

## **Jesus is My Rock: 25 Years of Grace College in Prison**

**Perspective #50      John Teevan      April 21, 2023**

*I wrote this in June 2011 just after our final college graduation ceremony. Our grad, I'll call him Dave, spoke.*

The Grace College Prison Extension was in its prime when the Indiana Legislature allowed it to end. Of the 2500 prison men in colleges, Grace enrolled 350. We were set to grow enrollment even more after graduating 142 men in the 2010-11 school year. Roughly 110 men at ISP-Michigan City under Roger Krynock, and 150 at Miami led by Brian Ramsey, and 40 at Wabash Valley were going to be joined by a record 80 at Pendleton, both led by John French. The school year was to begin in early May but only days earlier its demise was sealed.

Every year has its challenges. For a solid year Miami was not able to figure out how to feed men lunch and get them to their 1:00 classes before 1:45-2:00. In August 2009, an escape through a tunnel to a manhole in Michigan City led to a long lockdown that lasted until October. In August 2010, a drug problem closed PCF until the spring semester. In both cases we took books to the men in their cells and at PCF the entire semester was completed without classes ever meeting. That semester was a long independent study with an extensive system of mail to and from the profs. No one complained.

**These challenges took a toll on the men** and on the site. However, it afforded opportunities to visit men in their cell houses. Unforgettable scenes at ISP in 2009 included: the A cell house with its ranges of dense warren-like cells along with several cats on long, long leashes; hearing a Grace student's story at his cell on the top range of D cell house where it was much hotter in August than the lower ranges. He graduated in 2011. The men in the open E and F dorms were always eager to talk. On the very last day a few men spoke to me in the yard, but then as I walked with Roger Krynock across the yard to see the vegetable gardens, he was a magnet for many who knew him.

It was striking to visit the I-Complex at PCF in September 2010 with the teams of officers who were handing clamshells of food through the briefly opened bank-vault like doors. Then our books went in, and we had only a moment to encourage the men. The two-man cells were jammed, not a big problem because of the common space, but they were not allowed to use that space for months. The view from the guards' hall gate to the yard had always been full of flowers, but no more.

When I realized that college was looking unlikely, I started going to ISP weekly. A bible study on Mondays was full of men in Roger's Greek II class. Striking. I kept going and also led several independent studies so others could finish their degrees. It was an honor to be with those men who were taking the demise better than we were.

The extension of our contract through the 2011-12 school year was a relief, but by early 2011 it was evident that the end of SSACI funding was the end of that extension. Our efforts, including a brief chat with the governor when he was in Winona Lake, were futile. Even the good plan for sentencing reform was struck down by the prosecutors and the legislators.

We were placed in the prison by God's hand, and we have remained there the same way. This is sad, but not shocking. We were not singled out as a faith-based provider. We were more flexible than the big universities, who had so many full-time people that the earlier 35% funding cut really limited their final two years.

**The graduation at Miami on June 16** was all the more striking because one of our grads, Dave, spoke. He was convicted of murdering a man in a street fight in Evansville and served most of his long sentence at ISP. He came to Grace and to Christ there. He was moved around but was able to finish at Miami in 2004. He told of how a piece of mail with a 25-cent coupon turned into a Class B write up. He won his appeal and was able to finish his

Grace degree. He scorned the idea that the DOC 'made him a success' when, as he said, the DOC was not trying to make him, but to break him. He said that success is not education or income, but the way you treat people.

He told of how he was met by a homeless veteran's shelter man when he was dropped off in Indy at his release. No one at the shelter knew of such a man. He told of how he was interviewing for a clerk job with an Indy judge when the white southerner abruptly stopped and hired him on the spot because, as he said, God told him to. When Dave joined the advisory board for Miami, he sat next to the judge who sentenced him. He helped Dave get through his bar exam which he passed in early 2009. A remarkable story of determination and faith; his advice to the men was to keep at it and to not be broken by the system. He is, as he says, not a success but a work in progress.

**Jesus is My Rock:** The Miami praise band sang two toned-down songs. MSNBC who were recording this graduation then asked them to sing something less religious so as a smiling response they sang 'Jesus is My Rock' where the name of Jesus is mentioned about 100 times. When I went to thank the men before the graduation the band leader (a 2011 Grace grad) talked to me of his mentor at a northern Indiana church (NMC) and about how much his Grace degree meant to him.

He said that at ISP he had Grace's Michael Houghton who gave his final exam *in Greek*. He panicked because that was the first class he had wanted to do well. On the sixth page of the test the prof wrote, "God has already passed all your tests for you, so you pass this one as well." A relief and a fine lesson in grace.

These men, at least the ones we see, have found that Jesus is their rock. He lifts their eyes to the realities that help them through the numbing, bureaucratic, and often dehumanizing prison surroundings prison.

May God help and bless the many maximum-security prisoners who would have been students or clerks or tutors in the new school year but who now face being classified as 'idle no-pay' for the foreseeable future.