

At DUI Treatment Center Minister Rediscovered Christmas Truths

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Note from DOC's Editor, Bob Anez: Kristen Marble is a minister who comes to the Warm Springs Addiction Treatment and Change (WATCh) program at Glendive on a monthly basis and conducts a voluntary church service on Sunday afternoons. The following unique perspective was posted by Ms. Marble on the Huffington Post website following the Dec. 23 service at the facility housing 55 felony drunken-driving offenders. Reprinted with permission. WATCh East is not a prison, but a six-month treatment program in which offenders voluntarily participate as an alternative to prison and in exchange for a shorter sentence. Only 3 percent of those completing the program receive another DUI.

As Christmas draws near, churches around the country celebrate the glorious day with special worship gatherings. Disco balls for Jesus at Journey Church, little kids singing sweet songs in small-town America and a church in Washington State that raised the spirits of a sad heart. Each service unique and specially designed to once again tell the story of a baby's birth that changed the world. Each service hoping to draw the congregation into experiencing the true meaning of the season.

Today I too was blessed by a special Christmas church service. There were no disco balls or singing children. The setting was drab and far-from-festive. The stacking chairs were quickly set up in the multi-purpose room as we entered. The tattered hymnals and song sheets retrieved from the cabinet. No socializing before or after the service, only single-file, silent walking to and from the gym, punctuated by required signatures on sign-out and sign-in sheets. The individuals came all dressed in red -- not because red is a Christmas color, but because red is the color of the assigned uniform.

The service occurred at a state DUI Incarceration Facility in Montana called WATCh East. Once a month I have the privilege of serving this community as the Pastor. Two things I count on every single time I go to WATCh: it will be my favorite day of the month, and I will receive far more than I can ever give. Today was no different.

Had someone who planned the elaborate church services that filled sanctuaries and gathering spaces elsewhere walked by, they most likely would have been dismayed by what they saw and heard. This service was hardly polished or professional. We stumbled our way through "Silent Night" and "Joy to the World," singing all four verses for each song, and by the final stanzas were approaching the intended rhythm and tune. Stories were shared. Stories of hurt and regret over previous Christmas disasters intermixed with stories of commitment to hope and hard work. Two final songs, songs requested by individuals -- "Victory in Jesus" and "Amazing Grace" -- concluded our singing.

The disjointed, out-of-tune singing caused us all to chuckle, but its heart-felt honesty was felt, and the very real presence of God relished. What followed the singing was simple. A few Bible verses read aloud and discussed, their truths sinking deeply into hearts. Their promises of God's strength, presence and love meeting immense needs.

Nobody questioned the significance of Jesus' birth so long ago. The reality of God who became man -- to be with us, to guide us, to redeem us -- from the brokenness of life was longed for. Gathered in that circle of chairs, each individual, with masks removed, truthfully, transparently held up their own lives of substance abuse, felonies, prison, recovery and family turmoil alongside God's offer of forgiveness and healing. Immanuel -- God with us -- became our lifeline, anchor, second chance that we all so desperately desired.

No eye was dry as we closed with a final song and prayer. But we could not linger in that holy space. The allotted hour all too quickly came to an end. It was time to shuffle quietly back to the security desk.

On the way out an employee stopped me. I feared I had somehow broken a rule or taken too many extra minutes out of the highly scheduled day. Instead she shared, "Kevin* was really upset he missed church today. He says that he always enjoys your services because you do such a great job."

As I signed out, removed my name tag, and cleared through the locked gate my mind whirled with joy. The singing -- the quality doesn't really matter. The setting -- pretty much anywhere will do. Even the clothes -- prison uniforms are good enough for God. I reflected on the beauty of honest worship and significance of vulnerability. I pictured each individual, praying their Christmas, despite being separated from loved ones, would be a holy, hope-filled day, as they personally recognized the miracle of Christmas.

Before today's service, I had somehow lost the Spirit of Christmas. Illness and busyness had clouded the intended celebration. But a simple hour changed that for me.

No light display, decorated tree or holiday performance, no disco ball or children's choir could ever communicate that message as clearly as I heard it today. God didn't arrive in grandeur but in quiet insignificance. His gift wasn't intended for the great but the great-in-need. His hope isn't experienced in our strength but in our honest weakness.

When all was stripped away, Christmas once again became the simple truth that has boggled minds for centuries: our monumental need is met by God's magnificent gift.

And I will be forever grateful to a handful of red-uniformed residents at a state correctional facility for reminding me of that truth.

**Name changed.*