

THEY CAME TO SET THE PRISONERS FREE  
WELS IN THE STILLWATER PRISON

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When I first walked through the doors of the Minnesota Correctional Facility - Stillwater a light tingle went down my spine. To the right of me were a few glass display cases which told of the history of the prison. To the left was a bigger room where everyone had to go to check into the prison. Straight ahead was a big metal door which opened only when the prison guard wanted it to open. I checked in at the front desk and they told me that I was able to go into the prison that day. I had been placed on the list about a week ago, so all the preliminaries were taken care of. I walked over to the metal gate and was told by the guard that now I would have to walk through a metal detector. This detector was very sensitive so I had to make sure all metal was off my body, even down to metal that might be in my shoes. After I passed the metal detector test the big metal door opened and I was allowed to step into the first little room. The metal door began to close slowly and then I realized that in a way I was walking into another world. A world that many people do not get to see on their own will.

I was going into this prison in Stillwater to conduct Lutheran worship services. A practice that was started by Wisconsin Synod pastors in June of 1988. This was not anything that they really talk about at the Seminary. I had no class named prison ministry. Someone had to break the ground here at Stillwater so that I could have this privelege of preaching to these inmates. That is what I am going to look at in this paper: The pastors who first got into the prison for services in 1988 and what their feelings and hopes are for the future. Also I will share some of their advice to others in prison ministry situations.

The prison itself has quite a history. The first prison, in what is now the state of Minnesota, was a Territorial Prison. It was built in 1853. It was built just north of Stillwater. It consisted of 280 square feet which housed 6 cells and 2 dungeons for solitary confinement. In the 1880's the sale of convict labor fell into disfavor in Minnesota so the prisons started to have industries inside them. The prison in Stillwater began to build farm

machinery, which is still does. Because of poor architectural planning, swampy character, frequent escapes, damp cells, and difficult housekeeping a new prison in Stillwater was planned for. By 1914 the last inmates had been transferred over from the old prison. This structure, with additions, was the one that I went into.

Enclosed in the present structure are 22 acres. The main structure has a telephone pole design. The wings extending north and south each contain 512 individual cells. The maximum capacity, which includes a minimum security building, is 1,225. It takes about 500 people to make sure that this prison runs correctly and safely.

The one worker in the prison that I had contact with was Chaplain Knowles. He had been working in this prison for 25 years. He is a Protestant minister who was lenient on doctrine and practice. I guess one has to be that way if they are going to serve a prison which is run by the state. The description of his job reads as such.

Religious services of the Minnesota Correctional Facility/Stillwater has a residential Chaplain Director for all religious programs in the institutions operated by the Department of Corrections. The chaplaincy role is adapted to the skills, interests and discipline of the individual chaplains.

The chaplains also serve as religious brokers for civilian groups of various denominations. There are seventeen different religious groups active at the Minnesota Correctional Facility/Stillwater. In addition, the chaplains serve inmate and staff as family counselors.

As one who is to serve all the religions, he has run into many interesting and uncomfortable situations. He told me of one time when he had to go into the Twin Cities to find some religious articles for a devil worshipper. He must serve all the religions, no matter how he might disagree with them, because he is an employee of the state.

In January of 1986, Pastor Marcus Birkholz of Salem Stillwater was

asked by a member from St. Matthews in Winona to visit her brother who was in the Stillwater prison. He had no church. On February 18, 1988 Pastor Lloyd Hohenstein, who is the Institutional minister for the Twin Cities, visited a man in the Stillwater prison. As they were getting acquainted he asked the Talk About the Savior question: If you died tonight, do you know where you would be? The man wanted to discuss this question and a time to do that was set up. Another inmate was also interested, so Pastor Hohenstein visited them every other week through May. These two men had these little touches with the prison, but the services were not yet formed.

Pastor Birkholz later took a few pastors to the prison for a tour. In the course of that tour Chaplain Knowles explained that there were over 1200 inmates in the Stillwater prison. A third of those inmates register as Lutherans. However, there were no Lutheran liturgical services offered. The pastor asked what Chaplain Knowles wanted them to do. He said that they should come in and conduct services in the prison.

