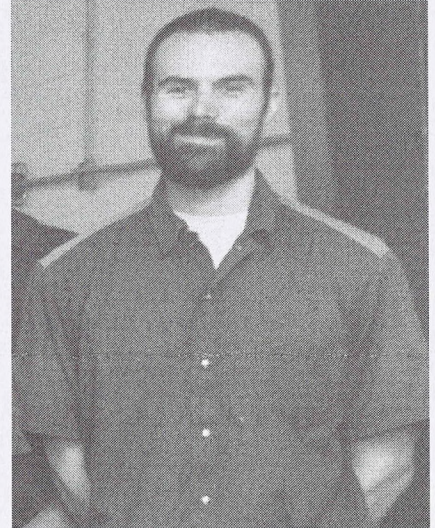


To: APWA

From: Daniel Pirkel

Re: Transforming the Prison Culture

Before my incarceration, I was a selfish, egotistical fool that suffered from a low self-esteem. After a series of unfortunate events (including betrayal by the love of my life, and my ex-girlfriend ripping my son out of my arms), I tried to commit suicide five times at the age of 19 years old. I took a bottle of pain killers, attempted to drown myself, and jumped out of my Dad's car at 85 MPH in front of a semi. When these attempts failed, I tried to force the police to kill me by firing a .22 cal. pistol at them. Thankfully, no one was shot except me. The police exercised incredible restraint by relying on mostly nonviolent force, for which my family and I will be forever grateful.



While I was at the Forensic Center in Ypsilanti, I began to realize how much pain I had caused the victims of my crimes, as well as how I had disgraced my family, so I decided to turn my life around. Overwhelmed with grief, shame, and anxiety, I asked God that if He was real, to please show Himself (until that point I was an atheist). Within a couple of days, I found a book called *The Case for Christ* on the floor in the corner of my room. After reading half of it, the evidence of the resurrection overpowered my doubts. Particularly compelling was Paul, a former enemy of Christ who inexplicably became His greatest advocate. I professed my newfound faith at my sentencing, not because I expected for it to get me out of trouble, but because it demonstrated that my world view had changed so dramatically that there is no way I would do something so immoral again. In turn, the Judge gave me a 22-52-year long sentence, oddly citing rehabilitation as one of the major reasons behind his decision.

Despite this setback, my newfound faith motivated me to reexamine all of my beliefs, and to attempt to make up for my past failings. I began to believe that God had a purpose in my incarceration. I refused to buy a TV for my first two years, and studied the Bible every day. I sought out mentors, and visited the library as much as possible. This went on for five years before I came to the realization that I would probably be at least 41 years old before I was

eligible for a parole no matter how hard I worked, or how much I had changed. I began to wonder as to why God would allow this. Although I continued to do the right things, I was only going through the motions. I felt hollow and empty.

It was in this mindset that I prayed for God to make a way for me to earn a college degree. I wanted to write books to help people learn from my past mistakes, and I believed college was necessary for this. A few months later, my Chaplain asked me if I was interested in filling out an application for the Calvin Prison Initiative. In 2016, I was one of twenty men to receive this blessing, and I have made the most of it, earning a 3.8 GPA thus far. More importantly, this program has reinvigorated my life with hope and purpose, the same purpose as CPI: transforming the prison culture.

To accomplish this goal, CPI graduates will be sent to different facilities to teach classes to other prisoners. Many CPI students have already begun to teach prisoners who are within one year of their ERD and are housed in the Vocational Village. The subject matter of these classes range from Algebra and Geometry to Moral Formation, and Employment Workshops. CPI students also publish a school newspaper called *The Sentinel* every month, as well as participate in the Writer's Club, the Restorative Justice Club, and the Garden Club. All of this is done while maintaining an overall class average 3.6 GPA. While CPI has done an admirable job of creating a grassroots movement to change the prison culture, we need the support of the local community, the legislature and the prison authorities to see a complete transformation.

The public can help in many ways. When I was first incarcerated, I was lucky enough to find good mentors who helped me reform my life. Not everyone is so fortunate. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is trying to rectify this through the Good Neighbor Project, which helps citizens to find prisoners who are interested in being mentored through the mail. Not only does this allow the community to assist prisoners develop spiritually and emotionally, but it also provides citizens the opportunity to become familiar with prison issues and how they can become advocates for positive reforms. Members of the public can also help by volunteering as guest speakers for church services, or teach classes on a variety of subjects, be it a Bible study, a basic finance course, or a vocational trade (it all depends on what the Warden

of the Institution allows). Some people can assist prisoner advocacy organizations like the Coalition for Justice Voters their pursuit to pass "smart on crime" legislation.

While Michigan's penal system needs many reforms, its most oppressive nature revolves around the fact that no matter how hard we work, or how much we have changed, our earliest release dates remain the same unless we receive a commutation, obtain a favorable judgement in court, or leave in a box. While county jail inmates can earn good time (one day for every six days served without disciplinary issues), state prisoners in Michigan cannot (MCL § 51.282). This does not make sense, as people serving longer sentences for more serious crimes than those found in county jails (i.e. property or drug offenses) are less likely to recidivate (see *Paroling people who committed serious crimes: What is the actual risk?* published by Citizen's Alliance on Prisons and Public Spending, 2014). Furthermore, extending good time to inmates held in state facilities would not endanger the public, as the parole board would still have the ability to continue a prisoner's sentence if they were not convinced of the prisoner's rehabilitation. Furthermore, a prisoner with a 20-year sentence would only be reduced to 17.15 years. If this system were to be implemented retroactively, I could receive a parole at the age of 38 (instead of 41) since I was incarcerated at the age of 19.

In addition to offering time reductions for good behavior, many other states offer prisoners the ability to reduce their sentence by completing college or other types of educational programs. When prisoners take advantage of these opportunities, all of society benefits. For instance, the Rand Corporation's MetaAnalysis (spanning 32 years of research) demonstrates that general education in a correctional setting reduces individual recidivism rates by 43%, thereby saving taxpayers the cost of re-incarceration and fostering public safety by preventing the commission of future crimes. While all prisoners may not be able to earn a college education, it is in societies best interest to invest in those incarcerated. Regardless of what we do, 95% of prisoners eventually return to the community. The more prepared they are to deal with the temptations of their old lifestyles, the better off everyone is.

Note for readers: Do not hesitate to send me any comments or questions at the address below.

11/14/2017

Date

Sincerely,

*Daniel Pirkel*

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