

PRISON MINISTRY

A BLOG FROM A PRISON CHAPLAIN

HOW IT STARTED

After receiving dreams about an island and hearing the Macedonian call, I started seeing a flag that was unknown to me. It turned out to be the flag of Bonaire. We started praying about it and that same week I received a message from the Head Chaplain of the Justice department in 2020 about Bonaire. I invited him home and he shared about his burden over the Prison on Bonaire.

There was a pioneer needed for an internal spiritual care department. This was the confirmation we needed so we went and I started serving in the Bonaire State Prison from 2021. I now understand why God called me. The situation was very bad. Prisoners receiving no visits of family members, children of prisoners committing suicide. Gay people being bullied, many believing to be cursed, having nightmares and seeing visions of demons. There was a big variety of pastoral challenges. I think it was the right time the Prison Church started because within half a year I heard many supernatural testimonies. Due to COVID we started with six services every weekend and currently we have 2 church services every weekend, Bible study during the week, worship team sessions and individual pastorate.

Through it all I learned to trust Gods voice whenever He speaks,

Ronald Lakhichand



The first weeks and months are finally over. Everything was new in the beginning, the temperature, the speed of life and all the hassles at the Immigration service. Gradually I become more and more acquainted with the daily life on the island Bonaire.



When Bonaire became part of the Caribbean Netherlands in 2010, together with St Eustatius and Saba, the start of a Spiritual Care department for these islands was topic of discussion for a long time. However, due to the complexity of one state prison for all the BES Islands (Bonaire, Statia and Saba), many of the plans were delayed. However, when I arrived in the prison I was warmly welcomed by personnel and prisoners. They were happy to see that it finally happened and that I could represent the various Protestant denominations. Though many happy, some of the Pentecostal churches outside were a bit sceptical to my coming. I was the new kid on the block and some had been a volunteer before and got concerned of the spiritual climate.

In the Prison I discovered that many things had to be pioneered, as well as the legal status of spiritual care. Under the Dutch law, prisoners have the right to have at least one hour spiritual care per week. This did not happen for years, partially due to COVID. I had to ensure that prisoners would have access to religious materials and gave various presentations to staff and personnel.

After showing up to different meetings with staff, caseworkers, project-leaders and security, people started to recognize my face. Or perhaps it was my jacket, because apparently I'm the only one wearing any. On an average workday, I'm greeted in the hallways with, "Bon, Pastor?" The Bonairian has respect for God and faith, that must be a good sign. I'm also very happy with the new church facility. Well, nobody used it yet, except for yoga.

My first thought was: *“let’s get the church going.”* However, a strong debate with the project leader followed about the location. They actually proposed to keep the church in a small library, because not many would come anyway. I never agreed with it and they turned out to be wrong. Fortunately the director gave us the total charge of the church facility area.

At the first Bible study I offered on a Tuesday, only one person came out (!). After entering the room he even left and I saw the fear in his eyes looking at me. So the guard brought him back to his cel. This was a Holy Spirit thing and I just knew God would do something big soon. He had not led me all the way here for no reason. I went to the departments and started talking with the people. By that time I also journaled about the strategy I would use. I got the idea to make bulletins about the spiritual care, pastoral help and church services. Just like church planting, I went to the people and started inviting them to the opening service. I said there would be food and drinks and it would be fun. I guess it worked:)

I started off with six services during the weekend. My plan for the first months was to just share about Jesus. Everything about His life, about His unconditional love, about His miracles, His hope for a better future, His healing, His resurrection power and His voice. They just loved it! They started asking for me during the week and came to every service or gathering we had. It was great seeing happy faces for a change.

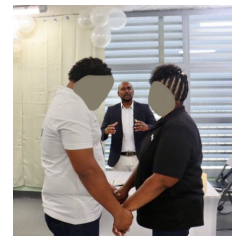


One time during my daily patrol, I visited a guy from Venezuela. He shared about the discrimination he went through because he was homosexual. I embraced him and said he was welcome in Church. He never missed a service and testified after several months about Jesus coming to him in his cell. One time he asked me if I could pray with him, so I did. He got baptised with the Holy Spirit and started speaking in tongues for the first time in his life.



Another time I spoke about a fatherless generation and Gods Kingdom. Before I knew all who were present broke out in tears. God had moved their hearts. We all cried together. Now that relationship is established, I hear of their dreams and goals, but also of the nightmares. It’s weird that when murderers, rapists and drug dealers worship God, He moves! And when the prophetic flow comes, He reveals things! And if they truly love Him, He changes them completely. It never ceases to amaze me that Jesus loves them so much. And I'm learning to do that too.

In a few months God began to reveal prisoners to me that He wanted to use to build the ministry further. One of them I used for translation purposes and he often showed his gratitude toward the prison church. He was convicted for murder and once a known drug dealer. However, God changed him completely. He got recently married behind bars, which was the first marriage in prison here.



The same prisoners who were telling me about their desire to commit suicide, or how they lived under curses and saw visions of demons in the night were changing one by one, step by step and day by day. It’s such an honor to be involved with His great plan for the people ‘without a face’. Many of them forgotten by friends and sometimes family, but never by God.

As I work with people in detention I see their talents. Oh my, they are so gifted! From singing and making music to painting and art. When I stopped by the young adults department, I talked to a guy who was sitting by himself in the recreation room. It was really hot in there but as I came closer I saw him painting. He showed me his many paintings and it was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. The details, the quality, it was just amazing. He shared how he never painted in his life before prison, but figured it would now be a good distraction. His work is already discovered by people who offered big money for his work.

During a service I always give an opportunity to share a testimony or sing a song. In the beginning no one wanted but now I hear great testimonies all the time, and a lot of rap music. Many will leave preaching. A young latino shared his dream with me about writing a book. He felt ashamed of even mentioning. I encouraged him to believe in it and he took writing classes. His book is now almost finished and I know his story will be a best seller.



When one of my helpers was about to be released he came into my office, he was actually waiting to be deported since he was from the Dominican Republic. He had to show me something at the arbeid (working place). So I walked with him, but what I saw there was just amazing. He used to work in constructions and wanted to make me a goodbye present. He made a pulpit for me to preach from and a cross to fill an empty auditorium. He decided to work on this project, ever since Jesus had touched him in a church service. Without telling me about it off course. I still use it every time and it works perfect. It means so much to me when people get activated in their gifts.

In this auditory we have our services every weekend. I've learned a lot here, seen many tears and heard many (often very sad) stories. This became a safe place of peace and rest, where the Spirit of God can touch the lives of His children. I know that trusting the Holy Spirit is the most important thing in any ministry, whether it's in the Church or any other working place we may enter.



We recently had an open air service, which is quite unique looking at our context, and all the different departments. There are people on a conflict list so the prison church was a potential danger for the institution's safety. However, the church turned out to be a place where people's behaviour are above average, where love and acceptance reigns.

Who knows what's next. Well, in the meantime we also planted a church on the island. But that's another story. One thing's for sure when God speaks we better listen. Thank you for reading my story about the prison ministry. Please keep them in your prayers, they need it.

Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison... -Hebrews 13:3a-