So in June of 1988 services were started. Four times a month they were allowed to go in. They usually go in on Thursday and services start shortly after 5:15 P.M. The services inside the prison are no different than the normal page five service that we conduct in our churches. They have many of the red Lutheran Hymnals in the chapel, along with many other religious books. Chaplain Knowles asked them to use page five and be very consistent with that. He said that the prisoners whole life has usually been inconsistent. They have had people let them down. They have been told one thing and then what they are told is never carried out. He said that a consistent liturgy gives them something that is always there and stabilizing. Even something that small can help. They do, however, have special services on the holidays. Holidays can be a very hard time in the prison because these men are away from whatever family they may have. They have had Christmas services with harp and flute and this year they took in a five voice choir.

The chapel itself is quite interesting. It is off the main hallway of

the prison and, in a way, is a world unto itself. As you walk through the colored glass doors you notice right away that it is airconditioned. There is a little hallway which has a few offices off of it. At the end of the hallway is the chapel. It is circular in shape and is that way for a reason. Because this is a state owned prison they cannot favor one religion over the other. They figured that a circle was as non-denominational as they could get, and was not affiliated with any religion. A few years after they built it, an Indian walked in and said "finally a worship area in the right shape". He said that the circle represented a drum so it was an Indian style chapel. There are chairs set up and an alter opposite the door. One notices right away that there are no religious symbols or articles in the chapel. Close to the ceiling there is a metal band and on this band they can hang whatever religious symbol is needed for the service. For our Lutheran service they pulled out a big cross and hung it behind the alter area. This chapel is very functional and adaptable for all the religions that have to be dealt with.

There are usually ten or more prisoners that come to the service. That does not sound that good until one realizes that this chapel is in the middle of a prison. Since June of 1988 Bible classes also have been held after the services. Pastor Hohenstein usually does this with a few of the prisoners. Not all of those who come to the service stay for the Bible class. They are studying the books of the Bible and have gone through a good portion of the New Testament. They usually take about a chapter for every class.

Because of the difficulty in getting into the facility on a regular basis and scheduling conflicts, there are three pastors at present time that go into the prison to conduct worship services. First there is pastor Lloyd Hohenstein who is Institutional minister for the Twin Cities. He has been going into the prison for the past three years. Pastor Marcus Birkholz has also been going in for the past three years. He is the pastor at Salem in Stillwater, Minnesota. Also Pastor Don Hockmuth at Salem, Woodbury, Minnesota goes into the prison. He has been going in for the past two and one half

years. Usually two pastors go in. Pastor Hohenstein goes in almost every time to conduct the liturgy and to teach the Bible class after the service. The other pastor goes in to preach the sermon. There are also five different accompanyists who take turn going in to play the piano. They figure with so many working at this project it will continue even if someone is sick, on vacation, or takes a call away from the area. Each year these people need to fill out a form to go into the prison and they all must be approved individually. They must have an annual T.B. test and either a Mantoux test or chest x-ray. Other individuals may come with them into the prison on a one time basis twice a year. They do not have to take any tests, but a request to enter must be given several days in advance. This is the reason that vicars, like myself, and special musicians have been able to get into the prison once or twice.

There has been one baptism and two confirmations of prisoners from Stillwater. All of these were done by Pastor Birkholz. Pastor Birkholz, however, comments that they are all back in the prison system. The pastors also comment that the weakest part of this ministry is follow-up. Those who worship with them are not always Lutherans. They sometime come to the services to break the day up a bit and to get into the air conditioned area. They really have no way of knowing what happens to some who are released from prison. They do not really know what they could do for follow-up anyway, since the prisoners come from many different places.

That, in a nutshell, is the historical aspect of the WELS work in the Minnesota Correctional Facility - Stillwater. It is a different kind of ministry that really does take a special kind of person. These three men and all their helpers are doing an exceptional job at carrying out the Great Commission behind the bars at Stillwater. With rest of this paper I would like to look a these three men and there attitudes and thoughts on prison ministry.

