-year old*, on-going request for relocation to a one-story dwelling was recently *hand-delivered* to the office of the landlord. Grandmother and a daughter who assists her were told the documents were lost. "You all should have *mailed* them instead!"

So kind folks can you guess who, surely by now you are as piqued as I was, can you guess who the rather unresponsive landlord is? None other than the Housing Authority of Contra Costa County!

Please pray for this family and so many others whose life situations mirror this one. Not as uncommon as some might think--right here in the lap of affluence and luxury. Be assured the kids' chances here are presently limited at best, their prospects bleak...

This we seek to change. We are not giving up on this family. Too many obviously already have. The battle for *justice* is engaged.

December 2005

A year ago or so, I took a group of young people to see a movie. Rarely have I done this; I seldom go to a theater even by myself to take in a movie. Not much out there that interests me, for a variety of reasons. The movie I took the half dozen kids to see though was based on a true story, set in a community in this county. Certainly there is no reason to share the title of the flick. How many movies released by Hollywood in recent times have sought to describe some aspect of life here in Contra Costa County?

We enjoyed the storyline. All of us were at least moderately familiar with the “true-to-life” details of the account of a basketball coach in Richmond who benched his team several years ago because the team had failed to keep their grades up, at acceptable levels. It was particularly encouraging to have had the story told at all considering some of the serious problems that have and do plague that community.

Yet, once we left the theater and got into the van for a short trip to the nearest buffet, we discussed and evaluated the movie. We engage in this activity, evaluation, following every excursion, whether the trip is simply a day-long trip to church, or a six-thousand mile road trip.

“You know, we don’t talk like that!” “Yeah, and we definitely don’t dress that way.” “They sound like they’re from New York!” “And, that wasn’t Richmond High--Rev *where* was that?” “Hollywood” generally takes liberties, I told them. Although the consensus among the members of the group was that the movie was reasonably

“cool” they asked some very good questions. Most importantly the young people, all residents of Contra Costa County, asked, “Why didn’t they shoot the movie here?”

Considering the fact that the motion picture industry based in Southern California maintains a significant presence here in the Bay Area, why could the picture not be filmed, produced, cast and edited right here where the story is set and took place? Besides the “realism” inherent in filming “on location” the actual location, I thought about something else...

Are there not young people here, potential “extras” as well as even “supporting” actors that could have been *paid* for their work, just as their counterparts in the Los Angeles area? Too, quite a few adults in *this* area could have and would have benefited from the work. Additionally, a film production company spends money. Lots of it. Buildings and other spaces are rented. Folks shop. They require places to stay, food to eat. The last time I took the time to notice, restaurants, hotels, motels, schools, gymnasias and stores do indeed exist along the Interstate 80 corridor from El Cerrito to Crockett. And, what needs that could not have been met in West County, there are Berkeley, Oakland, San Francisco, in close proximity...not to mention other parts of this county.

Could not the economy (and individuals) of the western portion of this county have gained appreciably, however temporarily, just as did, it is assumed, the Long Beach community where the movie, I read somewhere, was filmed?

It appears Hollywood’s “liberties” cost us dearly in this case.

Justice?

January 2006

Several kids with whom I have worked for varying numbers of years all reach their majority in 2006. They all will have reached their eighteen birthdays, three in the spring, same month, within days of one another. Two others' birthdays fall in summer months.

One of these young people I first saw in diapers at his great-grandparents' home seventeen years ago. I have known members of his family since long before he was born. As this is written he is residing in a college dormitory in Chico. He earned his GED while in custody, literally within days of his seventeenth birthday. He has enrolled in classes at Butte College in Oroville. On the day of his release from OAYRF I picked him up. We were in such a hurry to get up to the school, he jumped in the van wearing "county clothes" and changed in a McDonald's bathroom along the way!

Another of these young people also recently passed his GED, while on the electronic monitor (JEM), also shortly after his seventeenth birthday. We first met when he was a very young, but large, teen that was angry, mad at the world and under the mistaken impression that he was truly *bad*. During our initial encounter, I asked him to show me his fists. I took both of his fourteen year old fists in my hand. I then pointed to

his head and I told him he had far more power in that big hard head of his than “in these little fists.” His mumbled response: “Nobody’s ever called my fists little.”

Judge Haight herself referred this kid to me following a court hearing. The probation officer who was directed by the judge to call me told me the judge felt this kid could benefit by a visit from me. Dozens of visits later, in juvenile hall, but more importantly those outside juvenile hall, this kid is still grateful to the presiding judge of the juvenile court for the referral. He is working. I took him to the interview--he was offered the job on the spot. He too intends to enroll in college classes for the spring semester, maybe at Butte College.

Two others currently on JEM are in school *and* preparing to take the GED. If they pass the exam, both intend to go up to Butte College in January. The elder of the two by five whole days, I have known since he was fourteen years of age. The tearful kid on his first of several visits to juvenile hall was brought to me upon his arrival. He told me recently he thought I was a policeman sent to extract a “confession” from him. He shared, “I didn’t know what that *collar* meant!” Nevertheless I have come to know this young man *and* his mother quite well. We have spent a good deal of time together. I think now he knows just what that *collar* represents.

The younger kid, by five days, I only met a year or so ago. However, he accompanied me on a six-thousand mile automobile trip, to Pennsylvania and back last January. And what torture I subjected him to. He was not allowed to wear a “do-rag” in the car; we had no DVD player and the radio was kept silent. He could not “sag” his



pants or wear gym shorts under them. And, he was particularly puzzled by the fact that while we were at a remote rest stop at 2 am I did not go to sleep until he returned to the car from the payphone fifty yards away. “Rev, you’re jus’ too *over*protective!”

He too is studying to take the GED. Once he has passed the test, it is his current desire to join the others at Butte College.

The eldest of this group of five is a week older than one above who couldn’t figure out what that funny collar was all about. Our paths first crossed when he was nine years old. My preliminary task during our first meeting was to dry the little fellow’s tears. There were no parents in his life. Maternal grandmother was legal guardian. Shortly after our initial contact, the grandmother died. He had no one. He drifted from group home to group home for more than a few years. I suggested to the probation department that the Summit Center might be an appropriate placement. I had shortly before been appointed by the Court as “surrogate parent for educational purposes” for the kid, the eighth of nine. He completed a tremendously productive year at the Summit Center. Then I enrolled him in a boarding school in Pennsylvania, thus the long drive last winter!

Transition to that setting was challenging at best. He did, though, earn reasonably good grades while away at school. He came home at the end of the semester and by summer’s end he announced his wish not to return to Pennsylvania. And, as it turns out, with all the high school credit he earned at Mt. McKinley School and at the boarding school, he was, at the beginning of this semester, only nine and one-half credits short of graduation. He is diligently working on that now, through independent studies.

He plans to enroll at Butte College in January and to reside in the dormitory in Chico. He wishes to go on from there to Morehouse College in Atlanta, the alma mater of one Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. One of our kids is presently attending Morehouse College.

Currently there are eight of *our* Contra Costa kids enrolled at Butte College for the fall semester. The above kids, along with maybe a half dozen others, are preparing to join this group of eight in the spring semester.

If they all continue to “follow through” *and* we continue to send *our* kids up there, we may have to request that a whole wing of one of the three dormitory buildings be set aside exclusively for the sons *and* daughters of the County of Contra Costa!

February 2006

“Life isn’t a bowl full of cherries.”

--”Miz” Kennedy

5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher,

Roosevelt School, inner-city Detroit

c. 1963

Ah, friends, the vicissitudes of life, indeed!

Do know that all the more than occasional compliments about the conduct of this ministry, the accolades and the overwhelming support from you the readers and of the community-at-large are touching and much appreciated.

However, as with everything else in life, onto this parade, every now and again, a little rain does fall. Generally the reactions, negative comments and complaints of a very small minority serve well to prove the old adage: “...*the leaves don’t fall too far from the*

*trees.*” In other words, more often, it has been my experience, the poor young people I seek to serve, did not get into the predicament they find themselves, all by their lonesome.

There are several cases in point. Some years ago I received a phone call from a mother who told me, “Come get this (14 year old) boy out of my house or I’m calling the police.” He had recently returned “home” following more than a year in juvenile hall and group homes. This kid and a younger sibling had engaged in horseplay, had put a hole in a wall; she wanted him sent back to juvenile hall. With the Court’s blessing I found a place for him to reside other than in juvenile hall. Ultimately though, he ended up living in our home for about five years.

Soon after the kid was removed from his mother’s home, the Court appointed me “surrogate parent for educational purposes.” I was able to enroll the functionally illiterate young person in a private school, at my expense. The school addressed directly this kid’s significant and profound emotional and learning deficiencies. Would not one expect the mother to be happy, pleased and even supportive? Quite the contrary in this instance. The mother called the school repeatedly, threatened the principal and accused the folks at the school of kidnapping her son...

Then there was the kid, maybe eight years ago, who was encouraged by me and by his juvenile court school teachers to complete his GED and to pursue college. While he was still in custody, I took him to visit, tour, register and enroll at Butte College. I visited him in the dormitory, sent him an occasional allowance, and brought him home to

visit at least once, provided him with hygiene items and even some clothing. But despite all this, he drifted back into old harmful and destructive patterns of drug abuse. And, guess whose fault this was, according to the kid's mother?

In a letter to the young man's former probation officer, the school department and the chaplain (among a multitude of others excluding herself and the kid's father) were responsible (guilty) of causing the young man to *aspire* to heights, those heights, beyond his reach...

More recently, a truly irrational and marginally intelligent mother made some particularly scurrilous accusations about me and my relationship with her son. Along with a van-load of other ranch kids, her son had accompanied me to visit Butte College. He was one among more than two-hundred such individuals to join me on that trip over the past 40 or so months alone.

This interesting parent, more than a bit disappointed by and with her, by then, eighteen year old son's lifestyle and sexual orientation, sought to, in reports to the probation department, portray me as a pedophile and predator. At the very hour I had, according to her, taken her son, against her wishes, to the Gay Pride parade in San Francisco, I was in the pulpit at a church in nearby Daly City, preaching to about one-hundred "witnesses" including six young people who I took on the Bay cruise following church. Her son was not with us. The vicious and outrageous nature of her proven lies was only overshadowed by her consistently foul, crude and profane manner...

Clearly it is often difficult to expect much from the progeny of such types of

individuals. And, yet many young people do “overcome” and are able to discard the unfair and unfortunate legacy of excess baggage.

God, though, has provided us with a spiritual *leaf blower*. The switch to that valuable tool is always in the *on* position...

Peace.

May 2006

*Kids are kids for a very short time...we have a chance to make a difference.  
Adults are adults forever...*

TV Judge Amy Gray, CBS  
Television program, *Judging Amy*

One kid's story:

*...Well I met my surrogate dad in 1998. Most of you know him as Rev. I was going through some hardships in my life at the time he came in to my life, but let me take this time to tell you a little bit about myself. Do to the restrictions of this autobiography I am not supposed to say my name, but I have no problem letting the world know who I am. My name is Earl Edwards. [Nevertheless names and dates have been changed]*

*I was conceived in San Francisco in a small part of a city called Lakeview. My mother's name is Andrea Pierce, and my biological father's name is James Edwards. The two of them met at a hospital they worked at in the City. My mom was older than my father by a year and a half. At the time he was eighteen and she was nineteen both still kids themselves on their way in to adult hood. [They] didn't know too much about raising a baby. My mom went into labor on February 14, 1983 I was born the following morning which was the 15 at about 3:30. The same day I was released to my mother [and] father. [I was] taken to the room I was conceived in. My father had some doubts about whether are not I was his or not. But surly there was no doubt in his mind when his adopted mother Addie Bell Edwards got me in to her hands.*

*She took care of me for a brief but unforgettable amount of time till I was about*

six years old. My mother and father were around but still young. [They] had a lot of growing up to do. Eventually my mom and father parted due to Moms wanting to be free. So eventually I was snatched up and took to Richmond California where I can became what you call a problem child. I say just acting out what I saw and was immune to.

At about eight I knew what powder cocaine was by busting into a room at my Mom's girl friend's house named Kim (it smelled like strawberries and they both were sniffing it through a straw). That same day me and Bobby Kim's son put on boxing gloves and boxed in the front yard. [I] didn't mention I liked to fight a lot because I saw it in the home.

Eventually we moved from there to hotels in Oakland. Mom had this white girl friend name Mandy. They both solicited sex on Mac Arthur. Mandy told on a man and they sent someone to cut here tongue out. I remember her running into the hotel room holding her mouth bleeding, high off God knows what, out of her mind. That's the day my Mom stopped selling her goods on the corner. She kept in contact with a few of her clients or dates, that's when things got worse. She started with crack. And then the beatings started and all the neglect. I was then moved into my cousin home Kim with her husband and her family. And she pushed her husband to do drugs and eventually he gave it up and she continued.

My mom was sentenced to eighteen to twenty-four months for check and credit fraud in a federal penitentiary. I was 9 years old. My cousin was supposed to take care of me but child protective services came to the house cause her husband beat me and my little cousin which was his son with a dog chain for striking matches. Now child protective services became involved. I was at school and had bumped my back on a chair and the teacher lifted my shirt and I said I fell but she didn't believe that. So I went to live with my father. That didn't work because he had two more children my brother and my sister and a new woman.

Mom finally got out. They had a custody battle and [the] judge said choose. I said both of them. Everyone laughed. But he said you only can choose one. I picked my mom because she was in there by herself and he had his family. Bad choice. Things only got worse. I was molested by one of her friends that was a man but dressed like a woman. To this day I hate all gay people. I ended up going to court but my mom said she was tired of the lawyer that was representing us. So I made it all go away and said it was a lie. They dropped the charges on the fagot and he got out of town. They had a sick relationship. Still I loved her unconditionally.

My dad also was sent to jail a little while after that for armed robbery. He held up a local store right next to the house and the police just knocked on the door and there he went. Where does that leave me no father no mother at nine years old. Dad was sentenced to 1 year to life, now on his 12th year in Napa State Hospital. I do keep in contact, but

Mom kept me away from him in my youth. No visits.

We moved back to the City in the Tenderloin district were I joined a Asian gain called tlc Tenderloin Crip. I met a football player name Derrick Crenshaw that played

*for the 49ers. He became a role model and eventually I got jumped out [of the gang].*

*I was 12. Mom was on welfare and after the rent was paid for the studio apartment was paid, she smoked the rest up. I had to get a job. A friend of hers took me to this car wash called jet hands I get a lot of tips. I ended up buying food for the week. And when I was asleep I got the money stole out my underwear.*

*So we move back to Richmond and we come to stay with a man named Reginald. [He] wasn't a handsome guy at all but he brought everything for her, jewelry, cars and more but nothing for me. I really didn't like dude, but one night my Mom was at work, she was trying to get it together working at an in home care taking care of elderly folks. And he had called his buddy and they were talking and I told her when she got home every negative thing he said. So one day he tried to tell me what to do, and he pushes me and I hit my head on the edge of the counter in the kitchen. (I blacked out). When I woke up he throw my Mom on the stove and I ran in my underwear to my uncle's house full speed and my uncle asked what happened. I was crying 'cause I was upset. My uncle drove over there and as he drove I ran back over there even though he told me not to go. He was kicking open his door and snatched him up and told him don't you ever touch my nephew again and let my sister out this house. Then we came and lived with him. Then things got worse. She left me with my uncle and eventually she went to prison a second time.*

*She and a friend were high and were fighting over drugs. He was a real good friend and a positive guy just had a bad habit. He was an artist. He drew things for me and taught me how to draw. She ran him over with a car and killed him. She did four years in Chowchilla. Those four years predicted my future. That's when I lost all hope. I started skipping school, getting on the Bart going to Nordstrom's stealing coats and selling them at the Del Norte Bart station smoking weed, drinking to selling drugs and doing a hole bunch of devilish things, having sex with different girls and fighting every day. My uncle couldn't much control me anymore and figured the law could. He was an alcoholic anyway.*

*I went to jail at 15...*

One former juvenile hall staff member used to refer to “those” kids as the hurt and hurting babies of our community...

