

The Avenues of Hope

I remember a conversation I had with a prisoner a number of years ago who was contemplating being released. He had six months left to the parole board and commented, “I don’t know if I have enough time left to finish all the things I need to do.” He had set a number of goals for himself and was in the process of completing most of them. About a year earlier he had started serious conversations with his former wife and was working on reconciliation. He was also in contact with his children and was optimistic that his family ties were developing in a positive direction. He expected to finish a college degree in five months and earn a certificate in typewriter and computer repair in six. In addition, he was tutoring three men in academic work and they were making significant progress and were excited about their new potential. Several new avenues of hope were hope for himself and others and he wasn’t sure if he could finish all his projects before release.

Prison is a place where avenues of hope are not always apparent. In the Book of Isaiah one verse states, “There is a highway in the desert which is called the Holy Way.” This is a reference to a road God provided for Israel which led from captivity back to Jerusalem. It was a road that led from death to life. In the desert one can look in every direction – north, south, east, or west – and it will all look the same. It looks endless and hopeless. To have a road that leads from death to life, from nowhere to somewhere, is a pretty exciting prospect.

Prison is very much like the desert. There appears to be many roads that lead nowhere. What makes the situation even more difficult is that most people believe there are no avenues that offer life and they live with no hope or expectation. Believing there are avenues that are life-giving requires faith – finding those avenues requires creativity, commitment, and significant resources.

We seem to live in a time when the avenues now have road blocks or dead end signs. We need to ponder the situation and measure its gravity. Can the road blocks be removed and the way opened again? Does the Holy Way that leads from death to life still exist? These are serious questions that each prison chaplain must consider. They can only be answered out of the historical situation and the relevant context of faith.