



Alpha in a Prison Context

A personal encounter experienced by a member of the Prison Ministry Team. This is her story...

I was always troubled and concerned when we read in the Bible that Jesus asks us to “set the prisoners free”. I would always just dismiss this idea completely, thinking that there was absolutely no way possible I could ever do anything like that. When would I ever be able to go into a prison?

Well, Alpha has given me just that opportunity ... it was like a magnet pulling me to do just that!

In March 2014, I was invited to join the Prison Ministry team to see what happened inside Leeuwkop Maximum Prison - that is where the long term inmates are held - those who are doing time “*for life*”. Yes, those who have committed murder or rape.

For about three hours the following Saturday morning - whilst ministering to about 80 of these offenders (we’d also been praying, singing and dancing with them), I was totally in awe of the Christian love that shone from the eyes of many of the inmates who had completed the Alpha course the previous season. Their joyful singing and innate rhythmic dancing uplifted us all. Their depth of knowledge of the Bible left me feeling totally inadequate and embarrassed.

I was completely “hooked”. What an over-whelming and uplifting experience it had been. But it left my heart and soul in chaos and turmoil. For 5 days afterwards, I felt as if I was being churned through a washing machine.

Two weeks later my husband, John, came along too – mainly to see what life behind bars is really like! He, too, left Leeuwkop that day, a changed man.

Each year two sessions of Alpha run for about fourteen consecutive Saturday mornings in Leeuwkop Maximum Prison. Other members of our team have also run consecutive seasons in Medium C also at Leeuwkop.

Pope Francis would be delighted to learn that it is very much an ecumenical outreach project. Our Alpha facilitator group is made up of Catholics (from the Rosebank and Bryanston parishes) as well as a couple from the Maronite community in the South, plus Methodists from the Bryanston Methodist Church. I have even had two Muslim inmates in my group who are now committed Christians.



We meet at Leeuwkop at 8.30am every Saturday morning and have some time to chat and pray before we go “inside” just before 9am. One group goes into Maximum Security and another group goes into Medium C section.

We’re never too sure of what the procedure will be when we arrive each week. It all depends on the circumstances within the prison. If there have been any incidents and the guys have misbehaved during the previous week, *LOCK DOWN* will be enforced when no outsider is allowed to go into the prison.

When this happens the inmates are not even allowed out of their cells.



As it is even when they are allowed to sit outside in the courtyard and get some exercise and a bit of sunshine, all they can see is the sky – not even a tree or a blade of grass! I find this is so sad that they are even deprived of the great beauty of our Creator.

The most wonderful part of this whole experience is that we can indeed see how as the Alpha Course unfolds, the inmates are emotionally and spiritually *SET FREE* – just as the Gospels instruct us.

We think that some of the guys enroll on the course just to get their certificates at the “prize giving” ceremony on the very last Saturday. We always joke with them about the fact that attendance at Alpha counts towards their parole. But it doesn’t take too long before different scenarios unfold.

We have found that inmates who join Alpha for the first time are often lonely, depressed or really very angry. As the weeks go by a tangible change in their demeanour is so evident.

Gradually we notice that the guys begin to smile. Their body language changes. They are willing to talk, open up and share some of their deepest pain. There’s a new sparkle of hope and love in their eyes. We witness a complete change - especially in some of those who were totally without hope and peace or those who had been so caught up and trapped in gangs that they had no way of escaping this *prison within a prison*. Some express that it is the first time in many years that they have had the opportunity to open up completely and are very grateful for the opportunity to express such intimate emotion. They have said

that they have felt safer within the Alpha sharing groups than being with a Correctional Services social worker.

Every week the guys look forward to our team coming to pray and share the Alpha programme with them. They always express much gratitude to us for giving up our time to be with them. Little do they know how much we ourselves actually gain and learn from them. They are so grateful for an opportunity of repentance ... that they have a second chance to become the people that God intended them to be. Some of them express that they are actually pleased that they are "*doing time*" as it has given them the opportunity to get closer to God and experience a change of heart.

Without doubt, this is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The inmates have found Jesus - and He has, indeed, *set them free!*

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