Amen.

June 2006

Soft music was playing in the background; a slight breeze gently parted the drapes covering the partially opened window of the small room. Sounds of the city, an occasional horn, shouts of passersby in the street, scarcely interrupted the relative calm of the moment. The tranquil mood was one particularly conducive for reminiscence.

I remembered a grandmother who had accepted the responsibility of raising, or at least helping in great part to raise, her grandchildren. One grandson some years ago, then-residing in the now-closed Summit Center for Boys, was punished for late return from a weekend home pass. He had no choice in the matter. En route to Martinez from home, one Sunday evening, a tire on the grandmother's older model car literally disintegrated. The party was stranded on Highway 4. The kid was unable to return until the following morning. The grandmother had not the resources to replace that and the other tires on her car, her only means of transportation. Consequently, future earned and coveted home passes for the grandson, under the circumstances, were placed on indefinite hold.

Some years earlier I had replaced the tires on a big station wagon I had owned, with a set of nearly new tires my son had given me. The old tires sat stacked, collecting dust, in a corner of my garage. My wife was overjoyed as she watched me tie the set of four, a-bit-more-than-slightly-used tires onto the rack on the top of my little Toyota station wagon. Having checked the size of the tires, identical to those on the grandmother's car, I set out on a trip across the county to deliver, what was for that family, precious cargo. The kid's home passes resumed...



I remembered how, about the same time, after having worked for weeks with probation and the group home in Southern California where this kid's older brother resided, an agreement had been reached to allow the young man to attend Knoxville College in Tennessee. I chuckled to myself as I thought about how I had driven from Knoxville to Nashville airport to meet the kid coming in from Ontario. Flights into Nashville were considerably cheaper than into Knoxville. I had arrived a couple of days earlier, accompanied by fifteen other young, eager and energetic students. That trip and the one-hundred seventy mile trips from Nashville to Knoxville and back were beginning to take their toll. "Just *one more* trip back to Knoxville," I recall thinking, as I parked the van at the airport.

I arrived at the gate just as the first passengers began to disembark. In due time, all of the passengers had exited the airplane; the kid I had come to meet was not among them. The TWA agent was not impressed with my concern about the absence of the still yet-to-be eighteen year old. "Oh, he either missed the plane in Ontario *or* St. Louis *or* he got on the wrong flight... any number of possibilities," he replied almost gleefully.

"I really need to know *exactly* what has happened to the kid. You have a computer terminal there, you can track everything else-- Where is my kid, who has only flown one time prior to this trip? He is not a sophisticated traveler!"

Following equal portions of coaxing and prayer, the airline customer service agent, probably as fatigued and frustrated as I certainly must have been, finally determined that the kid had arrived in St. Louis and had been directed onto a flight that

took him directly to Knoxville. My trip to Nashville had been in vain.

The next day when I asked the kid about what had happened, he said, “When I got off the plane, ‘they’ asked me where I was going, I said ‘Knoxville’ and they told me to get on the next plane to Knoxville!”

By this time I had come to know the two brothers well, both of the kids’ parents, maternal and paternal grandmothers, assorted other family members and then finally a younger brother who, too, found his way into trouble. The youngest has become acquainted with his share of difficulties over the past several years. I have watched him grow mightily, almost exclusively in stature only.

Yet, in pondering and enjoying the positive and most amusing memories shared with this trio of male siblings and their family, I was thrust back to present realities by the urgency of the moment. The older kid failed to adjust to college life, preferring instead the old ways of the street. He came home, got into serious trouble. He currently resides in a California state prison. He will be away for a long time. The youngest of the brothers sits in juvenile hall waiting to be “delivered” to another of what has become a long line of group home placements. The middle child, with whom I spent the most time, a kid that accompanied me to church and to the “all-you-can-eat” buffets, a kid in whose “wrap-around” team I was a participant, graduated from the Summit Center program.

Although his therapist and I, among others, had high hopes for this young person, the kid was once more ensnared by the allure of the past. He was committed to the

California Youth Authority, paroled, violated and returned to custody. As with so very many, smart kid, few options, fewer chances. Still, he paroled a second time.

The walk down memory lane, however melancholy it had become, was concluded. It was indeed time to get down to the dreadful business at hand. I got up from the over-stuffed chair where I had been seated and slowly walked over to the object of my immediate attention. I was alone.

The middle child had been out of custody, not three weeks before he was shot. He bled to death, according to his mother, before he arrived at the hospital. I was standing before his open casket, thinking about what might have been...

I had come to say good-bye.

July 2006

Routinely I receive telephone calls from parents who report their children are out of control. Invariably they come to me seeking assistance after first calling upon staff in juvenile hall or the Orin Allen facility in Byron. Most have watched the “scared straight” programs on television; they are searching for similar type programs, comparable results with their children. Unless the kid has had contact with the police or probation, usually, with my encouragement and blessing, the parent is referred to the chaplain for support and aid.

A couple of weeks ago, as a matter of fact, I answered a call from a “loss

prevention specialist” at a local department store. A young person had been caught, first time at that location, shop lifting. The former police officer, his employer not wishing to prosecute, called the ranch. They, in turn, referred him to me. I welcomed the call and I invited the gentleman at the store to have the mother call me. We made arrangements to have her bring the kid to me, at a restaurant near his home. The self-described “frazzled” mother left the fifteen year old youngster with me.

We ate lunch together. I described for him, in rather graphic detail, as I have on numerous occasions for other kids in his position, the dreary, dull, yet attention-grabbing world of juvenile detention. The theme, simply put, is, “*Let me tell you about where you really don't want to go!*” Secondly, equally provocative, “*Just what do you need to do to ensure that you never go there?*” I much prefer to speak with the kids in the community setting, hoping and praying they never come to the hall. Some, however, have not paid attention and find their way to Martinez. Many with whom I have spoken, I never see again. Good thing!

A day or two after I spoke with this kid, I ran into another kid and his mother at the courthouse. I have known the mother for seven years. I was surprised not only to see her there with her son, but also to see how much he had grown since I had last seen him as a pre-teen. Congratulations were in order, as, following a short term on probation for a relatively minor offense, mom and son were going to court to have the probation vacated. Another good thing. I was in court when the judge took him off probation and wished him well. Mother and son exited the courtroom with huge smiles on their faces.

More recently, one afternoon, between meetings I sat down to listen to voicemail. Only fifteen messages since the day before--not bad. Two messages though, were from mothers, one the mother of the kid who had, a few weeks before, successfully completed probation. I could hear her choking back tears as she asked me to go see her son and to pray with him. I had, earlier in the day, glanced at the intake lists for the past several days. I already knew he was in the hall--for the very first time. I *expected* the call from his mother.

The other mother had, via voicemail, expressed her concern and that of her husband that their fourteen year old son was spinning out of control and they needed *help*.

Her initial call, from her home in one of the most affluent communities in the county, to juvenile hall was accepted sensitively and sympathetically. It was suggested that she call me. She did. We spoke. We set up an appointment for two days following the conversation.

In the meantime, in response to the first mother's request, I went to see the kid already in custody. First time in the hall: lots of tears, lots of fear, not yet having been to court. About an hour into our conversation, as he discussed his natural and understandable distress with the current predicament, I asked him just how he might describe this place to other kids. Specifically I asked him to address those kids seemingly hell bent on coming to juvenile hall. I told him in a couple of days I was going to be meeting with "Bobby" a kid whose misbehavior could soon escalate to a level where an

extended visit to juvenile hall might be warranted. Further I asked the kid to write an anonymous letter to Bobby, telling him just what this place, juvenile hall is all about.

The kid wrote most eloquently, shared with his permission as follows:

*Dear Bobby,*

*I can't tell you my name because I am in juvenile hall, where you don't want to be. This is my first time here and it's horrible. The rooms are tiny with no windows, the beds are hard and uncomfortable and the food is disgusting. You wear other people's clothes and don't change your pants (daily). You wear underwear that someone else wore yesterday, and the day before that, probably for years.*

*From the time I got arrested, they sent me to a holding cell in the police station for hours while they talked about my fate right in front of me. They drove me here, took all my clothes, made me shower, searched me and gave me my bedding. After that I went to my room and did absolutely nothing for the first time, because I couldn't.*

*My mom came to visit me a few days ago. It was the hardest part of being in here just seeing the look on her face. She couldn't believe I was here and couldn't stop crying and hugging me. Watching her leave and not being able to go with her made me feel like a prisoner. It made reality sink in that I actually couldn't leave and in fact was a prisoner.*

*When Rev. Tinsley came to see me and told me my mom had asked him to come see me I couldn't help but cry. I felt so bad about being here that I hated the idea of having to talk to a friend of my mom's. I felt like a little girl for crying, but he told me if they water proofed the door (of the room we were in) we would be drowning (from the volume of the tears) from all the boys he talked to that cried. I'm sixteen years old crying like a little kid.*

*Just a few weeks ago I saw Rev. Tinsley outside and met him for the first time I remember, but he knew me as a little boy when I was around ten. I never thought I would see him in here, under these circumstances.*

*From what I hear you need to get your act together so you don't end up here. I don't know exactly what you're doing but believe me when I say, it's not worth it.*

*Your Friend.*

Clever kid. Too bad this wisdom had to be learned the hard way. Maybe Bobby

will pay attention--and I will need to see him only once. Time will tell.

Peace!

September 2006

Nearly seven years ago a shy little fourteen year old and I became acquainted at the Orin Allen facility in Byron. In those days before the “Dorm 2,” the “little dorm,” was built, where the younger boys are now housed, this little fellow, who in this essay we shall call Dennis, was housed right along with all the older, bigger kids in “Dorm 1.” I have gleaned much about Dennis over the years, but precious little during that initial encounter. He was not much on trusting very many people, and for good reason. He had been abandoned by his parents and had resided in a half dozen foster homes and then in a series of group homes. A succession of promises made to Dennis by care givers, social workers, probation officers and others were either partially kept or entirely ignored, according to the young man. Undoubtedly he thought I was just another “grown-up” issuing empty assurances and guarantees...

We spoke a few more times before he completed his program at the ranch. But, since he had no home where he could return, he was sent once more off to a group home. Although we did not correspond during his time at a group home in another part of the state, he was surprised recently when I told him I had kept up with his progress. I knew several members of the staff at the group home who provided periodic updates on the young person’s progress.

Shortly before his eighteenth birthday, he asked to be returned to the Bay Area. He understood that upon reaching the age of majority, when the money stopped coming from the home county, it was the group home's practice to take the new adults to a motel and drop them off. He did not want to be "stranded" 350 miles from home. So, as I recall, he waited out the final days before his eighteenth birthday in juvenile hall, here. It is at that time I received a phone call from a particularly far-thinking and compassionate probation officer whose *lack of personal insecurity* allowed for his ability to ask for help.

"Do you know Dennis? Could you help him? The kid will be eighteen in a matter of days. He has earned the GED and essentially has no where to go..."

We became "reacquainted" and together we addressed the issues at hand. Not only did we discuss near-future living arrangements, we discussed education plans. Once provisions for housing were made and secured, and after he was released from custody, we began to focus attention on school.

"I'm not ready to go to college," was the constant and familiar refrain.

I seem to recall Dennis had made arrangements to live in the home of a former foster parent and to get a job. Consequently, I did not hear from him for several months. Apparently he had become tired of my consistent attempts to persuade this sharp, now eighteen year old to pursue higher education.

I was though, pleasantly surprised when I received a telephone call from Dennis. Although he was still convinced that he was not prepared to go to college, he told me he needed my assistance because he wanted to finish his high school diploma. The registrar



at the Martinez Adult School where I took him to enroll asked the same question I had asked days earlier, “Why?” The kid already had the GED, but he was determined. So all concerned echoed one another as we responded in unison, “OK, let’s get started.”

The process was nearly derailed early on when the young man got off the bus from Richmond directly in front of the Martinez Adult School. Backpack in hand; moving enthusiastically toward the school entrance, Dennis was stopped by a Martinez police officer who asked him, in a successful attempt to harass, “What are you doing in *my* town?” Dennis called to inform me. A simple telephone call to the Martinez police chief from a third party, who shall remain nameless, resolved the problem for us and maybe for other potential victims of that officer’s rather overzealous approach to law enforcement.

Dennis went on to earn the high school diploma. Two years ago he entered Butte College, although rather reluctantly at first. He completed a year there. He then decided to come back to the Bay Area for a year where he attended a local community college. With one semester to go before transferring to an out-of-state university, he decided to return this fall to Butte College. He had once again negotiated a living arrangement with the former foster parent, but that ended the day before we left to go back up to Butte College.

With the majority of his belongings in a dozen or more trash bags, we set out for Chico, on faith alone, because he had been unsuccessful in securing lodging for the final semester.

We had actually gone up to Chico a few weeks earlier to find an apartment for Dennis. The Board of Deacons of the Sojourner Truth Presbyterian Church had graciously provided some assistance to Dennis for housing, but everywhere he sought to rent an apartment, a co-signer was required. Two years earlier we had encountered the same problem at the dormitory. From their little corner of the planet, the folks could not fathom, "I don't have any parents, no grandparents, no uncles, and no aunts...no one to co-sign..."

This fall I have three others enrolled at Butte College, at this writing. The United Methodist Women of the Easter Hill United Methodist Church and the Juvenile Hall Auxiliary provided the initial financial means to move one of these kids into the dormitory. Another one, whose parents also have been more often than not, absent from his life, was the recipient of assistance from Church Women United, the Auxiliary, teachers in the juvenile court school at the hall (where he received his diploma the very day before his release to go to college) and from a prominent Bay Area television station news anchor. Fortunately I am in the position to cover the difference when we are a bit short. But, I am not willing or able to co-sign. Simply too many people--too much money involved.

So, without a place to go, except for the few days he could stay with me in a local motel, Dennis set out with me for Chico. The other kids were already there. Dennis had had some business to attend to here in the Bay Area.

During our three hour trip, Dennis brought up a topic he had always been hesitant

to talk about in the past. Dennis is approaching his twenty-first birthday. He asked me how to go about finding his biological parents.

“Judges, social workers, probation officers have all told me over the years, *they* couldn’t find them--so how can I?”

He gazed at me with a most fascinating look of incredulity on his face, when I suggested he call “411.”

“Rev, you make it sound so easy!”

“So, give it a try. Do you remember your father’s name? Where was he from?”

Moments later, in a scene right out of the book, *Finding Fish* and the subsequent movie, *Antoine Fisher*, Dennis told the party at the other end of the line he we trying to locate his family. He had recalled that his middle name was his father’s first name.

“Do you know a Theodore Baxter?”

“He’s my son.”

“About how old is he?”

“He’s in his fifties.”

“Does he have any children,” the crucial question.

“Why yes, there’s...,” the woman at the other end began to list her grandchildren by name, “and finally there’s Dennis Baxter.”

“I’m Dennis Baxter.”

“I haven’t seen you since you were four years old!” she shouted.

The grandmother gave Dennis his father’s “unpublished” phone number. The

father picked up immediately. The conversation, I could not help but overhear in a small car, was cordial, but guarded. Dennis was invited to come by to visit. The father spoke almost as though, to Dennis's obvious and justified annoyance, they had not seen each other for a week, not a life time. That evening we spent a good deal of time discussing that bitter sweet experience... Lots of questions will be asked. I pray the answers will be acceptable.

