

On October 9-12, 2009, I was blessed to be among 25 men from the Kairos Prison Ministry who entered the holy ground of the U.S. Penitentiary in Lompoc. The prison became holy ground, not because of our presence, but because of the undeniable presence of the Holy Spirit. We are all broken people, and we entered the prison in the spirit of humility and brokenness, asking only that God use us to show the men the infinite, undying, unconditional love He has for them and for each of us. We came not to save them, but to be saved with them, to work out our salvation as Church with the men, allowing ourselves to be loved by God, to be transformed to be one, holy and apostolic – truly the Church.

We came truly as an ecumenical group – Catholics, Mainline Protestants, Evangelicals – and we left our differences far outside the prison gates. Our experience taught me that the body of Christ, although human and thus broken and given to strife and division, is capable of allowing God to move us beyond our differences and act as one for His greater glory.

Our goal for the Weekend was to communicate God’s unconditional love for each of us, and we accomplished that through a series of talks, small group discussion, and the sharing of prayer shields, letters and cookies, and a prayer vigil.

Each talk builds on the theme of love, grace and forgiveness offered in Christ, and the call to Christian action on behalf of Christ in the world. Each man who gave a talk was open, honest and vulnerable, and yes, we shed tears. We spoke about who we are, talked about our life experiences, and were frank about our failures and our sinfulness. We also spoke about God’s forgiveness, about how God’s love overcomes all of our faults. We went to the hard places, those places we rarely (or perhaps never) go to, to encourage the men to do the same during the Weekend.

Although speaking about God’s unconditional love and forgiveness was critical, we also showed it through what we call Agape, consisting of prayer shields, prayer letters, cookies and participation in a prayer vigil. Prayer shields are coloring book-style pages, with a picture of what could be the Father welcoming back the prodigal son, with a verse from Psalm 145:9: “The Lord is gracious, and full of compassion; Slow to anger, and of great mercy.” Members of the outside community colored them, and children drew an outline of their hand, wrote their name and age, and a short inspirational saying on the back. We hung hundreds of prayer shields above the room so the men could walk around the room and read them. Each of the 25 team members wrote a letter to each man expressing God’s love for him. In addition, many members of the outside community wrote letters to the men. Each team member brought homemade cookies for the men, and many from the outside community baked cookies as well. Members of the outside community also participated in a prayer vigil by signing up to pray for the Weekend during a half hour time slot. People prayed for the men throughout the entire weekend.

We strongly encouraged the men to form small sharing groups after the Weekend, in order to continue the experience of being Church, and to help the men in their journey as Christians. During this Kairos, I developed a greater appreciation for how hard prison

life is, and specifically how hard it is to live as a Christian in prison. Participation in small groups is a great way for the men to stay on the right path and to continue their growth as children of God.

On the Kairos Weekend, we encountered 45 men who were not so different from us. I found the only significant difference to be that while the team members had already experienced God's love in rich ways, most of the men we served had not. The Kairos Weekend gave the men – and us, the team members – the opportunity to experience God's love, and what it means to be Church.

On the following pages are comments made by the men during an open mic session at the end of the Kairos Weekend.

If you would like more information about Kairos, please go the Kairos Lompoc website at <http://www.kairoslompoc.org>

## Kairos 30 Closures Comments

All Participants, individually and by Table Family, were asked to respond to three questions at the end of the Kairos 30 weekend:

1. In what spiritual condition did you arrive at Kairos?
2. What did you find here?
3. What will you be taking with you?

Here are some of their responses:

1. I was nervous; hopeful; didn't know what to expect; curious; searching; with empty spirits; already united with Christ; torn; confused; sad; distant; lonely; ashamed; with open hearts; hungry for the Spirit of God; needing to charge my spiritual battery; not interested, with broken spirit; with great love and joy.

2. True love and fellowship; caring listeners; much inspiration; God's knowledge; that God is real; an enormous union with my brothers; new friends; peace; the Spirit of Christ; God's blessing.

3. Eternal brothers; a new resolve to be the best Christian I can be; a positive attitude; Choices, Opening the Door, Discovery, a Christian ... (He listed all the titles of talks given during the weekend); compassion; a great example of the love of Christ Jesus; the strength to carry, to stand firm in truth and courage.

