

'On the Wings of a Dove' - Prayerline

DAY SIX: PRISONERS AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

'I was in prison, and you came to visit me'

Indigenous Australians are greatly over-represented in the criminal justice system, reflecting the history of socio-economic disadvantage and, in the last few years, a stricter approach to law enforcement. Sadly, in recent years, the greatest relative increase in incarceration has been for Indigenous women. The Indigenous female prison population increased by 262% between 1991 and 1999 (compared with an increase in non-Indigenous women of 185%). Indeed by June 2003, Indigenous women were incarcerated at a rate 19.3 times that of non-Indigenous women. The highest rates of incarceration for Indigenous women were recorded in Western Australia (428.6 per 100,000), New South Wales (383.1 per 100,000) and South Australia (286.3 per 100,000). (Figures: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Corrective Services - June Quarter 2003*, p 22).



Many Indigenous women are prominent in prison ministries, formally and informally. **Rev Alexandra Gater** (pic left) for example ministers to her people in prisons in the Brisbane area. She is also an Elder in the Brisbane **Murri Magistrates Court**, a Queensland Magistrates court which deals with sentencing adult Indigenous offenders.

The Murri Court takes into account cultural issues by providing a forum where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have an input into the sentencing process. This enables Indigenous Queenslanders, in association with the judicial system, to have a greater responsibility in helping to find a solution to the over-representation of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders in our prisons. When an Indigenous person wishes to plead guilty to an offence in a Magistrates Court, the offender is sent to the Murri Court for sentencing at a later date. The Murri Court is presided over by a Queensland Magistrate who is advised by Indigenous Elders or respected persons on cultural issues. The Magistrate will talk with the offender, his/her legal representative, the offender's family, a court Elder, the police prosecutor and a Corrective Services representative. The Magistrate may ask that a case plan be devised for the offender by Corrective Services. Case plans will generally be worked out in consultation with an Elder, the offender's family and the local community. Other service providers such as drug, alcohol, psychological and violence treatment agencies may also be included. The case plan will then be put before the court, where the Magistrate can speak with an Elder to clarify parts of the sentence option and the suitability of the sentence. This process has been extremely successful and is based on similar systems in South Australia, Victoria and NSW are also engaging in this process with great results.

READ Matthew ch.25 vv.31-45

The test of faith is always love, love such as is displayed in Jesus Christ: a down-to-earth faith which 'gets its hands dirty', caring for the outcast, the despised and the forlorn, not counting the cost. How would our society, our religious groups, and our lives, be judged by the criteria of this Gospel passage?

PLEASE PRAY FOR

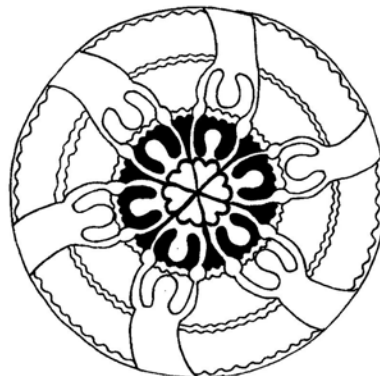
- * *Indigenous women prisoners and families of Indigenous prisoners*
- * *the authorities (magistrates and police) who make decisions in regard to Indigenous people. Pray that they are just and fair.*
- * *the Government and the Churches that they will listen to the concerns of Indigenous people: that God will open their hearts and minds to the injustices Indigenous people face - to find solutions that will decrease the number of Indigenous people in our prison system*

Prayer for the Day

Abandoned, Betrayed, Confined
- forgive us this ABC;
and help us to find ways to break the pattern;
that Destitution might become Delight,
Everytime, might be Never Again,
and Failure, Fullness of Life.

Fill those in prison,
inmate, staff and visitor
with your Grace;
and grant them Hope.

Amen



Overcoming Violence against women and children