Sunday morning I took the kids, including Dennis to church in Chico. Dennis was so moved by the sermon, and the previous day's episode, that, on the spot, he joined the church, the historic Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Later that evening, in the virtual eleventh hour, he made contact with friends who were looking for a roommate in an apartment complex locally known as *the zoo*. He moved in the next morning, *without* a co-signer.

Once everyone was feed, on campus, in classes, provided with books, supplies, and places to live...I said a prayer of thanksgiving, then I steered my car south and west. There was a smile on my face.

October 2006

My mind wandered back, as it has too many times before, under these circumstances to the beginnings and evolution of a relationship. The morning after I had

been notified of his death, agonizingly, I re-read the following case study I had written about the young man several years ago.

*The call came in one late one afternoon from a probation officer who supervised a number of young people on “informal probation.” These young people, although experiencing some difficulty in life, have yet to reach the level where detention is necessary. But, certainly such is a very real and imminent possibility if behavior is not significantly improved. Under the supervision of the probation department the majority of these cases never come to my attention. This one did--before he ever was taken into custody. Therefore, “VC” is one of a limited few with whom I had contact prior to his initial stay in juvenile hall.*

*According to the probation officer, the young man had had his share of relatively minor difficulties, particularly in school. Unfortunately problems had been becoming more frequent and serious. Over the telephone, the probation officer indicated that she had referred the kid’s mother to me, in hope that working as a support team we might keep this talented young person away from juvenile hall. “I hope that’s OK with you...and here is the mother’s number. She is awaiting your call...”*

*I called the mother. She filled in some of the blanks where her son was concerned, long version. It is always a welcome opportunity to outreach to young people before they find their way into custody. So that afternoon I promised the anxious mother that I would visit the kid at his school the next day.*

*I dropped by VC's high school the next day. The school attendance officer sent a messenger to bring the kid from the cafeteria where he was having lunch. The same individual secured an office for us to meet. If memory serves, the office we used belonged to the police officer assigned to the school. I went into the office and patiently waited for the arrival of the seventeen year old student-athlete.*

*"I much prefer to talk to you here or at home rather than in the hall."*

*"Yeah?"*

*"I don't want you there."*

*"Me, neither."*

*"You don't ever want to be there."*

*"Naw, I don't."*

*"You won't like it there!"*

*"I know."*

*"Can we work together to avoid that?"*

*"Sure--I gotta go back to class now," he exclaimed as he put in and put on his "T/L" (thug life) accessories and walked out the door.*

*"I hope you are paying attention," I thought to myself as I left the school.*

*Following the conversation with VC, I spoke again with the mother and the probation officer. We were all hopeful that he paid attention. But alas that was not the case, hardly. I received another call from the mother. I asked if I might come by their home to speak with VC. "Please!"*

*Before leaving juvenile hall I stopped by the laundry area to pick up some "tools." I borrowed a juvenile hall "uniform" complete with, used of course, shirt, socks, shoes, pants, underwear--shirt color appropriate for the unit where he would be placed if behavior did not improve. Upon arrival I told the kid to go to his bedroom and change, from the skin out, into the juvenile hall clothing before we began our conversation. Both mother and father were present.*

*“This is the only time your parents will see you in these clothing other than in juvenile hall, when they come to visit you,” I told him once he returned to the living room, “And when we are finished, this will be the only time you will be able to take these clothes off voluntarily!”*

*Again, this time in the presence of his parents, we discussed where he did not want to be. I hoped that the message was getting through to him. I was encouraged a few days later when he told me that after he had changed back into his own clothing and after I had left his home, he immediately took a long shower.*

*“I got in the shower and I scrubbed my body until my skin was raw...”*

*A good sign initially. Then I got another telephone call. Now VC was truly “skating on thin ice.” This time I actually took him to juvenile hall. There I asked one of the probation staff in the intake unit to come out into the lobby and give the kid still another perspective on “where you don’t want to be...” Perhaps he heard but did not listen because in a matter of days, the kid’s mother called me at 11:30 p.m. on a Friday night.*

*“Reverend, they got him.”*

*“Who got him?”*

*“They arrested him at school, just a little while ago--they said they’re taking him to juvenile hall.”*

*I called the intake unit and asked the staff to call me when he arrived so that I might speak with VC. At 2:30 a.m. the call came.*

*“Well, young man what do you think about that place so far? Young man, I will see you tomorrow afternoon.”*

*The next afternoon I did go by juvenile hall to see him. He was embarrassed.*

*“Well, young man was I lying to you about this place?”*

*“Rev, I hate this place...”*

*“You are going to hate it a lot more before this is all over.”*

*Hate it he did, but not before he spent several considerable periods of time in juvenile hall and then an extended period at the Orin Allen facility.*

*Yet, he earned his GED and his high school diploma while in custody. He expressed interest in going to Knoxville College and did go. Later he applied to and was accepted at Morehouse College. The folks there gave him a tennis scholarship. He called to tell me the good news. Talk about landing on one’s feet.*

I was asked by VC’s mother to participate in the funeral on Friday morning. I did so gladly. Another young person who had also once been in the system attended the funeral. Maybe a year or so ago I had introduced this kid to VC via the telephone because he had expressed an interest in also attending Morehouse College. In June, just before VC's death this kid had gone down to Atlanta to visit the campus (and VC) and to prepare to enroll this fall semester. They proudly called me from Atlanta to tell me they were together and that they were looking forward to school in the fall.

During the funeral I received an urgent call from juvenile hall. A kid there in custody had just been informed that his uncle had been murdered in San Francisco the night before. Rather than go to the cemetery, I went back to the hall to attend to that business. I asked the young man who had gone down to Atlanta to leave Richmond with me; he refused. He preferred to go on to the cemetery and then back to the church for the



repast. There at the church is where he was stabbed four times, in the chest (just missing the heart), in the side (puncturing and collapsing the lung), and twice in the back! He was airlifted by helicopter to John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek. I was just leaving Juvenile Hall when I received a call from the kid's brother--someone at the scene had called him. I met the family and the police at John Muir where we spent the next three hours in the emergency room...

December 2006

The probation officer called to ask if I might check on a kid on her caseload. The kid had been pretty much "on his own" in the street since we was nine years old. The only sign that the now-fourteen year old kid had reached puberty was a bit of "peach fuzz" on the chin and that slightly more noticeable hair above the lip. The kid was so tiny that during his first intake into juvenile hall, he was asked to stand on a box for the booking picture. Even then, the stationary camera just barely recorded the kid's full face in the field of view. The probation officer was concerned about the kid's safety because he had recently been severely beaten, near death, in the streets onto which he was about to be released. "Home" was hardly where the heart was; life for this child had been dreadful.

I was called upon to go out into the community to bring the mother to juvenile hall to collect her child and bring him home. Upon arrival at juvenile hall, she was unable

to produce any form of identification. Fortunately, wisely, the probation officer had authorized the child's release to the mother *or* to me. I took mother and son home, only to be asked for money, ostensibly for food, by the mother. The look on the kid's face more than reflected the tremendous shame he felt vis-à-vis his mom's behavior. I gave her a few dollars. However, in subsequent encounters, she was provided grocery store gift certificates or food from the food pantry where kids, including her son, had performed community service.

The kid, ever over-compensating for his diminutive stature, while on the electronic monitor, did indeed perform court-ordered community service under my direction. He came to church on numerous occasions. He ate well, for his size, when we were out; there was little food at home. Provided vital and needed assistance, the mother was able to, at the court's insistence and with probation's persistence, re-enroll the kid in school. I helped the family acquire some of the essential school supplies and clothing so that the kid could comfortably take advantage of the opportunity afforded him.

Owing to a combination of on-going and profound difficulties in the young man's life, as he knew it and had lived it, once more, school, home, electronic detention, sobriety, discipline were too much for the confused and frustrated kid. He cut off the monitor, left home and went back out into the streets. He was AWOL for months. A warrant for his arrest was issued. I heard *about* him but not *from* him.

I sent word out into the streets via other kids that he should call me. Given to his fear, embarrassment, and confusion, I received no response to my appeals. My fervent

hope and prayer was that he would be taken back into custody before more danger might befall him.

In due time, the prayer was answered. Upon his return to juvenile hall, he fell tearfully into my arms.

More so, I believe, than for any other reason but to save this delightful--in spite of himself-- little kid's life, the probation officer recommended to the Court that he be sent to the Orin Allen program in Byron for a prescribed period of time. The Court followed the recommendation. The time there has been especially difficult for him. It may appear perhaps, to all concerned parties, those options and opportunities for this kid, beyond the gates of the "ranch" are precious few. We cannot and must not give up on this dear creation of God--his plight is not unique.

Keep the Kleenex handy, it will be needed as you read the letter he wrote and personally delivered to me. The following is duplicated exactly as he had written it.

*Dear Rev. Tinsley, Rev I myself need help, I need help to start a new life. I just need to get this program over and get out of here. Rev when I get out I need to get baptize so I can get clean and wish all my crimes away. Rev Im sorry for Harting your fullings it aint like its your life but you care for me and you want to see me doing something in life. Rev I jest need help because I don't what to indup died or in CYA and I deinitly don't what to leva my mom. So please help me thank you I love you Father.*

I don't want him to "indup died" either!

January 2007

Ryan is a remarkable young man. Abandoned at birth by his father, mother in and out--mostly out, of his life, he has spent considerable time in foster care and in group homes. Other family members have tried to step in, maybe reluctantly, on occasion, but they are occupied with their own lives and activities. He reached his eighteenth birthday midyear 2006. A sharp and intelligent young person, Ryan graduated from high school eight weeks after his birthday. His future was, from his perspective, uncertain--at best. With *minimal* family support, *no* home to go to, *no* money, *limited* wardrobe, acquainted with, and accustomed to, a lifetime of rejection, abandonment and neglect, it was no wonder that the kid responded to my discussions about the future, immediate and long-term, with stark incredulity.

All of his teachers, including Sojourner Truth Presbyterian Church, (Richmond) member, Gwendolyn Shelton, frequently and enthusiastically told me of Ryan's scholastic potential and intellectual prowess. I began to speak with him on a regular basis about the idea of going away to college, about what he might wish to do with his life and how I could help him go about achieving life goals and objectives. Initially, and for some time, it was as though I was simply "talking at" him. "Rev, this ain't possible," was a common refrain. The several hundred kids I have had the same discussion with over the years, almost to a person, have responded similarly, nearly identically.

As usual we must not be deterred, by them or anyone else, when the very lives of our young people are in jeopardy. For the past one dozen years, a bible in my office has been opened

to Proverbs 22:6, “Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.” [NRSV]. Sometimes we must simply pick up the slack, because too many of our children are *untrained*, *poorly* trained, *mis*-informed, *mal*-nurtured and *mal*-nourished, *have not been* loved, encouraged or respected...

Ryan did indeed go away to school, to Butte College. First semester was a tad *rocky*. Although he was eighteen years of age, his short stature and particularly young look attracted the attention of overzealous police in Chico. The young man was stopped on several occasions, was compelled to produce identification, because, “you don’t look eighteen.” An overzealous response on Ryan’s part to being shoved by another student landed him in more than a bit of hot water. Thank God, we have, for the most part, put that to bed. Yes, the first semester was interesting...

Nevertheless, the day after Christmas, a week into the winter break, I took Ryan to the Sacramento airport (at 4:30 a.m. ouch!) where he boarded an airplane to Houston connecting to a flight to San Jose, Costa Rica. Yes, the now *seasoned* college student has gone to Central America to study Spanish language and local culture for three weeks in a school sponsored class/program.

Three days after his arrival, Ryan called me. Of course, I had specifically asked for a call *upon* arrival. Oh well! Anyhow, I was just thrilled to hear the enthusiasm in his voice as he described the activities of the preceding days! I particularly enjoyed, “Rev, I thought they made a mistake when I (exchanged) \$20.00 and they gave me 10,000 (Costa Rican Colon)...I thought I was rich...”

My child, you are. More than you know.

February 2007

Recently I shared in this space a note from one of the kids who is currently residing in Byron at the Orin Allen facility. I understand many callers to the Interfaith Council office have expressed heartfelt sympathy and concern for the young man. This was, of course, not the first time over the past dozen years I have reprinted letters written to me by hurt and hurting young people in our midst. What I shall now share are excerpts from a letter I received in the mail just a few days ago. Dated January 9, 2007, the correspondence comes from a young man in another state, a couple of thousand miles away.

Some years ago, when the writer of the letter was thirteen or fourteen years of age, (he will some be 20) I was contacted by a great-aunt and her brother, the young man's grandfather. The kid to whom I refer, and his younger brother, had been "rescued" from his parents at a tender age by the great-aunt. She brought, I seem to recall, the kids to California and raised them as her own. When this kid reached puberty, he became defiant, went out into the streets and proceeded to get into trouble with the law. Somebody at juvenile hall gave the family my phone number.

The kid performed community service under my direction while on the electronic monitor, came to church with me--certainly enjoyed going out to eat after both activities. Still he seemed committed to continue to get into more trouble. The Court rewarded his unacceptable behavior with periods of confinement in juvenile hall and at the Orin Allen facility. I remember he generally behaved himself abysmally. His issues could have been

or might have been addressed more effectively and successfully in a different setting, but...

Anyhow, once the kid “finished” that program, and completed parole, he left California and went back to find his parents in another state. I knew where he was. I am native to the area as well, and therefore quite familiar with the place where he had gone. The kid called me shortly after his relocation and left a message. I returned the call. The father took my call but did not communicate the fact to the kid that I had called. “He don’t like positive people...” I was told by the kid over the phone from a “juvenile correctional facility” operated by that state’s equivalent to our Division of Juvenile Justice (formerly, California Youth Authority).

“Rev, can I write to you?” he asked over the phone. Excerpts of the first letter, just as he wrote it, follow:

*Rev,  
Wat up? Not too much. I’m happy I can hopefully stay in contact with you. Your all my hope. Thank’s for helpen me Rev. that really mean’s a lot. Its been a long time. I thought you forgot about me. I’m happy you didn’t. God got his reasons, rather good or bad. This jail life is old. Some people just don’t listen. I miss you Rev. I hope I see you again. Soon as I get off parole, I’m movin back to California. I’m working on geting my GED. It aint lookin so good as of this moment. I’m gon call you most likely every Tuesday around 2:00 pm are time...I’m homesick. I miss California. I still talk to my family out your way. Sometimes my family seem’s like there threw with me. I don’t blame them. All I’ve put them threw. I’m learning Rev. It aint easy but life aint easy eather. I aint movin wit my family in [this state]. They failure. I really need your help on that...I’m tryin to start a new life. My family done wit me and I’m done wit them. It’s my falt. I man up...Send me some pictures. We can have only 5 at a time. If you can, send me a picture or postcard of the Bay and one of you. Can you send me some money? It has to be sent by money order. I hope I aint asking for too much. If I am just don’t send those thing’s to me. I love you Rev. And I miss you. Thank’s for everything...I’m going to talk to you soon and I will keep in contact...I promise.*

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March 13, 2007 From another young person residing in an  
"out-of-state "Juvenile Correctional Facility"  
Rev,  
...I'm 20 years old, I have a child, I have a daughter...she is two years old. I've been  
in and out of jail my whole life...My (daughter) and my baby mother...is the only good  
thing that ever happened to me. Out of me being locked up for along time made me  
realize like man its time for a change. I want to go to college so bad. Rev I been working  
on my GED for awhile now...I know that if I go back to (hometown) I would either go  
back to jail or end up dead. I just want to go some place for to start my life over, raise my  
daughter in a better environment, go to church, graduate out of college and have a good  
life, u know? I just need to start over.  
\*\*\*\*\*

March 2007

The "after care" project to recruit and to monitor with the goal of retention, continues to  
be "work intensive" and as has always been the case, work in *addition* to ministry to the  
young people in custody and to their families. Currently young people with whom I have  
worked attend several schools across the United States, with the largest number presently



enrolled at Butte College. Visitations to colleges in the South and Midwest are planned this spring for students preparing to complete their community college experience and to transfer to four year institutions. Although in the past the majority of students have failed to complete their courses of study, failed to remain on campus more than a semester or two, the current group of students, those at Butte College and elsewhere, have excelled in that area, in simple terms of longevity *and* in terms of grades.

