

Murder in the Faith Based Unit

At 10.30am, Thursday, 4th April an event in 'He Korowai Whakapono' the faith based unit at Rimutaka Prison, would prove to be a turning point in the unit's history. It was at that that an inmate in unit at Rimutaka Prison was found dead, with a garden fork through his throat.

Rex Hopper was coming to the end of a life sentence for killing his fiancée in 1995. After killing her, he turned the shotgun on himself, blowing half his face away. He survived to become, as Chaplain Sister Marie Roche described him, "a generous, loving man". In charge of the unit's maintenance shed, Rex became involved in an altercation with a new inmate, Emani Seu over a screwdriver.

The incident that triggered this event, could only be described as the sort of encounter that inmates have many times each day. A request was made and declined. No one could have predicted the savagery and violence of this attack, either from the nature of the incident itself, or the assailant's previous history.

The next week saw the hand of the Lord in many ways. The shock and disbelief of the tragedy was soon overtaken by amazement at the miraculous evidence of God's power to transform and mould new lives. The Prison unit staff, devastated though they were, moved amongst the inmates, hugging them, crying with them, praying with them. Christians and non-Christians alike, including prison staff from other units, joined to support each other. Our Program Manager, Pat Lewis was surrounded with support. Graeme Taylor, John Jamieson (a PF Board member), and I spent the afternoon with Pat and his colleagues.

That evening, we held a church service at the Upper Hutt Christian Fellowship, where staff, volunteers, and church leaders prayed, worshipped and shared. Phil McCarthy, the Department of Corrections, General Manager of Public Prisons, arrived unannounced. A born again Christian, Phil read from the book of Sirach, pointing out that as a Catholic, he had five more books than anyone else. It was a beautiful reading. He then made it very clear that this incident in "no way affected the Department's support for the faith based unit".

On the morning of Friday, 5th March, the inmates were unlocked for a two-hour service, organised by Prison Fellowship and the chaplaincy. The Catholic Chaplain (Sister Marie Roche), Graeme Taylor, myself, prison officers, and the inmates coordinated and spoke at the service. The music and singing could only be described as heavenly. Tears flowed, people openly supported and hugged one another, as people sought the Lord. There was a wonderful sense of unity and Holy Spirit anointing, as inmates and others struggled to establish God's purpose in all this. The inmates as a group, resolved that this was a call on their lives to Godliness, to stop grizzling and complaining, to desist from pettiness and power plays, and follow Christ with more determination than ever before.

The Regional Manager, Dept of Corrections, visited the unit later that morning, and was amazed at how settled and "together" the inmates and staff were. It can often take weeks for inmates to settle after such an incident; he acknowledged that there was a supernatural power at work.

Visitors, the Police and staff were deeply touched by the prisoner's response. A Maori elder (kaumatua) who took part in a blessing of the unit following the incident, wrote, " I was so touched by the support and endorsement displayed by the men. As we blessed each house they acknowledged by taking off hats, bowing their heads in prayer, and at the end gave a little wave of appreciation. It added essence and value to what we were doing. And to then hear them singing hymns was like the icing on the cake."

In the evening, Graeme Taylor and I visited Rex's family. They were everything that families are in these moments; sad, angry, recollecting his life with a mixture of laughter and tears. They asked all sorts of questions, some of which we were able to answer, others that we couldn't. They supported Rex's faith quest, and while they could not comprehend God's hand in this situation, talked lovingly and respectfully of the character of God. Over the next week the prison chaplaincy and Prison Fellowship shared in taken evening services in the home of the victim's family – taking the opportunity to share our faith with them, and to share in the grieving and healing process.

In November of 2004, Emani Seu was tried and found guilty for the murder of Rex Hooper.

The murder marked a turning point in the unit's journey. Inmates, staff and volunteers became acutely aware of the spiritual attacks they and their families were being subjected to. People responded to each other with increased care and sensitivity, conscious of the need to support one another in times of need and stress. Prison management made additional provision, so that inmates could receive pastoral support as they struggled with the challenges of living in an in-prison Christian community.

And so we moved forward, our resolve strengthened, and demons put to rest. While the spiritual attacks may continue, we are equipped to meet anything that Satan throws at us. If there is one scripture that gives us direction and inspiration, it surely must be Paul's words in Romans. The Living Bible says it simply:

"And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them".

Romans 8:28