

merciful caring

by Rick Jordan, CBFNC Church Resources Coordinator

The thick door closed behind us in the sally port with a very loud clank. “Are you okay?” Terri Stratton asked me. *“I think so,” I said.* As the next slider opened into Death Row, she said, “That sound causes a little anxiety in some folks.”



Terri, a CBF-endorsed chaplain, has been a chaplain for the state of North Carolina since 2010 and has been the Senior Chaplain of Central Prison in Raleigh since January 2014. The duty of a prison chaplain is to promote equality, fairness, justice, and mercy, and to offer spiritual guidance, not to convert offenders to one faith group or the other. North Carolina has 15 approved faith groups but because the needs of the institution come first, worship services are not always available to the offenders.

I visited with Terri early on a Monday morning, in time to observe the American Indian worship service. Eleven men – some Indian, some white, some black – gathered in a circle created by large stones. They sat on pea gravel facing a small stoned circle. One of the offenders played a drum as another “smudged” the air above four colored rocks which represented the four directions. Each offender had a pipe. They did not speak. They listened to a CD of American Indian chants as they offered their prayers to the Great Creator. After smoking, one offender read from a book of visions, then the group discussed the meaning of this vision.

“Some people think the men on Death Row will look different from those on the streets. They aren’t monsters; they are just people. They have done horrible things and made very bad choices,” says Terri. This is where they will spend the rest of their lives. The most recent inmate came in 2016. One has been on Death Row for 33 years.

“Do you know what they have done?” I asked. “Some of them, I do, but only because they have shared their story with me. I’m human and I don’t want their crime to influence my thinking when it comes to offering a listening ear or spiritual guidance.”

“Do they respect you?” “I’ve found that for many of these men, there are two persons they respect: their mamas and their preachers. For some, I am both to them. Even those who are my age and older need to have a mother-figure. I am a safety net for these guys. They can tell me things that they won’t tell officers. Personal things. And they know I see them as they are. They have two legs, not four. They are human beings, not animals. We have to look past what they did and explore what they can do now. I ask questions like, ‘Where are you in your spiritual walk? How can

I help you walk that path while you are here?’ My goal is to help guide them to a better place, spiritually, than when they got here. Not to be their savior but to listen as they share their deepest thoughts and concerns. To give them an ear and a soft tissue.”

Of course, not all prisoners are Christian. There are fifteen different faith groups represented at Central Prison. “Chaplains love them enough to respect their faith and we care enough to learn about their faith – how it motivates, helps, and guides them. We try to help them find a faith mentor. Even those who claim Christianity as their faith may not know what they believe, just like people in the outside world. So, a mentor can help them with that. Some are seekers, so we ask, ‘What do you believe in? What do you want to believe in?’ Sometimes, they just want to believe that there is somebody who cares. Certainly, from my faith perspective, I’d love for them all to become Christians, but I must honor what they believe in and we walk together the path of what we have in common.”

Merciful caring is personified by the chaplains. Terri says, “When you ask about their family, they know that you care about what they care about. They miss their wife, their children, their grandparents. I recently made a call about a sick grandmother. The inmate hadn’t been able to reach her and was worried she was back in the hospital. She was doing fine but had a new phone and didn’t know how to work it. That is one way to show mercy here. I have learned more mercy by being on the inside.”

“But,” I said, “this place is where we want them, right?” “Maybe this is where the ones who don’t have a relationship with Christ will find it; maybe they will seriously consider what they believe and choose their own faith walk. Maybe this is the only safe place that will allow them to worship. We’ll never know. We do know that some of these men had a hard home life, some were abandoned as children, and some never had anyone to show the love of God to them. Once they are here, it is our God-called duty to let them know that they are a creation of God, a child of God. Even for the evil ones – and some here are evil – God loves them enough to keep giving them their breath. There is still a purpose for their life, and, if they’ll let us, we’ll help them find that purpose.”