Five of the fifty-five students who enrolled at Knoxville College, beginning in 1998, have since been murdered. Several others of the remaining fifty are serving long state and federal prison sentences. However, one of the original Knoxville “kids” is presently completing Bible College in another state. Another is married (I officiated), has three daughters, and he and his wife recently purchased a new home. He is a licensed barber and has a job in the telecommunications industry. Although most of the group had been out of contact, occasionally some surface from obscurity and call just to “check in.” Their calls are always pleasant surprises. Now and again the caller shares something along the lines of “going to Knoxville was the most important turning point in my life.” Others have kindly and sincerely offered, “You saved my life...”

The juvenile court schools have, in most instances in preparation for this program, prepared and tested more GED candidates, successfully, in the past ten years than in, I understand, the forty previous years combined. Additionally, many young people have

earned the high school diploma. Some have earned both. Unfortunately, the probation department has put a damper on the earning of the GED and the diploma, citing an inability to place young people in out of home settings once they have completed high school.

Recently an EOPS counselor/TRIO assistant director accepted an invitation to go out to dinner with me and the students at Butte. A juvenile court judge and the two juvenile court school principals have been invited to accompany me to Butte College and to the dormitory in Chico. All parties have agreed to come; a date is to set in the near future. Tours of both facilities will be conducted by students, who in all cases, were once students in the court schools, several *very* recently, and defendants in juvenile court hearings presided over by this judicial officer.

The climate on campus has improved immeasurably. The students' level of comfort is reflected in telephone conversations, text messages, and most importantly in their grade reports. They are eating well and not getting into trouble. The support staff at Butte College, in particular, those who deal directly *with* and *to* the needs of "my students" are beginning to look at "those kids" as "our students" as well. The heretofore animosities and discomfort are, following years of effort, experience and hard work, fading into welcomed oblivion. The kids, this population whose future, the data indicated, was bleak at best, are now exposed to the mainstream institution of higher education, a place where,

they could not hope to venture, as society had dictated, or so they (and *too* many others) were led to believe...

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A Letter of Recommendation

March 7, 2007

I have known [this young man] for seven years, in fact, since he was fourteen years of age. It has been my privilege to witness his growth and development from that of a shy, rather confused and directionless young teenager to a self-assured, focused, strong and delightfully informed young adult. He is respectful and talented. I care for him and love him as one of my own children.

In the past several years, [he] has earned the GED, and a high school diploma. All this has occurred despite the fact he was abandoned by his parents and spent the majority of his childhood years in foster home and group home settings. Additionally, of late, and most worthy of note, he has taken college classes at Contra Costa College in San Pablo and at Butte College in Oroville.

This young man has persevered and has accomplished, in a short period of time, more than he and others may have expected for him in life, given the nature of the circumstances of, and the dreadfully real deficiencies inherent in, his upbringing.

Based upon what I have observed, and continue to observe of and about [him], it is without reservation that I recommend him to [your organization] for review and consideration. He is an outstanding candidate ...

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April 2007

There are folks out there whose worldview is that we always *must* maintain detention facilities--"if they do the crime, let them do the time..." and continue building, *bigger and better*. "They" also commonly, it has been my experience, somehow view such an approach as the most efficient and effective way to deter juvenile (and ultimately

adult) crime. Of course rarely are *their* kids in "the system." It appears perhaps, rarely too, do significant numbers of these people take into account (if they bother to be aware of) such issues as discrimination, disproportionate minority contact (DMC), racial/ethnic disparity, and overrepresentation within the juvenile justice system. Never mind the fact that according to the Center for Juvenile and Criminal Justice, CJCJ, "Throughout California, **juvenile crime is down**...today juvenile homicide arrests are at their lowest level since 1967, overall violence at its lowest level since 1969, and rape and felony arrests at their lowest level since statistics were first reported in 1960.Statewide, juveniles are responsible for the lowest felony arrest rate since 1960...The **decline in serious crime...come(s) at a time when Los Angeles County [for example] is utilizing incarceration within the Division of Juvenile Justice (formerly CYA) much less than it did a decade ago.** In fact, Los Angeles has reduced its use of DJJ commitments by 77 percent since 1993...**Alternative placements available to juveniles may provide examples of better public policy...**" Interestingly enough though, the CJCJ report goes on to say that, "Meanwhile, the generation raising these juveniles is experiencing an immense increase in felony arrests, both in Los Angeles and throughout the state. The same population is being incarcerated at a rate that is 1200 percent more in 2005 than it was in 1980. California adults, ages 40 through 59, are now incarcerated at a rate that has grown more quickly in the last 25 years than the rates of any other age group...[yet] **the enormous expansion in incarceration rate among [this group] has had no effect on reducing the crime rate** among that population...it is time to consider the successes

[through *appropriate alternatives--as available to juveniles*] of those populations whose crime rates have decreased.” (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, August 2006. Available from [www.cjcj.org](http://www.cjcj.org). Internet accessed 21 August 2006) [emboldened emphasis added]

Senge’s archetype “Fixes that Fail” [Senge, Peter M. *The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Doubleday, 1990], appears to describe the *failed* phenomenon taking place here. S-o--o, juvenile crime rate is down, but we *still* spend money to build bigger and "the best" juvenile detention facilities, to "keep up with the trends--*what trends??*" And, adult crime rate is up, incarceration rates are up, there exist precious few empire sponsored methods/approaches/attempts to "rehabilitate" and we build and, propose to build more and still more prisons. (More money for prisons than for schools and colleges!). According to CJCJ, massive prison building programs and increased incarceration rates have not reduced the crime rate among the offender group as illustrated above. It appears as though alternative methods to incarceration of juveniles have worked, as reported in Los Angeles County, likely elsewhere. Is this not a better "fix" than continuing to endlessly lock folks up?

To be “fixed,” though, not what the “powers-that-be” have in mind for this population. As this is written, the governor of this state is proposing the building of two new prisons, at \$550 million each. These figures do not include initial, short term and long term staffing, administration, and maintenance costs. Approximately 172,000 adult Californians reside in state prison facilities. Imperial interests and thinking control the

powerful prison guards' union, an organization that hardly seeks to eradicate itself. On the contrary, these wise folks are more than aware their job security corresponds, *directly*, to an adequate supply of new clientele. So, from where does this new client base come? Juveniles do not remain juveniles forever. What happens to the adult system, if, the juvenile population is "fixed" and does not "graduate" to the adult system? This presents a very real problem for imperial interests. "Failure" is, I submit, a matter of perspective.

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### Affidavit In Lieu of Parent's Information

Name: Chambers James A  
SS# \_\_\_\_\_  
Last First MI

The above named student has applied for financial aid and has indicated that he/she is unable to provide us with parent information due to extraordinary family circumstances.

Please provide a brief statement regarding your knowledge of the student's family history and relationship with parent(s):

***Mr. Chambers is effectively an orphan. His mother is deceased. She died when he was nine years of age. His father's whereabouts is and has been unknown. There has been no contact between Mr. Chambers and his father whatsoever since the age of nine or ten. A succession of other relatives sought to raise Mr. Chambers before he became a Ward of the Court.. Wardship was terminated on or about his eighteenth birthday.***

Why do you believe that the student is unable to provide parent(s) information for financial aid purposes?

***They are not present.***

Last date the student:

- A) received financial support from parent(s)? 1996 ??
- B) lived with parents? see statement above

How long have you known the student? Five years

What is your professional relationship with the student? Pastor and surrogate parent  
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May 2007

Most weeks I “deliver” no fewer than thirty or forty “sermon-ettes” that, often last longer than the tradition sermon preached from the pulpit. The recipients of these “mini” sermons are those young people in custody *and* those with whom I continue to work , in many instances, well beyond their last periods of confinement in juvenile facilities. “After care” for some has lasted for, now, twelve years!

It is, of course, most pleasing to know that young people, (the oldest I have worked with in this setting are now approaching the age of thirty), do *at times* pay attention to that which has been shared. In many instances folks who have not been around for years will call and say thanks for the assistance rendered during difficult times in the past. There are, however, a group of about fifty, (and still increasing), individuals who are in constant contact. Some are away in school, others are engaged in gainful employment and raising

families. Some are slowly, but surely I think, moving in that direction, as they move into their mid-twenties. Change indeed has occurred, and, is occurring.

One Saturday afternoon last summer I was in a luncheon meeting down on the Peninsula when I received a frantic telephone call from one of “my kids” that was at the time just short of his twentieth birthday. We had first met in Byron when he was fourteen years old. Abandoned by parents, he had lived in foster care for most of his life. He got into trouble and spent most of his teen years under the supervision of the probation department. While in custody he earned the GED. Afterward he went on to adult school and earned his high school diploma; he has since completed two years of college.

It seemed the young man had been walking across a local community college campus when an alleged minor infraction attracted the attention of a campus police officer. Although the infraction *may* have warranted a citation, the officer apparently proceeded to over react. The young man sustained cuts and bruises to his face and broken teeth. He called me to immediately tell me how his head was viciously “smashed against a bus bench,” how he was bleeding and holding pieces of his front teeth in his hand.

I directed him to take down the names of the several witnesses and then to proceed to the nearest hospital, a short distance away. He again called me from the emergency room where doctors treating him had called in the local police to file a report. They also took



detailed photographs of the wounds. When the city police officers determined that the injuries to this young person's body had been at the hands of the campus police, they left, indicating the matter was outside their jurisdiction. Throughout the several exchanges, the person with whom I was meeting sat in stunned horror and silence with her mouth wide open.

The emergency room physician directed the young man to seek emergency dental care for the broken tooth and presented him with a rather substantial medical bill. During our third or fourth call of the afternoon, I stressed to the young man that he needed to do exactly as the physician had advised where the tooth was concerned. And, I told him he needed to make an appointment the first thing on Monday morning with the college president. I was quite encouraged on Monday when he again called to tell me he had been to the dentist and he had made an appointment with the college president for the following day. The teeth were repaired. The cost was significant.

The young man appeared before the college president, at the appointed time, with a witness list, photos and medical bills in hand. He later told me the president seemed a bit unconcerned about the issue until the president was told, "I'm one of Reverend Tinsley's kids." "The president," according to the young man, "moved closer and then really began to pay attention..."

A report was filed. An attorney was contacted. A formal complaint was filed. At this writing, attorneys for the defendant have offered a reasonably adequate out-of-court settlement. The medical and dental bills will be paid.

More importantly, though, a formerly impatient, impulsive, poorly informed young person *listened, paid attention, followed through and learned how to do things in an acceptable, legal and correct manner.* He learned to function, in this instance, the way folks in the mainstream function. We could not have even begun to expect such a calculated, meticulous response and execution, in a similar situation, in the not-so-distant past. I am so very proud of him. Change, notable and remarkable change, indeed has occurred. A colossal stride in the right direction! Most encouraging!

September 2007

The following is an excerpt from a recent letter of appeal to a state licensing agency submitted by a system “alum” one of “my kids” who is working hard to get things on track in his life and the lives of his children:

Nearly five years ago when I was nineteen years old, I was arrested and charged with four felony counts...the Office of the Public Defender... successfully advocated in my favor before the Court, and with the district attorney reached an agreement where two of

the counts were set aside and the remaining counts were reduced to misdemeanors. I served 27 days in custody and I served the remainder of a six month sentence on county parole, home detention, under the supervision of the sheriff's office alternative detention unit. I resided in the home of my surrogate parents...Upon the successful completion of county parole, it was determined by the Court that I serve a period of two years of summary (court) probation. Over that two year period I had no contact with any police agency, went to school part-time, but had, because of my record, few employment offers. If not for the patience and generosity of my surrogate parents, who supported me financially and allowed me to continue to reside in their home rent free, I don't know where I may have been. The Court had also stipulated that once I successfully completed the two-year informal probation, I could petition the Court to have the record of the misdemeanor convictions expunged.

The record remains because sometime prior to the conviction, I had had a traffic ticket. The fine now is over \$1,500. Since I have been unable to work on a steady basis, I have been equally unable to pay the ticket off. I have found myself in a "catch 22" situation, no work--I cannot pay off the ticket, I do not pay off the ticket, I will not be offered employment.

I am working very hard to support my four children. And, I am preparing to be married. Mine was a difficult childhood. However, I have had opportunities none of my numerous

siblings have had. I seek to continue to be a positive role model for my children and in the community for other children less fortunate than my own. I want to give my children more than I had as a young child because, I once was among those who are less fortunate. I seek to give back to the community, ultimately through a career in law enforcement. I simply need a chance.

I made a mistake once that I had sought to make right. I got burned and I learned from that experience. I humbly request a reconsideration of the bureau's decision to deny my ability to function in the capacity of \_\_\_\_\_ in the State of California.

\*\*\*\*\*  
"Minor's Request" (Juvenile Hall)  
Date & Time: 9-14-07 9:10 pm  
Name of Minor: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name of staff involved: reveren  
Subject: i need reading glasses  
Statement: I already went to the nurse. And they said the only way they could give me glasses is if I'm almost blind so please give me some reading glasses.  
\*\*\*\*\*

October 2007

What follows is a letter I wrote to a young person I once worked with here. He left California, returned to his native state, and proceeded to get into rather serious trouble there. He currently resides in a “juvenile correctional facility” of that state’s equivalent to California’s Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) (formerly CYA). Embarrassed, he hesitated to write to me for almost 18 months. Finally he swallowed his pride and put pencil to paper and asked for my assistance, present and future...

Over the years I have received and responded to hundreds of letters from young men and women, once here, who have been unfortunate enough to have “gone on” to other unpleasant places for long periods of time.

January 20, 2007

Dear V,

I hope this finds you well. As you can see I have received your letter of the 9<sup>th</sup>. I am still a bit surprised that you actually thought I could have forgotten you. All those early morning community service activities, the court appearances, meetings with your family members, time in Martinez and Byron, numerous conversations with the p.o., and teachers--I would have to be absolutely senile not to remember you and your hard-headed self!! ☺

I am so very glad to hear you are working on the GED. I do hope you are able to get that, and then continue with your education. You know, V, right now I have six kids in school at Butte

College...As a matter of fact one of the kids at Butte actually went to Costa Rica over the Christmas break to study Spanish language and Central American culture... A whole lot better than what the streets, Rapper Mac Stupid and Thugston B. Dummy have to offer. I do hope and pray that you have figured that out. There is indeed no future in the kinds of activities you have engaged in to get yourself into the position you are in presently. You just simply are not very good at being bad. The good news is, this situation is not forever. It is likely that if you pay attention to the folks there, learn as much as you can, take advantage of all the opportunities offered you, you will be able to get your little butt in gear and become a contributing member of the society, an asset rather than a liability. This is my hope and my prayer for you. I offered you my assistance to you (and to your family) a long time ago. That commitment is still good.

Your brothers here have asked about you at times. They knew you had gone (out-of-state). When I was (there) last year (I had two kids with me) we wondered about your whereabouts. Many of the ones here are really starting to put things in order in their lives--many who have not are no longer with us. As a matter of fact, Son, I lost a record five in five consecutive months last year. I do pray that that is not repeated, not this year, not ever! I don't want this for you either. Keep that hard head up high. Behave yourself, pay attention, do a good program and be careful.