Given individual opportunities at the "Open Mic," here is a sampling of comments from Participants (Note: It was difficult to hear clearly with electric fans buzzing, and many of the Participants used this time to thank our Kairos team instead of expressing what the weekend meant to them personally):

"This is true love. Jesus and His angels are here. I've never felt love like this before. It's a good leap in my Christian faith."

"I skipped all kinda Kairoses I shoulda gone to. I gotta repent for that. I found a home right here to rest my head. If you don't believe in Jesus, I'm still gonna love you; but if you do believe, I'm gonna love you that much more! We all have our own truths, but we've got one Shepherd. This is what restoration's all about. You're doing a great thing right here."

"I see the love of Christ, and I thank Jesus for the body of Christ."

"Praise God for allowing us to be here!"

"I want to answer everybody's letters, but I only have two minutes. My experience in Kairos was the best experience in the 37 years of my life. I've never gotten so many letters in my life. Every single letter was full of love. This is the beginning of a new life for you. We are family. If God was looking for instruments to make an orchestra, then He has definitely made a good choice in Kairos."

"Praise God! When I first came, spiritually my battery was kinda drained. It's meant a whole lot! Just to see how many people are praying for us means a whole lot to me."

My experience here has been very uplifting. I truly believe in the power of God to help us face challenges and difficulties. What was a rocky road is no longer rocky. It is the power of God that's changing me."

"I'm finally standing up and doing what's right. We'll take this with us for the rest of our lives."

"I came with a bad attitude. The whole time I was sitting there, I was blocking it out, but now, forgive me for giving you a hard time. I want to express my love for all of you."

"I've been in prison a long time, but I've done a lot of praying and seeking the Lord. This has been a real blessing. It's been a tremendous experience. I'll be around; I'll see you next Kairos."

"We can't see God with our eyes, but we can feel Him with our hearts."

"The stories [the Outside Team] told took me by surprise. I never felt the Spirit before, but today I felt it for the first time in my life. All my doubts and worries are gone."

"I met a lot of friends I didn't know I had. When I see them again I'll be more than glad to say 'hi.' Acknowledge each other when you see each other in the hall and the yard, because we're brothers!"

"I wasn't going to show up. I was kind of backsliding, but it gave me time to talk to my brothers and decide to go back to church."

I thank God for being here. I came with a spirit really, really down; but yesterday God's Spirit filled me."

"Hey, I'm happy! I'm a happy camper! I see these guys in here, and I'm blessed. The Lord is beautiful. He comes in the clouds. It's hard to believe, but, where I come from, if someone had told me back when I was the leader of a motorcycle club that I'd be saying what I'm saying ... I'd have punched him in the eye. When the Lord comes, what's gonna be on your plates? Is He gonna be able to say, 'This Is my son'? Don't listen to what your friends say, that you're wussy or weak for coming to Kairos, 'cause it's only between you and the Lord."

"When I look at you, I see Jesus in your eyes. This is the first time I've experienced true fellowship from outside."

The "Fourth Day" talk was given by a man named Joseph. He spoke fast, so it was difficult to catch much of what he said. Hopefully the following will capture the gist of his message:

"Kairos is a beautiful thing. This is my fourth Kairos. When I arrived here in this prison, I was already serving the Lord. My friend told me to check out Kairos, and it has helped me so much! It's not easy walking with that cross: It's heavy, but Christ helps us hold it up higher. I thank the Lord to see a lot of inmates participate ... and some were the same ones who were against Kairos. I want to encourage the Participants to keep the faith.

"I used to be associated with the South Side, but now I walk with the Lord. Don't forget what the Lord has done!

"I'm actually [getting] short [with my prison sentence]. I'm just 13 days to my house, but it's [going to be] tough because the battlefield is really out there.

“I’ve had a good experience in Kairos. Every time I see new members of my Kairos family, it’s like I already knew them. Let’s not forget what Kairos is: It’s the love of God.

“I never thought I’d have to go through this [prison time], but it’s all for God’s purpose. God bless you all with the love of Christ!”

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Again, I apologize for taking notes on such a small fraction of the Closura Comments.

My brothers at the Timoty Table Family (Yes, the “h” was missing from our table sign) truly bonded like a family: We had differences and disagreements; lesions, sutures, and healings; and we came to accept each other fully as members of our family – not *in spite of* our differences, but rather *because of* them.

No story has value unless its characters are unique.

—Roy Smith (El Rollo)