

Comments by Rev. Edwin Mark Muller
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Delivered by Rev. Petero Sabune

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In 1967 I became Chaplain to Green Haven Prison after being trained for the work at the City Penitentiary of New York on Rikers Island, Methodist Hospital in Brooklyn, The New Jersey State Mental Hospital, and The Ecumenical Institute in Chicago.

I spent the first two weeks visiting all areas of the prison, which included the hospital, solitary confinement, the visiting room, the yards, the work areas, and the school. I found that the school only went up to the eighth grade. There was an office staffed by one prisoner that offered a program for cell study. The textbooks used in the classroom were discarded from city schools and when you opened the cover in large bold print it read : “REJECT” from New York City Schools.”

Early in 1968 I organized the first Exodus Group at Green Haven. There were sixteen in the group, twelve prisoners and four outside volunteers.

Here are a few examples of college development that I witnessed at Green Haven.

Our first college class offered a community college degree and included at least three outstanding students. Jeffrey G. Smith took his community college degree when released and graduated from Vassar, Princeton, and Yale Law. In 2016 his picture was in *The New York Times* as one of the top ten lawyers in New York. Jeff has stayed involved with his Green Haven roots. He was a speaker at our 50-year celebration of the Exodus Group at Riverside Church and at the Vassar College-Green Haven Reunion. For many years he has also served on the Board of Directors of The Osborne Association. Gerald Hooks was the first to leave Green Haven and attend Marist College where he graduated with honors. Another Exodus man, when released, earned an MSW degree and had a long career in social work.

Salvador Agron (The Capeman) was sent to the Sing Sing Death House at age 16 and could neither read nor write. His sentence was changed from death to 25 to life. In 1971 he was transferred to Green Haven and I got him involved in our early college program. He had become self-educated. When he wrote an impressive op-ed in *The New York Times* the governor took notice and commuted his sentence so he could attend the State University at New Paltz. I was to be his mentor. After he was released, and eventually died, Paul Simon contacted me and decided to prepare his Broadway Musical called *The Capeman*. Since Sal had been a member of the Exodus Group for several years, Paul came three times over a six-year period to meet with our Exodus

Group.

The second example concerns my first and last Exodus Groups. The first was at Green Haven. There were 16 men in the group and only two had attended high school. The rest could barely read or write, but the group developed the model for the first college class. It was part of a comprehensive model, and when William Vanderbilt saw it he said to me: "Let's do it." The model included 15 different programs and we implemented all 15 at once, including the college program.

My last Exodus Group was at Fishkill and included 16 men. Eight had college degrees and the other eight had both college and the MPS (Master of Professional Studies) degrees from New York Theological Seminary at Sing Sing. Most of the group had attended Bard College through its Bard Prison Initiative. Our outside guest that evening was Ronald Day, PhD. Ronald had been in Exodus for several years and had earned 90 college credits inside but all three of his degrees were earned outside after release. He is now Senior Vice President of The Fortune Society.

In my final thoughts, I feel that what needs to be mentioned is kind of tragic. The largest influence on college expansion program was the uprising in Attica in 1972. A few years after that a large amount of money, both Federal and State, was made available [in the form of Pell and TAP grants specifically to subsidize education for low-income citizens. This era was followed by the Rockefeller Drug Laws, the Clinton Administration's Crime Bill, and Governor Pataki's tough on crime agenda. The result was. In 1994, the elimination of the Pell and TAP grant programs, crippling education within NY prisons.

In the last couple of decades hope has been restored in this area, to a notable degree, by programs like Rising Hope, the New York Theological Seminary Certificate in Ministry and Human Services, and particularly the Bard Prison Initiative associate and bachelor's degrees. These programs have inspired a variety of community colleges and other institutions to provide life giving education to incarcerated men and women throughout the state.] ¹

Prison is very much like the desert. There appear 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.²

¹ Edited for clarity by Gordon W Brown, 8/11/25; original closing text missing.

² Rev. Edwin M. Muller; from "The Avenues of Hope" an Exodus Study Paper.