Grace and Peace!

Love,

Rev. T.

Another letter. It is not uncommon that I address the court on behalf of young people, even after they reach adulthood. The following is, I think, informative and self-explanatory.

January 29, 2007

Superior Court of California

In and for the County of Contra Costa

To the Judge presiding in the case of J.O. (081689)

Your Honor:

“J.O.” was born to a drug abusing mother from whose custody he was removed two weeks after his birth. It is reported that the mother who had not seen Mr. O since he was two years of age, has recently died. The assumed father has never been present. Paternity has never been proven. The child was placed in foster care with the maternal grandmother. She died when Mr. O was about thirteen years of age. His entire teenage years following the death of the grandmother have been spent in a series and succession of group homes and in juvenile hall.

When Mr. O was fifteen years old the juvenile court on the recommendation of the county office of education appointed me his surrogate parent for educational purposes. He is the eighth of nine young people the Court has, over the years, appointed me to serve in that capacity. I suggested to the Court that Mr. O might benefit from placement in the, now-recently closed,

Summit Center program for boys. He excelled in that program where he spent a year. It is there he came within a year of completing his high school diploma.

Since his completion of the Summit Center program in December 2004, the young man continued to pursue his high school diploma. He is currently one class short of that achievement. He tells me has been studying for the GED. Too, since December 2004, I have provided for him, almost in total. To help him to get started in life I have willingly made available to Mr. O, as needed food, shelter and other ordinary parental assistance.

Recently though, as evidenced by the matters at hand, this young man has developed an alcohol/substance abuse problem. It appears apparent that this issue has served to fully distract and to interfere with Mr. O's intentions and ability to complete his education and to be gainfully employed. Until this problem is effectively addressed, it is doubtful that Mr. O will transcend the current state of chaos in his life. He needs help.

It is my belief that this young person, not yet nineteen years of age, whom I have known for nearly ten years, could benefit from the structure and interventions of a residential substance abuse rehabilitation program. It is my hope that, despite the absolutely dreadful nature of his past, for much of which he is not responsible, such a course of action shall provide Mr. O the opportunity to develop the strategies required to set his life on a positive and productive course. It continues to be my desire and my commitment to assist him in that endeavor.

Respectfully,



November 2007

A few months ago I was contacted about a 15 year old girl in juvenile hall who was having a particularly rough day. Not uncommon considering where she was and some of the life issues with which so many of the kids at juvenile hall are forced to deal. She was called down to the intake unit where I see kids. At one point I asked her about what she was studying in school. An interesting discussion followed. I wanted to help her to get her mind off the current difficulty in her life, so I asked her to write a story about a girl her age set in the era she was studying in school--the mid 1950's and the Civil Rights Movement. "Do some research and use your imagination..." she was told.

Strap yourself in. This kid, one of "those kids," is remarkably talented.

Below is the child's essay, just as it came to me.

Historical Fiction

2007

*On August 11<sup>th</sup> 1941 there was the lady name Mary Lee Watson who gave birth to her fourth child that she name Betsy May Watson. Her mother though she was gorgeous. Month's after months and years after years Betsy May Watson began growing up. When she was 10 she start attending school in her hometown Montgomery, Alabama. Growing up and going to school wasn't easy for Betsy, life was hard for her, it was boycott and the racesim. In 1952 Betsy jus made 11. She was happy so she went to this restaurant that she always wanted to go to but somehow there was this sign that said Whites only. She couldn't believe it so she whip her eyes but it was really there. Betsy was thinking in her*

*mind like it needs to be a stop to all this. She then went to school where it was all black school but things was very ragety. They books were getting old and stuff. The whites on the other hand had very nice things, they were living fancy. So one day when Betsy was leaving from school she sat at the front of the bus. This one lady got on a few stops later and ask Betsy to move and Betsy said no. So the lady ask her one more time to move and Betsy said no again. Betsy was saying that she got tired of all this racesim. She wanted everybody to be all in one eat in the same restaurant and stuff. The lady said that she was breaking the Jim Crow law.*

*So the police was later called on Betsy. So Betsy was held at the police station until her mother came to get her. Betsy was fined with a \$10.00 fee. Later on she started to protest for her rights. She started to attend church. She went to Martin Luther King's church in Montgomery, Alabama. Later on in life in 1956 Betsy May Watson was 15 years old gunned down and left in the dessert.*

January 2008

Thirty-five years ago I served as the director of a church-sponsored summer day camp program in San Francisco. One afternoon out in Golden Gate Park, one of the day camp leaders reported to me that a first grader in her group could not participate in the scheduled arts & crafts activity. He simply could not finger paint. "Why?" I asked. "Come and *see*," was the response.

The back of the almost six-year old kid's little body was covered with bleeding wounds. The child was in too much pain to even finger paint. As I administered first aid and sought to comfort the child, I also asked what and how this had happened. Sheepishly and in an almost inaudible voice he told me his mother had done this to him that morning. The kid's siblings, also in the program, reluctantly confirmed what the child had told me.

The mother, an active member of the congregation, was generally pleasant, cordial and friendly to me, and I suppose, to others. It became apparent that that kindness was rarely extended to her child, this child. We were to learn later, her other children were not subjected to this type and level of cruelty. Upon return to the church, I immediately reported what had happened to the pastor who in turn spoke with the mother. I was told the mother had agreed to restrain herself in the future. The child, she promised, would not come to us in that condition again.

A week or so passed. One morning as the children gathered in the church gymnasium in preparation for the activities of the day in the park, I was called upon again to attend to the same little kid. The child was sitting forlornly in the corner of the building by himself. He was bleeding from a huge gash in the left corner of his forehead. Again I administered first aid and then, of course, promptly called his mother. I thought he had fallen or had been beaten up by older kids on the way to the church. This time he wasn't talking.

“Mrs. *Congenial*, I am calling because *Hank* has large cut and knot above his left eye, and...”

“*I KNOW*,” she interrupted, “*I did it...he got smart with me, and I picked him up and threw him across the room and he smashed his head against the corner of the window sill...and, I'll do it again if I need to.*”

The pastor was just coming into the office as I finished my call with the dear woman. How he dealt with his parishioner, I do not recall. I believe the woman ultimately left the church. The children did not return to day camp the following summer.

It so happened that I shared this story recently with a young man who currently resides at the Orin Allen facility (Boys Ranch) in Byron. Just how we began a discussion of child abuse I do not remember. However this kid, also named *Hank*, sat silently listening, evidently paying especially close attention to the narrative.

When I was finished, *Hank* paused momentarily and then responded reflectively, but with pain in his voice, “You know Rev, when I was that age, the same thing happened to me...that bump on my head lasted for weeks...” Hank’s eyes in that not-so-long ago wounded head, welled up with tears, but not a precious one dropped...

The “village” is dysfunctional.

February 2008

*Dear Rev. Tinsley, Rev I myself need help, I need help to start a new life. I just need to get this program over and get out of here. Rev when I get out I need to get baptize so I can get clean and wish all my csines away. Rev Im sorry for Harting your fullings it aint like its your life but you cear for me and you want to see me doing something in life. Rev I gest need help because I don't what to indup died or in CYA and I deinitely don't what to leva my mom. So please help me thank you I love you Father.*

A year ago I shared in this space the above letter from a young person I had worked with while he was in custody and while he completed court-ordered community service under my supervision. Too, he attended church with me on a number of occasions. In the article last year, some may recall, I discussed in detail the very dreadful nature of the life he had lived to that point in time, to the tender age of fifteen. He had been, reportedly, out in the street, on his own, since the age of eight. He had survived, barely.

The young man was back at the Orin Allen facility in Byron when his letter and the brief story of his life appeared in this newsletter. We sat down together and read the article. He was, of course, unable to accomplish that task on his own. He was so very pleased that I “took the time” to write about his plight and to include his note to me in the article. The tears began to flow as he phoned to tell his mother and uncle about the item in *Ministering Together*. The young man’s small chest was puffed out to its absolute limit, with pride, as he left me to return to the dormitory. He promised to show all the other kids what “The Rev” had written about him...

Unfortunately the kid continued to experience significant difficulty in maintaining himself while

in custody. Conflicts with peers and staff were frequent. Our weekly encounters were long, drawn out and intense. Even after he completed his period of detention, he found ways to violate parole. Although he was short in stature, he was long on attitude.

As is all too common with so many of this population of young people, although this kid was showered, while in custody, with suggestions for positive conduct of life in the future, he went back “home” to the streets. The old, overwhelming sights, sounds, and smells of those streets took over. Once more he “went underground” and I did not hear from him, or about him. Not a good sign. Regrettably, it is rare that I go out into those streets and look for someone. Oh, it has happened, but over a thirteen year period, I can count those times on the fingers of both hands.

I read last night a short article online that recently appeared in the *Oakland Tribune*. Despite my little young man’s expressed desire to the contrary, at the age of sixteen, just days before Christmas, he did indeed “*indup died.*” May he rest in peace. He never experienced any here.

\*\*\*\*\*  
February 1, 2008 From one in a juvenile facility in another state  
...I hate jail and everything in it but just because I don’t like it don’t mean it won’t help me. As you know I’m soon to get released again. Lots to look forward to as far as a fresh start in life and what to prepare for to adapt in the world in the right way of living...You right in the letter you sent me , I’ve been wild for some time far as setting myself up for failure. But failure is the opportunity to begin again more intelligently. It’s about time I grow up. It’s a time for everything and I feel growing up is that time for me. I’m ready to be a man, no more playin’! Rev you been there for me no matter what, thanks for everything. I miss you and I love you. You’re the best

thing that ever happened to me. Rev, I need a big favor, when I get out I'm not really gon have any clothes or shoes...

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\*\*\*\*\*  
Date: 2-2-08

To: Reverand Tinsley

From: (a juvenile hall resident)

Re: College

I am very interested in attending Butte Community College. I understand that you can help me. I am 17 years old. I have been here two times. I am currently taking my GED. Mrs. Jackson says I am great. I feel that this is an opportunity of a lifetime.

Please contact me as soon as possible.

Thank you.

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March 2008

Jeremiah will be twenty-five years of age this July. Although I have never used his name before, the details of his journey and plight have been shared in this space over the past eleven years numerous times. Our paths first crossed when he was thirteen years old and in juvenile hall. There was precious little in the way of "home" at home for him, something hardly lost on the Court. I was therefore given permission by the Court to take

Jeremiah out of juvenile hall for temporary leaves, in the judge's written order to probation "whenever and for whatever duration..." Before he was placed in a group home, he came out of the facility on temporary leaves with me more than twenty-five times. The very small young teen came out to go to church with me and to participate in other activities along with a growing "family" of other "after care" kids. This continued even after he was placed in local group homes.

I was appalled when I went to the group home shortly after Jeremiah's placement to find the theretofore energetic and active young teen so well drugged that he was dragging his right leg and slurring his speech. During a subsequent visit, I found the group home employees sitting on the front porch smoking while the unsupervised kids were inside the house eating a most nutritious meal consisting only of greasy deep fried corndogs. This and more was reported to the probation officer. Jeremiah was removed and placed in another group home. Of course that facility was closed.

The second placement proved even worse than the first. Some of the staff there very much resented the attention given Jeremiah. It was during his stay there, Jeremiah accompanied me and other kids to Los Angeles and Atlanta. Despite court orders sanctioning the excursions, some staff in the group home sought to block the trips. At one point, in frustration, inexcusably, a staff person actually hit then-fourteen year old Jeremiah in the face with his fist. Jeremiah was sent back to juvenile hall to await another



placement. The State of California closed the group home.

It was after that incident that the Court appointed me as “Surrogate Parent for Educational Purposes.” The first of nine such appointments in the past ten years! The probation officer confided that it was the judge’s intent that the appointment be considered “Surrogate Plus.” I worked to have Jeremiah sent back home. That happened, but lasted maybe two weeks. One Saturday morning I received a phone call from the mother telling me to “come get this boy or I’m calling the police...” I dutifully complied. He never returned there.

After several temporary placements in the homes of benevolent supportive individuals, an arrangement of which the Court was aware and approved, Jeremiah finally landed in our home, where he had always wanted to be anyway. (He stayed for six years!) I was able to enroll him in a private high school where his significant educational needs were addressed. He traveled around the country with me many times and was exposed to places and lifestyles far different from his own. He later enrolled and took courses in the community college. What a tremendous honor it was to “finish” raising him.

As a matter of fact, two years later another kid in juvenile hall actually told the judge, “I want what Jeremiah’s got...” The judge simply said OK and he signed the court order appointing me surrogate parent (plus). Eventually he too came to reside in our home.

Two sixteen year olds, hard headed and constantly engaged in intense sibling rivalry. And to think my wife agreed (reluctantly) to all this--as I have shared before, the woman must love me!! More recently though, she has said, “been there, done that, **no more...**”

Jeremiah was recently married for the first time. He and his wife’s child is due in March, 2008. Although he has other children by different mothers, he is present in their lives--in ways hardly modeled in and by his birth family. Jeremiah is working and has come to conduct his life in a reasonably responsible manner. He is presently working as a security guard and hopes one day to become a police officer.

\*\*\*\*\*  
March 27, 2008 From one in a neighboring county’s jail  
...Being sober for this long has never felt better. I can think clearly and my mind is more focused. This is the beginning of my turnaround to a structured life that isn’t just based on running the streets...  
\*\*\*\*\*

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April 1, 2008

From another in that neighboring county's jail

...I'm also going back to studying my word. I've been lacking in that area for some time and I believe with that not being a part of my life, that is the reason for what trials and tribulations I'm going through today. What you don't use, you lose and I'm learning and re-learning as time goes on. I'm taking care of my mental, physical, and spiritual needs once again, and I do tend to regain my life once again...

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April 2008

On so many occasions and in many settings I am asked, "What do *they* think?" The *they*, of course, are the children with whom I have had the privilege to work. Another frequent inquiry usually follows, "Why do *they* do the things *they* do?" From time to time over the years I have shared in this space excerpts of some of the more heart wrenching autobiographical sketches produced and provided by kids who have found, and find, themselves in unpleasant places, under most extraordinary and unfortunate circumstances.

The essay below is just such an exquisite and remarkable piece of nonfiction prose. This comes from the mind, heart and hand of a just-turned eighteen year old young woman, in

juvenile hall, whom I have known for several years. I believe, where she is concerned, the questions above will indeed be answered. Thoroughly so. As always, information about her identity has been edited out. Hold on!

