

CHAPTER EIGHT

PRISON WIDOW

Loneliness, frustration and guilt are the emotional feelings of the wife that waits outside the prison wall for her husband's release. She hasn't committed any crime, but she has gone through all of the arrest and trial procedures with her husband. Now she waits outside the prison wall while he serves his sentence. An important part of herself is locked up in that prison cell and her life will not be normal until her husband is released.

Besides being sole parent to the children, she is repairman, grocery buyer, taxi driver, breadwinner, chief cook and accountant for the family that is left behind. She visits at the prison and the welfare office on a regular basis and buries her identity elsewhere to hide her shame. She is lonely and often bitter because she has been left alone to wait for a man that she loves who may just commit another felony when he is finally released. She is afraid that he will go back to jail again and leave her alone once more. Welfare doesn't provide enough food and shelter so she tries to earn a little more money by working as much as possible, as she tries to hide the true circumstances surrounding her life.

The prisoner's wife really wants to wait for her man, but often she does not. Figures at one Midwest state penitentiary show that 70 percent of all marriages break up during the first year of incarceration. Nearly all spouses, who didn't divorce their mates who are locked up inside the prison wall, had some sexual relations outside of marriage if the prison sentence and separation lasted more than one year. These are hard facts not often faced by prison ministry volunteers. They do not reflect as much on the wives, who didn't survive the wait, as the justice system that created a prison widow with a living husband that she cannot live with for several months or years.

Inmates learn these truths shortly after they arrive in prison and some men will encourage their wives to seek an outside relationship with someone that they know and trust, who does not represent a real threat to their marriage. In other words, they approve (as long as they can't be there personally) of someone who will not represent permanent competition. No single prison problem is less understood. Few couples who survive the prison experience will ever talk about this dilemma. Experienced prison chaplains know that separation of married couples is one of the most complex problems facing the prison ministry today. Conjugal visits have greatly relieved the problem in prisons such as Attica, New York and Walla Walla, Washington; but many states have failed to deal with this situation and the social nightmare that it creates.

What is the result? Besides an unstable marriage, there is a lifetime scar on the relationship that couples often blame on the justice system. Right or wrong they blame the justice system and not themselves. There is no easy answer, but as we minister in the prison environment we must always be aware of the possibility of infidelity, which is seldom discussed or talked about. It creates an atmosphere that will have an effect on your ministry both to the inmate inside the wall and his spouse on the outside. Prayer works wonders, but there is also a great need for the love and companionship of the church to the family during this difficult period. The wife who waits for her husband needs enough material help to make welfare reach. She needs social acceptance by the church to provide love and companionship while she waits. The church can be a tremendous help by just being there to share the hurt and to care.

Some fine young wives do wait and survive the prolonged prison sentence. If they can do this, their marriage may actually be strengthened. The men and women who minister in prison need to be aware of the serious problem created by separating married couples so they can properly minister to both the inmate in prison and the family that waits outside the wall. Besides acceptance, love and a normal Christian lifestyle, the prison widow needs some financial assistance in the form of car repair or moving help, as well as children's clothes and basic food if the welfare check doesn't fully reach. Above all, she needs the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ in her life. She is probably going to be more receptive than she has ever been before because of her current dilemma.

There are many fine churches that have helped prisoners' families through difficult periods of imprisonment. They make the future of that Christian family a distinct possibility after the inmate is released from jail. May God bless them all.