I remember my first feelings when I got to the prison. I felt uneasy and was ready for anything to happen. I think our minds make up the worst

scenario and we believe that is what is going to happen. All the pastors expressed the same feelings. They mentioned the closing of the last gate behind them. That loud clang goes right through you the first time you experience it. They also mention that they had a feeling of coldness and a little fear. However, they also mention that because they were there to do the Lord's work, they knew that God would care for them.

Now that they have been at it for a while it seems that their feelings have changed. The anxiety and fear is low and almost gone. The coldness still hangs around, but a prison has never been described as warm and homey. No specific reason was given why the feelings had changed. One possible one was that now everything is a little more familiar. Also they have gotten to know some of the guards and prisoners, or at least recognize a face. One even mentioned that through all this he has maybe learned to lean and trust a little more in the Lord's protection. /

All of the pastors expressed the feelings that they really enjoy the prison ministry that they are carrying out. Pastor Birkholz relates a story that when he took the call to Salem, Stillwater he took it with the understanding that he would not have to work with the prison. The Lord had other plans and he says that now he enjoys the expressions of appreciation for the Word that the prisoners extend. They all like the fact that it is a pure mission endeavor and they do not have to worry about all the little things that go on in a congregation. They can just go out and do what they were trained to do, preach and teach the Word.

What about the receptiveness of the prisoners toward the Word? Pastor Hochmuth gives a little warning here. He says that they are receptive, but we also need to be cautious about that receptiveness. Some "get religion" in order to "ride the Bible out". These guys are cons and are good liars. For some of them the pastors are the only touch with the outside world. Some of the prisoners, however, do seem very receptive. Some have been worshipping with them for 1 to 2 years. Pastor Birkholz tells a story about a time that

right in the middle of his sermon he was interrupted by a man who said "I just want to thank you for taking the time to be here". Because of the follow-up difficulty they really do not know what happens to many of them after they leave the prison. Has the Word touched their lives or not? They leave that in the hands of the Holy Spirit.