### *The Tears Behind My Smile*

*I have a crazy reputation but it results in being raised like a savage. Most people don't understand what its like growing up in Richmond. I grew up with my grandparents and my cousins. It wasn't cool at all. I was abused at a young age. And lost in the world of survival. Some people call it the 'concrete jungle' but in my hood they call it the rich.*

*The journey began at Brookside Hospital...I was born (to parents) known for their infamous crimes. My daddy was a great factor in the streets but when he came home he was a loving and devoted father. My mother was also a wonderful parent and loving housewife. She had a very outgoing personality and took very good care of her five children. My mother also went through a lot of trauma at a very young age but she did not let that affect the love she had for her kids.*

*I grew up living in (the projects) with both my mother and father. I had the best life that any kid could dream of. I had everything that I'd ever wanted and needed. That is until that shattering day that changed my life forever. It was 1996 I was spending the day at my grandmother's house. I was just 7 yrs. old when they broke the news to me. My loving daddy had been shot and killed. My mother had a nervous breakdown. It all happened so fast. I asked God how he would allow all this to happen to me, why he'd taken my daddy away from me.*

*I had to move in with my grandmother, my sister, my brother and me. At the time we attended school in Richmond. School was nothing but an escape route from life at home with my grandma. It was torture beyond belief. My grandma had an addiction to crack cocaine. When she had it that was usually the only time she was ever nice to us.*

*My grandma forced me and my siblings to do her dirty work for her in home care. She would wake us up at a ridiculous hour on a school day and put my great-great grandmother on the toilet and change her adult diapers when that was not our responsibility as a child. She would often beat us with long sticks which often left bruises and welts on our skin. The food she served us was nasty and old. She even gave us a time limit. I often found myself gagging on the food but we were forced to make due with what we had. Our other grandma would let us sneak and throw away the food in her garbage can beside her bed when my granny was not looking.*

*We were not allowed to go outside and play like the other kids in our neighborhood. AI grew up with a learning disability. I also took, school as a joke. It was my escape of reality for me. My mom slowly recovered and came to our rescue. At the tender age of nine years old we moved to Vallejo...I got into a bit of trouble (at school). I was clowning and acting a fool. A year later we ended up moving back to Richmond. I*

*was now in the fifth grade and I was doing better in school. I was a straight 'A' student...I also paid attention and stayed on task.*

*My mother eventually began dating a man...He was OK, but he would never take the place of my father. If that is what he thought, he had another thing coming, and we let that be known. He would bribe us with luxurious things but when that got old, so did he. I eventually began attending (middle school). By this time I began smoking weed. I had a new boyfriend...Every girl in my school wanted this popular boy, but he was mine and I knew they were jealous of me so I flaunted it the best I could.*

*School was no longer a priority to me. My brother and I would smoke marijuana while my mom was at work. She never suspected our doings, but then again she had no reason to. (My boyfriend) began spreading his love around to other girls. But I knew they could never have him like I did. Or so that's what I thought. When I found out it was true that was the straw that broke the camels back. That's when (another boyfriend) came into the picture. (He) was one of those troubled boys my mama always warned me about, but I thought I was quite sexy. He never attended school and that gave me the excuse to do the same. His house was the kick-it spot and there was always a party. This is when I began running the streets full throttle. I was now becoming much more independent in the hood, and learned how to strive for myself.*

*I was the main attraction. Everyone wanted to be on my team because I was raw and they wanted what I had. I had the courage to fight anyone who crossed my path. I started kicking it with older crowds and drinking alcohol. It often depressed me and made me think about my father and I would go insane no matter where I was. I got to the point where no one could tell me anything or chastise me because they were a lot worse than me.*

*I have always lived life in the fast lane with no speed bumps to slow me down. All I ever wanted was to be the best at whatever I did. I have always wanted the best things in life even if it meant selling my body, or crack cocaine in the Tenderloin. I did whatever it took to get ahead. A pimp has kidnapped me and he threatened my life. He told me I had to do whatever he said or he would kill me. Needless to say he let me go safely.*

*I have been through a lot in my little time here on earth and I thank the Lord that he has been there to protect and guide me through my hard times. I am so thankful to be the person that I am today and the young woman that I have turned out to be. I am blessed to have been taught the lessons I have learned in life. Even though I have been through a lot, I am thankful for the struggle because it makes me that much stronger and helps me appreciate the better things I have to look forward to in my future. Now that I know what I do not want, I can better decide what is healthy for me in my future. I am ready to live a productive lifestyle and be a positive, functioning part of society.*

*“For you have delivered my soul from death, and my feet from falling so that I may walk before God in the light of life.” Ps. 56:13 [NRSV]*

May 2008

On March 24<sup>th</sup> the several editions of the *Contra Costa Times* newspaper carried a remarkably informative story about this ministry and some members of the population we serve. The extremely complimentary article, superbly and accurately written by a *Times* religion reporter, Rebecca Rosen Lum, was, it is apparent, widely read. Particularly kind and positive responses have come from all over this and adjoining counties. People have called to offer scholarships for those young people preparing to go away to college. Others have inquired about volunteer opportunities to assist with, and reach out to, troubled youth and young adults, inside and outside of the facilities.

Of the more tender and moving responses to the article was a letter to me from a set of parents who were convinced that an accompanying copy of a letter sent to them by their son could be helpful to young people. I agree with their assessment. The letters are reproduced below in hope and anticipation that, so shared with an immense audience, lives might be touched in positive and constructive ways. The very reading of, hearing and even feeling the immense pain of this family might well serve to encourage young people in your midst to not only embrace what is good and decent, but to count their plentiful and abundant blessings. Please share the following, just as I have with young people in the detention facilities.

On a page of stationary, under the imprinted words of Psalm 91:11, “The Lord will send out his angels in charge over you to protect you wherever you go,” a loving and supportive mother wrote:

*Dear Reverend,*  
*I read the Valley Times article on the good work you are doing. My son had just recently sent me the enclosed letter. We visit him every week at Folsom [State Prison] and have been doing this for twenty years. My son made one mistake. I hope that this letter may help others to find peace and direction in their lives. Our son just received his AA from Ohio University. He is the first inmate to receive an AA--on his own. Anyway, our family hopes that this letter may help others.*  
*Thank you for your work with young people.*

The letter from their son:

*Dear Parents,*  
*I want to tell you that I realize what a complete fool I was to throw away all of what you gave to me! The upbringing you provided for me was nothing short of perfect, with such a loving atmosphere & upholding attitude. You supplied me with all of the tools needed to grow into a respectable adult! I was nurtured through you & the family & I am truly grateful for it! What I did was throw all of that to the side, taking it for granted, & made myself into a complete idiot! I put myself in a world of unimaginable ignorance, stupidity, hatred & fear. I put myself into a place that was the total opposite of the place I grew up in! I still can't believe after 20 years, that I decided, I made the choice, to walk out of a lovely dream & into a horrible nightmare! I did this! Now I'm stuck trying to get out of the nightmare I created, & again you are there to uphold the loving atmosphere of home & family. I have grown quite a lot & I have quite a lot of growing to do. I'm no longer that fool idiot who threw away the dream yet I have a lot of learning to do before the nightmare is over.*

**PEACE!**

\*\*\*\*\*  
From one in the county jail  
...since I have been down, I have been thinking about all the opportunities you have

given me to go to school; and I haven't taken any. When I get out you have my word that when I get out I will stay on the right track, because I am getting too old for all this. I'm truly sorry that I let you down, I try so hard; and always fall short. I guess I need to try harder, and focus on the better things in life that are before me. I already have plans to go to school when I get out which is soon, because I need to get this started. Thank you for everything...1 more thing...I know you have a lot of kids to help, but I really need some money so I can get some food. This will be the last time I ask. Love you.

P.S. I walk by faith and not by sight.

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Summer 2008

All too frequently young people having been released from custody, venture out from a juvenile facility possessing few of the skills and resources necessary to allow for a successful return to the community. During the periods of parole and probation, and afterward, very often, insufficient housing, lack of job/social skills, and lack of knowledge of available educational opportunities, serve to insure that a significant number of this group return to custody in relatively short periods of time. Sadly enough, such deficiencies generally existed prior to these young people's introductions to the system.



Some young people of this population who have reached the age of eighteen while in custody come out of the system with no place to live and few, if any, of the fiscal resources required to secure a place in which to reside. “Couch surfing” is a common practice employed over a usually finite period of time. Such a state of instability, in all too many instances, is a contributory factor leading to conditions that often result in individuals’ return to custody.

People seeking to be “successful” in the society must adhere to the “mainstream” standards of conduct and behavior. Of course, members of this population are not exempted from this principle. Yet, too many have been neither introduced to, nor adequately exposed to, or trained in, the intricacies of what Peter B. Vaill calls “[the] strategies for survival in a world of permanent whitewater.” Such profound deficiencies in the areas of housing, job training/interviewing/social skills and formal education leave so many of this group in serious jeopardy of failure and loss. Return to custody, often in adult facilities, is but one dreadful option, the other is, regrettably not uncommon, untimely, pointless death, as the kids say, “at a young age.”

Fortunately enough, such sad and tragic scenarios are preventable. Given the training, nurture, concern and directed instruction, individuals who have through much of their short lives existed in the sometimes extreme margins of society, can (and must) be provided the opportunities to develop those strategies for survival in the “mainstream.”

Although the concepts of accountability, responsibility, dependability, commitment, among a plethora of others, are, or have been, apparently rather alien notions for some of this population, certainly within the context of the larger society, these ideas, thankfully, *can be taught*.

September 2008

I have written about Curtis Pounds, anonymously when he was a minor, in this space on several occasions. We first encountered one another in juvenile hall when he was nine years old. Scared, crying and confused, he sat down with me for the first time and he began to trust that together we could “make things right.” Several years later following numerous subsequent visits to juvenile hall and brief “stops” at more than a dozen group homes, Curtis was placed in the (now closed) Summit Center for Boys. As long-time readers of this column may recall, the Summit Center was a therapeutic group home for boys administered by the probation department and the mental health department and served by the juvenile court schools under the auspices of the Contra Costa County Office of Education.

Shortly before the Summit Center placement, I was appointed by the juvenile court to serve as the fifteen year old young man’s surrogate parent for educational purposes.

Despite a life-long acquaintance with parental abandonment, neglect and absence, the kid was not a particularly poor student. He wrote well, was an eloquent speaker--content of his often times passionate exhortations were not always appropriate, but there existed tremendous potential once some of the overwhelming demons of the past were exorcised. Assuredly, this was an enormous undertaking on the parts of all concerned with his care. Yet, he appeared to be open to the opportunity to mutually address the issues that were real impediments to growth, development and progress in his life.

Following an exceptional year in the Summit Center, I was able to enroll Curtis in the Seventh Day Adventist Church boarding school, Pine Forge Academy in Pennsylvania. We actually drove back to eastern Pennsylvania in December, so that he might begin the spring semester at the prestigious prep school outside historic Pottstown. Although the overall experience there was a bit less successful than it might have been, given a different set of life circumstances on his part, his grade point average was better than one might have expected. Still when given the opportunity to return after summer vacation, he refused to go back for his senior year of high school.

Undaunted, I helped him to secure a place to live. That did not work out well. He enrolled in a barber school apprenticeship program, but never quite followed up. The old, tired slime-like “sights, sounds, smells and folks” began to rapidly ooze back in and take control of the very essences of his being and conduct. He fell, hard, back into old ways

and the result and consequences were the same. But, having reached his majority he found himself in the county jail. Over a most difficult two year process he was in and out of that facility too many times. He always proclaimed a seeming sincere desire to change, but, his best efforts, and mine, affected no more than short-term and temporary positive and productive progress.

Six months ago I received the following letter from Curtis, two months shy of his twentieth birthday, one written to me from the county jail:

Dad

First and foremost let me start by saying that I love you and truly miss you, and I am sorry for letting you down; but also myself. For you have truly taught me better than this, and it seems that I keep messing up. Dad I ask that you bear with me, for I have truly seen the light to a brighter future. When I get out I ask that you please help me with finding a place to stay, and with my financial situation if you can. I do appreciate the help that you have provided since I have been in this overwhelming situation, because you are truly the only one who have helped me physically, mentally and emotionally. I hope that you (are well). Me I'm doing as well as can be expected considering my current situation. There's always a better day. Dad I want you to know I appreciate everything you do for me. But, I have a small favor to ask: which is you order me some shoes, size 9 on the internet, because the money you just sent me I (bought) hygiene and food. Dad can you please do that favor this one time? Oh can you please send me some pictures of me if you have some, and can you send me the application to (Butte) college. Thank you

P.S. God bless you and I love you

Love your son  
Curtis

Seventeen hours before I began writing this essay, I responded to a knock on the front

door of our home in Brentwood. Two detectives of the Antioch Police Department appeared before me to notify me that Curtis Pounds had been shot the evening before in Antioch. He did not survive the shooting and was, the Contra Costa Times later reported, “declared dead on the scene...”

Tenderly and most respectfully, the officers shared, as they entered our home and again when they left, “We are very sorry for your loss.”

When does this madness end??

October 2008

There is a young person in juvenile hall, I have nicknamed, “G-2,” who will spend some time at the Orin Allen facility in Byron. “G-2” is short for generation two. During our initial conversation some weeks ago, it was determined that this young man is the seventeen year old son of an individual I worked with more than thirty-five years ago in San Francisco!

G-2’s father was eight or nine years old at the time.

When I meet young people for the first time, whether they are in the hall, the ranch or

even out in the community, I ask them to share a brief autobiography with me. I ask them, “When were you born?” “Where you were born?” “Who are your parents?” “Where do you live and where have you lived?” “Brothers and sisters?” “Schools?” Even when the young person has come to me to speak about a pressing matter, usually they are asked if we might “bracket” the unpleasant issues until I have had the opportunity to “get to know you a little better.” More often than not, the autobiographical sketch follows a grin on a face where a scowl or even tears were present just moments before.

Although G-2 had been born in another state, I was told his father was a native San Franciscan. I asked where the father had lived in The City. He told me the community, I asked which street. As it turns out, the father grew up a block or so away from the Ingleside Presbyterian Church where I served as the summer day camp director, 1970 through 1973. “How old is your father?” I asked.

From an interview room in juvenile hall, we called the father. G-2 asked his father if he was familiar with the church, then he handed the phone to me. I heard the tail-end of the answer.

“...I went to Ingleside...”  
“Really?”  
“My mother was a member of the church, and I went to day camp there in the summers.”  
“When were you there?”  
“The early seventies.”  
“You are speaking to the director!”  
“I REMEMBER YOU...I always looked forward to day camp...we had a lot of

fun. And you brought so much energy to the program...”

“That was certainly the intent--glad to hear we were successful...”

I was still in a state of incredulity, that someone who was eight years old would remember that much about a brief period, so very many years ago, when G-2's father told me, “You probably don't remember *me*, because I didn't get in trouble...”

The Ingleside day camp was but one satellite program in San Francisco of the Cameron House day camp in Chinatown. Our daily attendance was a mere fraction of the Cameron House program, but we had about 150 kids enrolled. Young people were grouped according to age and gender, 6<sup>th</sup> grade boys, 6<sup>th</sup> grade girls, 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys, 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls, and so on, down to the first grade. Each group was assigned two volunteer high school age leaders, who I trained during the week prior to the opening of day camp. I simply could not know every kid, as well as I might have liked.

G-2's father was right. I did not remember him. Even now I can look at old pictures and remember the names of the kids that repeatedly got into trouble! Much as with the school principal, when a young person got into trouble while out at our campsites in Golden Gate and McLaren parks, they were separated from the group and sent to the director. Young people now, the eldest in their early thirties, have thought my *dreaded lectures* began here with them only fourteen years ago. No! Poor little kids had to deal with my lectures, when they were misbehaving, way back in 1970!

Oh, but then G-2's father 'fessed up.

“I did get in trouble with you, ONE time.”

“Tell me about what happened...”

Amazingly enough, I did indeed remember the incident. This was a problem that could have been serious had not his particularly alert leaders intervened and successfully handled the situation. G-2's father was removed from his group and sent to me.

“What did I do? And, was I fair?” I remember the incident but not the aftermath and remedy.

“You probably suspended me...”

“I doubt that. I never really did that very often. Oh, it did happen, but not often! It is more likely you spent a day or two with me in the council ring, in silence and you accompanied me on my rounds...”

“G-2” and I have spoken with one another a half dozen times since our initial encounter. And, although we have yet to meet in person, I have spoken with his father, my former day camper, now in his mid-forties, on a couple of occasions over the telephone. He continues to speak fondly, (even to juvenile hall staff, I am told) about that episode in his life when our paths crossed. He was in elementary school at the time, I was in college. Apparently that was a special time for him--just as that time was a blessing for me.

