

Life experiences led to passion for corrections ministry

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GALATIA, Ill.—“Why are you interested in corrections ministry?”

It was a fair question, and Karen Vinyard faced it head on. Her answer at the time? “My husband is incarcerated.”

Vinyard, a longtime Woman’s Missionary Union leader in Illinois, became involved in corrections ministry while her husband was serving 13 years in prison after being convicted on drug-related charges. Their daughter, who was 10 years old when her father was arrested, grew up, graduated from college and got married while her dad was in prison.

“I tell people: ‘It’s not something that I planned for my life. It’s not something that I wanted to happen in my life,’” Vinyard acknowledged.

“I would tell that to our daughter. I said: ‘But you know what? It happened. Now what are we going to do with it? We have a choice to make in this. ... We can hide it, be ashamed of it, or we can use it to somehow allow God to bring glory to him and to use us in this.’”

Vinyard chose the latter—even amid the painful and unexpected detours of life. Today, she and her husband, who was released from prison last year, are active members of First Baptist Church of Eldorado, Ill.

‘Why not me?’

While she is grateful for their current season of life, Vinyard remains deeply committed to helping other families still struggling with hardships similar to those she and her family faced.

“I think truthfully, there were so many years that I felt like I probably lived in a tunnel—just trying to survive at times,” she candidly said. “You don’t maybe sometimes have a lot of support from people, friends. It’s not something that you talk about many times over casual conversation.

“It was, I think, after my daughter had actually graduated from high school and college, I just finally felt a freedom like: ‘OK, God, we made it. We made it. Thank you.’

“Through this time, we were able to raise a daughter in the church and still, even with an incarcerated father, to kind of still maintain that contact of the family, but yet not have a turning away from God in the midst of it, not asking God, ‘OK, why did this happen to me?’”

Instead, she asked: “Why not me? Why would this not happen to me as to anyone else?”

Supporting families, aiding re-entry

Armed with that outlook on life, Vinyard often leads conferences on the subject of “Bringing Hope to the Forgotten Families.” Noting that “sometimes I felt like the families of the incarcerated were the ones that truly were forgotten,” she explained, “We as a church need to be aware of that and to know how to minister to those families of the incarcerated.”

Along with reaching out to families, Vinyard has a burden for helping encourage churches to assist former inmates with their re-entry into society.

During a recent speaking engagement, she told participants: “People released from prison have three needs: They need a safe environment, they need employment, but they also need community. That community can be the church walking alongside, sharing the love, hope and forgiveness that

is possible through Christ.

“Are we as churches ready to minister to the needs that may come with someone who has been in prison and is re-entering the real world?” she asked. “There is a great need for churches to be bridge churches to people who are formerly incarcerated, to be mentors to them in their spiritual journey.”

Rooted in WMU

Vinyard’s ministry passion can be traced to her early years involved in Girls in Action and Acteens. In fact, she and National WMU Executive Director Sandy Wisdom-Martin are longtime friends who served together in their teens as counselors at Illinois Baptists’ Lake Sallateeska Baptist Camp.



Karen Vinyard, who grew up involved in Girls in Action and Acteens, credits missions camp at Illinois Baptists’ Lake Sallateeska Baptist Camp as helping prepare her for a life of missions and ministry commitment. She said her years there as both a camper and counselor taught her that Christian ministry to others “truly is about

service.” (WMU photo by Pam Henderson)

Wisdom-Martin vividly recalls: “The bubbly personality of the teenage Karen drew me in like a magnet. She was such a positive influence on my life, always upbeat and encouraging.”

“She served with incredible passion and joy,” Wisdom-Martin added. “Nearly four decades later, her name still brings a smile to my heart. And all those things I said about teenage Karen are still true. She has allowed God to take the circumstances of her life and use them for His glory. I am astonished by her faith and grateful our lives intersected.”

The feeling is mutual. Vinyard affirmed Wisdom-Martin’s “mission-mindedness has always been there,” as well as her commitment “to serve others, to share with others in such a loving way and such a fun way.”

“For me, WMU is extremely important. It is a foundation for me,” said Vinyard, who serves as Saline Baptist Association’s WMU director. “I want it to persevere. I want it to transcend all generations. I want it to be there for my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren because it is the vehicle, the instrument that we can use to share the gospel with others.”

All about hope

Affirming that her WMU and church involvement helped equip her to lead corrections ministry, Vinyard said: “It boils down to hope. There’s hope for that person who’s incarcerated. There’s hope for your family. There’s hope for salvation. There’s hope abounding everywhere if we will just allow our hearts to be open, to be willing to talk with others, to be willing to listen to other people, to be willing to be vulnerable sometimes and share your story.

“There may be someone sitting right next to you in our churches that either they have been or a family member has been incarcerated, but many times we won’t share that,” Vinyard pointed out.

She encourages those families to “find safe people to talk to. Find people that truly want to know what’s going on in your life because they care, not because they’re nosy about what happened.”

Urging concerned Christians to “love people where they are,” Vinyard pointed out crucial issues for many families range from financial stress to loneliness to a sense of shame. Helpful responses can include such practical steps as inviting the family over for a meal, sitting with a parent who is alone at a child’s sporting event, volunteering to take a child shopping for school clothes or just taking the time to send the child a birthday card.

“It definitely is a ministry of presence and encouragement,” she added. “Our church always paid a lot of attention to my daughter. Those things mean so much to you to have that community behind her.”

Amid all the emotional and spiritual ups and downs over the years, Vinyard said her life verse has become 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 which describes God as “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”

“The comfort that the Holy Spirit gives you is not just to bring you comfort,” she reflected. “It truly is then to share with others.”

And that’s motivation enough for Karen Vinyard to pass along that sense of comfort to those on a path similar to the one she once traveled.

EDITOR’S NOTE: As of June 16, Texas prisons housed [131,000 inmates](#). This does not count the number of inmates in [Texas state jails](#) or county

detention centers for adults and juveniles. The likelihood of someone in a Texas church being affected directly by incarceration—themselves or a family member—is high.