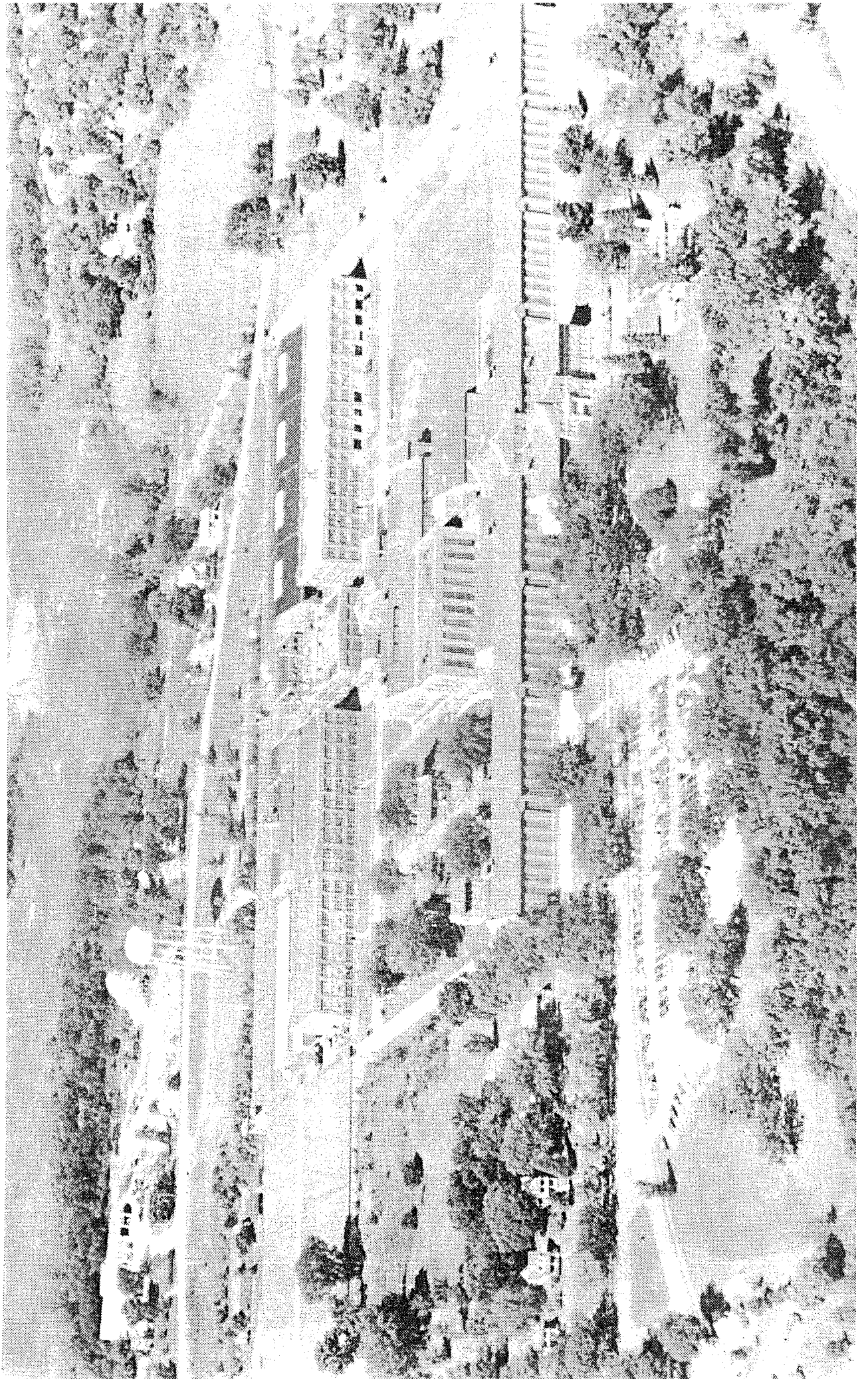
All of the pastors expressed the warning that if one gets into a prison they need to be sure to follow all of the rules. A story about this was told to me by Chaplain Knowles. There is a rule in most prisons which says "nothing in and nothing out". A pastor was conducting services in a prison for a couple of years and he got to know many of the men quite well. One time, after a service, an inmate came up to him and said that he really appreciated what the pastor had done for him and the other inmates the last couple of years. He pulled out a small stone out of his pocket and told the pastor that he wished him to take it. On one side he had printed the word smile and on the other side he had painted a picture of a flower. The stone was small enough to place in a pocket and the prisoner hoped that the pastor would keep it with the coins in his pocket. On bad days, the pastor might reach into his pocket for some change and see this stone with the word smile on it and it will make his day a little brighter. The pastor saw nothing wrong with taking the stone so he placed it in his pocket and walked out. About six months later the same prisoner approached the pastor and handed him an envelope. The pastor's first reaction was that he could not take it. The prisoner explained that the letter was for his mother's birthday and she did not know he was in prison. If she knew he was in prison, her heart would be broken. He wished the pastor to mail the card outside the prison so that the prison stamp would not go on the letter. The pastor gave in and mailed the card. About six months later the same prisoner came up to the pastor and handed him a manila envelope and asked if he would mail it to his lawyer. The pastor immediately said no way. The prisoner, however, recalled for the pastor the fact that he had already taken out a rock and a birthday card. If he did not take this out he would tell the



warden and the pastor would lose his ministry in the prison. This prisoner had the pastor right where he wanted him. It took him a while, but now he could manipulate him. The pastor, over the course of about a year, had lost his ministry because he did not follow the rather simple rule that the prison had given him. Chaplain Knowles urged us that we should not let our emotions rule us in the prison, because the prisoners would take advantage of that. Our thought process is not like theirs and all they have is time to think of ways of getting out. Follow the rules! It sounds simple until you have a chance to break them.

Recently these men were told that starting on April 1, 1991 their time in the prison would be limited to every other week. This was done mainly because there are so many groups wishing to get in. There is an intern from Lutheran Northwest school in the Twin Cities that works in the prison every once in a while. He will take the alternate weeks that they are not allowed to go in. They hope to get back to the regular weekly schedule when this young man goes back to school.