Too often we are unaware just how much the things we say, attempt to do, and do, for others affects them. When juvenile hall staff related to me just what G-2's dad had said to them *about me*, I was floored. My first thought was, “given the number of years passed, what he remembers is mostly exaggerated...” But, those are his memories. I am so pleased to have been, it seems, in the position once-upon-a-time, to be a role model for him (and others then) and make suggestions to him about conduct of life.



What's more, by and through God's amazing grace, I still get to do this--different venue, different population, and another generation--all God's children. What an extraordinary journey--what an incredible blessing!

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October 4, 2008 A text message from  
one away in college  
Another problem. Somebody broke the car window of the boy who tried to poke my eyes out. You know who the first suspect is...police are coming now. The guy just threatened to shoot me when he gets the chance.  
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November 2008

Reflections

**I**

Train children in the right way  
And when old they will not stray.

Jesus said, "Let the children come,"  
"Do not keep them away."  
Guide them in the way of God,  
guard they go not astray.

Train children in the right way  
And when old they will not stray.

The plight of too many of our kids,

dear ones, neglected, thrown away;  
They know not that they are loved,  
Homeless, hungry, no place their heads to lay.

Train children in the right way  
And when old they will not stray.

We, God's people must, beyond ourselves, reach out  
not only to ones we birth;  
Called we are without one doubt,  
to train future stewards of the earth.

Train children in the right way  
And when old they will not stray.

## II

In the streets and gutters, kids, no place to play,  
birth to prison pipeline, our children, no place to stay;  
Clueless leading clueless, and the blind leading blind;  
Time to bring our children home, maybe for the very first time.

Focused on the nothingness of lives stuck on hold,  
youthful broken spirits, dreadful stories yet untold.  
Billions spent on prisons, little left for school,  
Time to bring our children home, live out the Golden Rule.

Our kids don't belong to counties or individual states,  
Loose your hold on them, O Satan, from your evil fates.  
With precious few to guide them, lonesome through life they roam,  
O God, time, past time, we pray, to bring our children home.

### III

Even in the depths of dread, behind great doors of steel,  
confusion reigns for younger ones, distortion of what's real.  
Hurt, hurting, beaten and broken, even before this affair of state,  
predictable that they would know, surely, less of love than hate.

Some begin their "system" journey in the second week of life,  
too many introduced to poison while in a womb of strife.  
As teens they've inflicted damage to people and property,  
whose responsibility to re-teach them, absent parents, but you and me?

Throughout short lives rejected, none with whom to turn,  
Often carrying the stigma that they're too damaged to learn.  
Can we continue to turn away and offer them but fear?  
This for God's true precious ones, our Savior holds so dear?

February 2009

We are going to have a party in June! On June 16<sup>th</sup> of this year, it will have been forty years since I began to work with young people. Time certainly flies, whether one is having fun or not. But, to employ a colloquial phrase from the past: I have had a *BLAST!!* When I began to work with youth in June, 1969, I was between five and ten years older than those with whom I sought to teach, to guide and to counsel. Now, of course, I am thirty-five to forty years older than the kids I encounter in this extraordinary setting.

Truly a blessing, this most remarkable journey has been. Nevertheless, I clearly remember a question I asked God those forty years ago, “Lord, what have you gotten me into?” The question is still asked in frequent conversations with God, even these many years later. From a most faithful God, the answer is always swift, decisive and unambiguous.

I shared in this space several months ago the story of an encounter with a young man in juvenile hall whose father was one among one-hundred, fifty of my day campers in San Francisco forty years ago. When that piece was written, the kid’s father and I had yet to become re-acquainted. In mid-December we were able to sit down over a meal, reminisce a bit and discuss his son’s future following release from custody. As we discussed the past I was at a distinct disadvantage because I still did not, and do not, remember him or much about him at the time. Yet, surprisingly, he remembered me. The kind and polite gentleman now approaching middle age, spoke of pleasant fun-filled times in programs I administered when he was in elementary school. He has asked that I continue to work with his seventeen year old son. The Psalmist writes: “Come and see what God has done.” (Ps. 66:5a) NRSV

Six months ago, I received a telephone call from a person who identified himself as a student of mine some twenty-five years ago at Contra Costa College. Remembering nothing about the caller, he was asked how he found me. “Over the internet,” was the

response. My thought, though not expressed to him was an emphatic, “WHY?” The caller, whom I still only vaguely remembered, spoke about people and events of a quarter century ago. He had seen a newspaper article last spring. He wanted to find out if the person profiled in the article was the same person who took time for him when he was eighteen years old. Those times were he told me, special for him. Although he was a bit disturbed that I did not remember him, we will get together sometime in the near future... “Come and see what God has done.”

Very recently while placing items for purchase on the checkout conveyor in a local store, the clerk asked, “Aren’t you Reverend Tinsley? I met you in juvenile hall when I was fourteen...” The much larger face was slightly familiar. He spoke briefly about recollections of initial conversations we had when he was in custody, eight years ago. We shall get together soon to discuss, among other things, tattoo removal. Someone is growing up... “Come and see what God has done.”

This ministry, in its fifteenth year, represents the longest tenure and the most defining illustration of the work to which God has called me. It seems clear, even as described in the few vignettes above, that God has indeed richly blessed the activities of the past forty years. What a tremendous honor and privilege it has been to serve God’s people in a variety of settings and in unique and special ways. Thank God for the opportunity and for

“what God has gotten me into!”

So, truly when we come together to celebrate in June, foremost, we shall all “Make a joyful noise to God.” We will, “sing the glory of God’s name; give to God glorious praise.” We will, “say to God, ‘How awesome are your deeds!’” And together all those, precious ones of God, assembled with me, wherever the venue, will rejoice and shout, “Come and see what God has done: God is awesome in God’s deeds among mortals.”

(Ps. 66:1a, 2, 3a,5)

Blessed be God, because God has not rejected my prayer or removed God’s steadfast love from me. (Ps. 66:20)

March 2009

Recently I was asked to speak to a local church group engaged in “an extensive process that provides a context in which participants can grow in their commitment to care for the vulnerable and to become advocates for justice.” There is a program that purports “to strengthen the growing commitment of participants and churches to be agents of social transformation, mercy and compassion.” Over the period of a year, “(t)he intent is to provide (participants) a tapestry of learning opportunities that emphasize and enliven the remarkable justice tradition of the Church.” The program, an activity of a church that is located in one of the more affluent communities in this county, “is about connecting with the poor and vulnerable.” Ambitious labor and admirable goals.

I was referred to the convener of one of the learning sessions by the mother of a (no-longer not-so-young) person whom I have known since coming to this ministry. When contacted, we explored ways group participants might study, and learn from the experiences of the population with which I work. The group was specifically interested in those current or former “youthful offenders” who have genuinely sought to change, “to turn their lives around.”

In further conversation, I expressed my willingness to come to speak to the group. Too, I suggested that I might bring some of “my kids,” to discuss their plights and journeys. Their input is always informative and educational. And, part of the training for young people who spend, and have spent time with me, is public speaking. It is always with great pride that I listen to young people stand before an audience and speak with confidence and skill. Attendees of the last two annual meetings of the Interfaith Council have been *taught* by members of this growing group of transformed and ever-developing individuals.

Following an initial hour-long address I gave to this church group, and after a brief break, the young people individually spoke tenderly from their hearts about their journeys through the fields (sometimes *minefields*) of life. Three of the individuals who have spoken at the annual Council meetings, along with one other young man, spoke to this

group. The young men, two who are now twenty-five years of age, the other two who are twenty-two years old, spoke with extraordinary passion and enthusiasm about their former selves. They went on to discuss, with eloquence and pride, how they have grown up and out, beyond old destructive ways. Some of the rather unfiltered comments brought tears to the eyes of the listeners.

Addressees' questions and responses indicated that perchance they had gleaned much from the experience. As the meeting concluded, a discernable warmth of the Spirit engulfed the room as kind words and hugs were exchanged between the presenters and their "students." People of faith, all parties, having experienced a natural high left that space to return to normal routines, perhaps truly changed.

We left just as parishioners were arriving for regular worship. As we walked out into the parking lot, one of my precious young people was still exceedingly encouraged by the friendliness and the embrace of the members of the church to whom he had just spoken. In a most gracious expression of unity, friendship and agape love, this young man joyfully extended his hand to a gentleman on his way to church, and greeted him with a sincere, "Hello, God bless you!!"

The more than likely affluent, educated and well-to-do white Christian congregant simply looked at the proffered African American hand, as if from that hand he had something to



fear, did not bother to shake it, but responded simply, but forcefully, “*I don’t have time...*”

***Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'* Matthew 25:45 NRSV**

June 2009

One of the greatest joys over the years while working with young people has been the ability to travel. Glancing at a website called TravelBlogs.com, I found interesting comments under the heading: *Why Travel With Kids is an Enriching Experience* that support, without doubt, my contentions about the value of travel.

“Travel with kids is possible.”

“Life as a field trip is simply amazing!” (Jeanne Dee)

“I believe traveling with children is worthwhile because it exposes them to new experiences and provides unique opportunities for learning about the world we live in.”

(Stacy)

“Travel is one of many things parents can do to help their kids grow into well-rounded adults with perspective that extends beyond their own neighborhood.” (Debbie Dubrow)

”Traveling with kids is good for kids. They find new interests, or expand on interests they already have. Trips to museums and other sites make information come alive for kids, and make it so much more exciting than a textbook or even classroom experiment can.

They learn how to handle new situations, and interact with new people. They learn

patience; sometimes it takes a long time to get to somewhere really exciting or interesting.” (Linda)

“Travel is education; it’s as simple as that.” (Michelle Duffy)

I worked as a volunteer leader in a summer day camp program in 1969. Along with my partner, who went on to become a police officer in San Francisco, I labored long and hard with a sixth grade boys group; extremely hard-headed pre-teens, the lot. Mere days before the close of the summer program, I was approached by the director of the junior high school department. She asked if I might wish to bring the sixth grade boys group along with the seventh and eighth grade boys and girls for their end-of-program camping trip. She proposed that I take overnight, into the woods, kids who had never been outside San Francisco! I had determined weeks earlier that I never, ever wanted to work with kids again, and now this? God definitely has a sense of humor.

Of course I agreed to bring “*my kids*” along. And, true to form, they lived up to their summer-long reputation. They were BAD. My memories of the activity are vivid. I recall being angry with them, frustrated with their antics, and generally unhappy with the junior high school director for even asking me to bring this rabble. (She and I remain close. We actually found out we are cousins, descended from brothers, born in 1806 and 1807!) But, after a long harrowing day, the *thoroughly* fatigued little laddies fell asleep as soon as they zipped up their sleeping bags! (Understand I made very sure they would be so-o-o tired; insuring my evening would be peaceful ☺). And, despite their poor behavior during the day, when they quickly drifted off into a deep, deep sleep, they resembled, as

did the seventh and eighth graders, perfect little angels. What an incredible challenge that “field trip” turned out to be. It is with humble gratitude, I report, hundreds of safe, fascinating, challenging and truly astounding “field trips” have followed.

Over the past two score years, it has been a tremendous honor and distinct privilege to travel with young people; to, as “Stacy” stated above, “(expose) them to new experiences and (to provide) unique opportunities for learning about the world we live in.” Many camping trips followed during the four years I served as the director of the day camp program where I had first come as a volunteer. Prior to coming to this ministry, as a community college instructor and later a campus minister, I took Contra Costa College and U.C. Berkeley students on frequent study trips to New York City and Washington, D.C.

Amazingly enough though, over the past fifteen years, in this setting, so-called troubled kids, many even while in custody, have accompanied me on “field trips” to places where people’s ideas and (quoting Debbie Dubrow above) “ perspective(s) ... (extend) beyond their own neighborhood.” Thank God.

Among the cities we have visited:

Atlanta San Francisco San Jose Sacramento Reno Las Vegas Los Angeles  
Memphis Nashville Knoxville Cincinnati Indianapolis Chicago St. Louis  
Kansas City Dallas Denver Columbus, OH Jackson, MS Lexington, KY  
Chico Oroville Redding Fresno Phoenix Dayton, OH Cheyenne  
Denver Santa Rosa Santa Cruz Monterey Salt Lake City Virginia City  
Carson City Topeka South Lake Tahoe

We have toured the following schools and colleges (some of these are where more than 200 have gone on to enroll):

Butte College (80 times) Chico State University San Francisco State University  
University of San Francisco San Jose State University U.C. Berkeley U.C. Santa Cruz  
U.C. Davis U.C.L.A. University of Southern California Morris Brown College  
Morehouse College Clark-Atlanta University Interdenominational Theological Center  
Knoxville College (20 times) The Piney Woods School Pine Forge Academy  
University of Cincinnati Earlham College Central State University(OH)  
Wilberforce University St. Mary's College (CA) Stanford University  
Santa Clara University Cal Tech University of Tennessee  
University of Kentucky Miami University of Ohio University of Dayton Berea College  
Bethel College (KS) University of Nevada (Reno) Laney College  
Contra Costa College Chabot College Los Medanos College Diablo Valley College  
City College of San Francisco Job Corps (SF) Job Corps (Reno)  
SF Theological Seminary Graduate Theological Union Pacific School of Religion  
Solano College Yuba College Cabrillo College Hanna Boys Center  
The Branson School New Vistas Christian School Patton Academy

And, young people have accompanied me to worship and/or for special programs at (among) the following churches:

Pittsburg United Methodist Solomon Temple Baptist, Pittsburg  
First Baptist, Pittsburg Stewart Memorial CME, Pittsburg  
Liberty Church of God in Christ, Pittsburg  
Community Presbyterian, Pittsburg First UMC, Concord  
First Presbyterian, Concord St. Marks ELCA, Pleasant Hill  
Community Presbyterian, Danville Easterhill UMC, Richmond  
First Presbyterian, Oakland Sojourner Truth Presbyterian, Richmond  
Ingleside Presbyterian, San Francisco New Liberation Presbyterian, San Francisco  
Covenant Presbyterian, Palo Alto Antioch Baptist, San Jose  
Stanford University Memorial Church University AMEZ, Palo Alto  
Church of the Nazarene, Concord Allen Temple Baptist, Oakland  
St. Peter CME, El Cerrito Bethel Baptist Pineville, KY Bethel AME, Cincinnati  
Trinity Presbyterian, Dayton, OH St. Mary's College Chapel  
Third Baptist, San Francisco Orinda Community Church (UCC)  
First Christian Church, Concord Church of the Good Shepherd, Pittsburg  
Imani Presbyterian, Vallejo Unity Church, Richmond  
Moraga Valley Presbyterian Clayton Valley Presbyterian  
Shell Ridge Community, (ABC), Walnut Creek Faith Presbyterian, Oakland  
Elmhurst Presbyterian, Oakland Hillside Presbyterian, Oakland

Grace Presbyterian, Daly City   Broadmoor Presbyterian, Daly City  
 Old St. Mary's, SF   Progressive Baptist, Berkeley   Zion Hill Baptist, Richmond  
 North Richmond Missionary Baptist   St. Luke UMC, Richmond  
 Presbyterian Church in Chinatown   First Presbyterian, San Anselmo  
 First United Presbyterian, Knoxville   Emmanuel Presbyterian, Knoxville  
 Westminster Presbyterian, Knoxville   SFTS Chapel  
 Alpha and Omega COGIC, Pittsburg   St. Peter Martyr , Pittsburg  
 Unitarian Universalist of Berkeley   Shiloh Presbyterian, Knoxville  
 St. Cornelius, Richmond   First Baptist, Richmond  
 Bethel Tabernacle, Richmond   Miracle Temple, Richmond  
 St. Paul AME, Berkeley   El Cerrito UMC   Contra Costa Korean Presbyterian  
 Walnut Creek   Trust in the Lord Ministry, Richmond   Bethel Temple Pentecostal,  
 Richmond

We have attended weddings, ordinations, installations, a Bar Mitzvah, baseball, football and basketball games, concerts, pastor appreciation programs and far too many funerals and quiet hours. We've visited the King Center and the Carter Center in Atlanta, the Truman and Eisenhower Presidential Libraries, and Arlington National Cemetery. Young people have viewed the White House, the Capitol, National Monuments, and the Sears Tower. On two, six-thousand mile automobile trips different sets of kids have traveled through no fewer than seventeen states. They have seen Civil War battle sites, Underground Railroad stations, places where slave markets once existed and driven through the tunnel beneath the Cumberland Gap and through Native American reservations. A surprising number of kids while with me have crossed the Golden Gate Bridge and taken the bay cruise for the very first time!! One young man actually mustered the courage to get a passport and travel to Costa Rica to study during the winter break several years ago—a first!