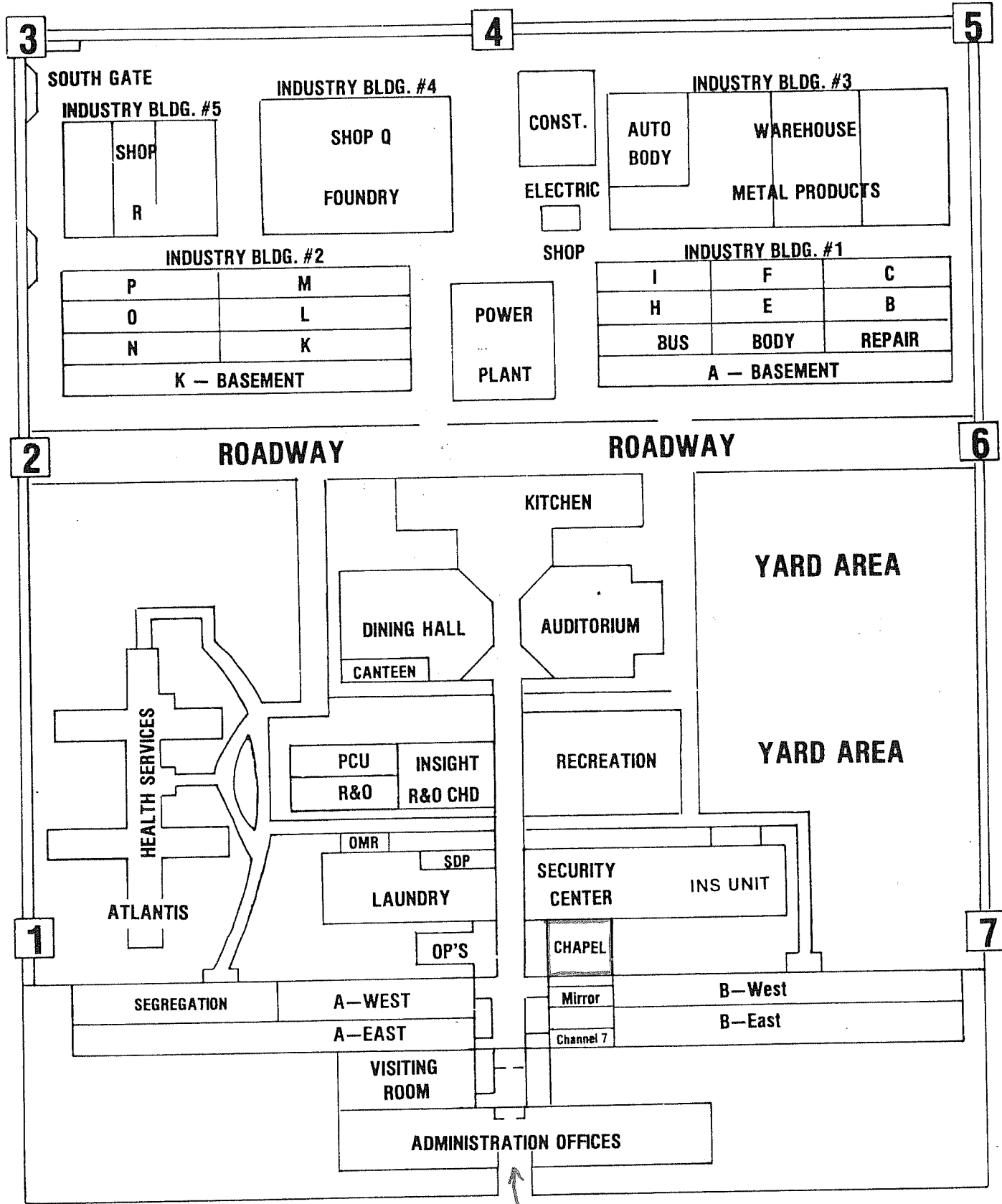
These three men have a very special ministry at the Stillwater prison. Pastor Birkholz makes the comment "We need the reminder - our task is to sow the Word and keep on sowing. The Holy Spirit is responsible for the rest. I am thankful the doors are open for our ministry". There are many doors that our Savior opens for us during our ministries. Some might be right in our back door, like the one these men found in the prison at Stillwater.



Water Tower



Water Treatment Plant



# RELIGION