And, of course, after all these activities, WE EAT. They do that well! VERY WELL,

On behalf of all the young people who benefit, to all of you (and to my wife) who have contributed faithfully and generously, Thank You. Without your support, precious little of this would have been possible.

August 2009

On September 7, 2009, it will have been fifteen years since I began to serve in this interesting, challenging and amazing ministry!! In those days the then-Council of Churches sponsored chaplaincy ministries in the county hospital and the county adult jail facilities. Shortly after my arrival the program at the hospital was eliminated, given county budget cut backs. My colleagues' positions in the county jail facilities were axed several years ago when the powers-that-be in the sheriff's office sought bargain pastoral care from a different source. Of that group I was privileged to join back in 1994, I am the only one now serving county facilities under the auspices of the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County.

In those days, my colleagues took turns contributing articles and reflections for this space in *Ministering Together*. My first opportunity to share was in the November/December 1994 issue. My thoughts from that essay include the following:

**Thirty-two years is a long time! And, it is very difficult to replace one whose tenure has been so long. I am though, fortunate to have had the opportunity to spend time with the outgoing Juvenile Hall Chaplain, the Rev. Keith Spooner. Our appointments overlapped on September 7, 8, and 9.**

**On those three days, Keith shared history, history and more history. We discussed philosophy, theology and the nature of the Juvenile Hall chaplaincy. Keith spoke passionately of his many joys and of his frustrations and occasional disappointments. He, indeed, had an awful lot to say. We agreed on many things, and disagreed on fewer. Thank you, Keith, and all the very best wishes for the future. Also thanks to the Council for allowing the "overlap" to happen. Over the past several weeks, staff and administrators at Juvenile Hall have been MORE THAN helpful, supportive and responsive. They have a difficult and unenviable job to do in the midst of chaos not of their own making. Dedicated lay ministry volunteers take MANY moments from their busy schedules to come in to comfort hurt and troubled young people at Juvenile Hall. This group, too, is to be admired and respected for their hard, productive and faithful work...**

**Incredible to me is just how time "flies." I am sure Keith shares this sentiment. In June, I began my 26th year working with children, youth and young adults, in a variety of capacities, in the church, in educational, recreational and institutional settings. I shall not be here thirty-two years! I doubt Mother Nature, Father Time, not to mention my wife will allow it...**

**President Kennedy once said, "God's work must truly be our own." There is much work here to be done.... Wouldn't it be nice if our collective efforts resulted in no future need for juvenile detention facilities? IF ONLY...**

**In the meantime, however, I believe, where the kids of this county are concerned, we must keep in mind and in heart, what Jesus said, "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my father in heaven." Matthew 18:10.**

Well, fifteen years, too, is a long time! In 1994 I could not have *imagined* serving in this capacity for this long. I still cannot begin to presume to know exactly what I may done so very right to deserve the opportunity to have been called to and to continue to serve this special population in a most remarkable and distinctive setting for ministry. I remain exceedingly grateful to God for this incredible and humbling gift.

Thanks also to you all who have, with your words, kind thoughts, prayers and money, faithfully supported this effort to serve in the detention settings (and beyond) “hurt and troubled young people” of this community.

Too, I am indebted to my wife who has been a constant partner (although generally a silent one—at least in public) in this ministry. She has endured MUCH, yet she is still here—incredible, most incredible!

September 2009

Last month I shared an excerpt of the very first article for *Ministering Together* I wrote shortly after my call to this ministry in September, 1994. The article below is the second one, which appeared in the January/February 1995 issue of this newsletter.

***The past three months have been among the most remarkable in my life. I know why my predecessor was here so long. This is indeed an extraordinary opportunity to serve. I have often remarked to Juvenile Hall staff that there is ~ one job I would do here, AND (Thank God), I AM DOING IT.***

***They are, as I frequently point out to kids, not robots. Probation Counselors are people, people, who, as we all do, have feelings. They have lives outside Juvenile Hall - strange as it may seem to some of the kids. They hurt like the rest of us, experience the same difficulties and frustrations; they smile, laugh, cry, frown....***

***There are, though, some "unsung heroes" at Juvenile Hall who must be recognized. The folks who really are on the "frontlines" at Juvenile Hall are the Probation Counselors. These are people, who as a group, are responsible for several thousand, often fairly disagreeable, kids a year. They transport them, make sure they are clean, safe, and warm and fed. They accompany them to the nurses' office, supervise activities, get them to church - here in***



***Juvenile Hall - on time every Sunday and they deal appropriately with young people's inappropriate behavior when necessary.***

***They are given, through the county juvenile hall superintendent and his staff of supervisors, the responsibilities of surrogate parents (with all the rights[?] and privileges [?] pertaining hereto).***

***They work long, often, extremely stressful shifts. At times, they endure verbal abuse from their charges, to an extent that you and I would be unwilling or unable to tolerate. Yet, daily and nightly, often with only a few hours of sleep, these dedicated individual return in seeming high spirits, to perform necessary service for you, the residents of Contra Costa County. And friends, the vast majority of them do their jobs VERY well. This is my observation. I do get around.***

***All the folks who work at your Juvenile Hall in Martinez, deserve, not our pity, but our respect and our admiration for jobs well done. Keep them in your prayers.***

Remarkably, and interestingly enough, I must report, my feelings about this segment of “the system” have not changed significantly, if at all, in fifteen years!

Kids still grumble and focus on counselors’ shortcomings and imperfection. This usually gives me a marvelous segue into a bible lesson from the *Sermon on the Mount*, as in “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3) Then of course, a fascinating discussion follows as we often examine, in depth “And (just) who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29b)

**בולש**

October 2009

One of the young people just celebrated his twenty-second birthday. I met him when he was sixteen years old. The other young person will observe his twenty-third birthday in November. This one I met when he was fourteen years of age. These young men were in custody when we first became acquainted. They both grew up in Richmond. Each has lost *many* friends to street violence; they've attended far too many funerals. They have been shot at; threatened, hurt physically and emotionally. They have been homeless. In their short lives, they have experienced fair measures of difficulty and struggle. Substantial stumbling blocks for them have been many; obstacles to personal advancement often times painfully significant.

One of these young men has frequently said, "Who would have thought someone *like* me, could go to college..." He earned his associate of arts degree this past July. Abandoned by parents, placed in foster care and later in group homes, this one found himself at the Orin Allen facility in Byron for the first time at age fourteen. He was shy and reserved when we first encountered one another. Once he completed the prescribed program there, he was sent to a group home, because he had no where else to go. Several group homes and three years later, he found himself back in custody in Martinez, almost eighteen years old with no home to which to go. His assigned probation officer contacted me because, he shared, "when this kid turns eighteen, he will be released and we have nothing else for him." The young man and I began to talk about Butte College. He initially enrolled at Butte but returned to Contra Costa College where he earned the A. A.

degree. He had previously earned the GED while in custody; he received the high school diploma at the Martinez Adult School.

The other young man spent shorter periods of time in juvenile hall. However, he had considerable problems following guidelines at home *and* those set in place by the court and the probation department. He experienced particular struggles when he was supervised via an electronic monitor. On one occasion, following a home supervision violation, as he prepared once more to leave juvenile hall, he exclaimed to me behind a huge smile, “I am NOT coming back here ever again. He *did come back*, but beforehand he accompanied me to Oroville and Chico where he toured Butte College and the dormitories. He enrolled there shortly after his high school graduation. He graduated from Butte College in May, 2009.

The *great news* is, these two young people enrolled and registered for classes in August at Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio. Central State is a historically Black university (HBCU). These young men truly have “come a *mighty* long way.” Most “system alums” I have sent away to school, over 200 in number, have not finished even the two-year community college program. That is why these young men’s decision, to “get out of Dodge” and to relocate and to go away to a university is a BIG DEAL in my book. I am hopeful and prayerful these young people will excel *mightily* in this latest endeavor.

In August too, I introduced them to the Trinity Presbyterian Church [PCUSA] in Dayton. The congregation has overwhelmingly and enthusiastically embraced these young people. Members of the church have provided furniture, food, supplies and other expressions of love and support for “my kids” in Ohio. I was present one Sunday in September, when following the worship service the choir director pushed, prodded and *ever-so-gently* urged, persuaded and coerced these young men to join the Trinity Church Men’s Chorus. (Well, maybe not so gently!☺)

I have taken five trips in five months to the area to help them to get situated in their new journey in Academe and with their novel existence free of danger and fear. They are happy, (other than being cold), safe and contented with the direction of their lives. I am thrilled, overjoyed, and I am tremendously proud of them. What a remarkable and magnificent blessing! My pockets are empty. I have spent an awful lot of money in the process of getting these special young people settled; **amounts that do not equal the cost of one moderately priced funeral...**

“Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray” Proverbs 22:6 [NRSV]

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October 15, 2009 From one in the county jail

*...I'm still trying to keep it together. Myself I keep flowing based on the words you tell me  
'No giving up aloud'*  
\*\*\*\*\*

November 2009

“After care” and “preventive care” have always been major components of this ministry. Many young people with whom I have had the privilege to work, initially within the confines of the juvenile detention facilities of this county, have gone on to college, married and have families, have bought homes, have gone into the ministry, among many positive and productive pursuits in life. For these accomplishments we are all tremendously grateful.

Too, parents and guardians often call seeking assistance with their children, sometimes preteens, in efforts to keep the young people from *ever* coming into the facilities. Fairly routinely parents bring their children to meet with me at selected restaurants located throughout the county, usually for sixty to ninety minute meetings. During these one-on-one encounters, over a meal, the young people and I discuss the reasons why they should not wish to go to juvenile hall, and certainly, what they need to do to avoid the prospect of being “locked up.” Regularly, during these sessions, we call upon young people by telephone, often those recently released from custody, to provide peer advice

and assessment. They readily offer valuable first hand information about the situation in which one might find oneself, if one's behavior does not significantly change—and soon.

Sometimes I ask young people, especially those who are finishing their programs at the Orin Allen facility in Byron, to write an anonymous letter of encouragement, persuasion (and warning) to those young people who are on an apparent fast track to go into custody. Such essays are always moving, most often eloquently drafted, sincere expressions of concern and empathy for the young men's contemporaries out in the community. How commendable.

One such letter, shared here with the permission of the author, follows:

*Dear whoever this may concern,*

*I am writing this letter to you today not to tell you what to do, but to help you. A lot of teens these days are getting in trouble with the law. I was one of them. Depending on what their crime is they get caught doing, they might have to go to juvenile hall or another juvenile facility.*

*Most kids don't always think about the consequences when they are about to do something illegal that could put them in a juvenile facility. Some might think of the consequences, but might believe they won't get caught. They think they are good at what they do and won't get stopped. That is exactly what I thought before I got caught. What I did was sell drugs. I always thought I wouldn't get caught because I played it smart. You should know that whatever the case is, whatever you are doing, something can always go wrong. You can get caught. Maybe you won't get caught right away or the first couple of times, but eventually you will.*

*Most people, after getting caught and being placed in a juvenile facility, regret what they did. They may be sorry. Well that can't change anything. You still have to serve time for your poor decisions, and really it's not fun. I was lucky and only did four months. If I could change what I did, I definitely would without doubt. Not being able to eat good food, not wearing your own clothes, showering with other people, always doing the same thing every day at the same time, and doing exactly everything you are told every day are just a few reasons why committing crimes are not worth it. I have learned from my experience and I truly hope this letter persuades you to stay out of trouble. You don't need crime in your life to be successful. If anything it will take you away from success. Everyone has opportunities to make something out of their life.*

**“I have learned from my experience...”** We do so pray that indeed he has learned, and shall not be returned to custody. And, we hope and trust that others will learn and benefit from reading/hearing this young person’s passionate account of an unpleasant period in his life.

December 2009

During first conversations with young people in custody, I am often told, “I was in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong crowd.” More times than not, they go on to tell me, “If I had paid attention and ‘followed my first mind’ (initial instinct), I wouldn’t be here now.” Hindsight is generally 20/20. Severe, even grave consequences may (usually) follow exercises in poor decision-making in the extreme. It is always so awfully unfortunate that such a realization is made and reflected upon by young people, by then, “stressin’” in juvenile hall. Expressions and statements of regret and contrition on their parts frequently follow: “I wish I hadn’t...” “Never again...” “Those were so-called friends...” “Peer pressure...” “*I just need one more chance...*”

While listening to such stories of sadness, anguish and woe, I am reminded of the old proverbial saying, oft-times attributed to the English evangelical preacher and martyr, John Bradford (c 1510–1555): “There but for the grace of God, go I” I have rarely or ever shared a story with the young people, about when as a teenager, I encountered one particular situation where I was faced with a dilemma strikingly similar to some of theirs. Most of the kids are relatively unconcerned with “ancient history” so I keep it to myself

and ponder the specifics of an incident that occurred more than forty years ago.

I recall most vividly how, late one evening, on a school night, I received a telephone call from one of my classmates, theretofore one of my closest friends. I was invited (ordered? compelled?) to go out with him and some of his “new friends.” He had “borrowed” his sister’s car and the group was going out somewhere to “get high” and have a “good time.” Although I was hardly known, in those days of yore, as a *nerd* or a *narc*, I had a genuine problem with some of the folks whom my friend had recently become intimately acquainted. In the parlance of the era, they were known as “stoners.” Simply put, I did not trust them. And, more to the point I was concerned about where my friend-classmate-football and basketball teammate, was headed.

I couldn’t talk him out of going out that night. Moreover, it became clear our friendship was on the line when I refused to “join in” and “go along with the crowd.” “We are going to have weed, reds, bennies...too bad you can’t make it,” I was told, in his last ditch effort to exert extreme *peer pressure*. He then tersely terminated the conversation. was, I had not done so. Their “good time” ended abruptly when, at high speed, they drove off the freeway, rolled down a hillside, and destroyed the car. All were injured, first arrested, handcuffed to stretchers, hospitalized for various periods of time, and then transported to juvenile hall, (in another county), all of which, thankfully, I was spared.

I have long since lost touch with all of those people. That night, I am confident, is one they shall never forget. (Certainly, neither will I). That *crowd* was truly fortunate to have survived that ordeal. They undoubtedly learned costly lessons, the hard way. I too



learned valuable lessons, mostly about God's grace *and* initial instinct, ones I hope the young people with whom I work, will come to learn, know, keep and *employ*, if, and when they are afforded we hope and pray, that *one more chance* they seek.

"There but for the grace of God," with them, I *might* have gone. Oh, but how grateful I

"For grace is given not because we have done good works, but in order that we may be able to do them." - Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

## The Final Reflection

*...you have showed me and taught me a lot of things including how to keep my lips zipped when I have something to share with people when really I shouldn't share my thoughts that could hurt me in the long run. It was music to my ears when you told me that my dad was missing out not being there for me and not being able to watch me grow into a young man. I love you a whole lot for that and I thank you a whole lot for being that father figure in my life.*