

# How to Bring Light to Death Row

BY MICHAEL B. ROSS

I wish we could challenge church people to take it upon themselves to get the names of some death-row inmates and write to them. It's important to come in contact with them and know them as people . . . to find out about these people that society has condemned to die" (*mother of Mike Berryhill, a death-row inmate*).

Death row can be a dark and lonely place. If you are a condemned person, society says you are not worthy of life. Deemed too dangerous to be placed with the general prison population, you are isolated from other prisoners by being housed in a separate unit ominously called death row. This isolation goes even further. Many condemned men and women eventually lose contact with or are abandoned by their families.

How do I know this? Because I am a condemned man on death row. But I am lucky. I have contact with some of my family and have several pen pals from as far away as Ireland. However, I am an exception and not the rule.

I know of inmates who receive no letters and have no visitors. I know of persons who have been executed and had no one to claim their bodies. Their last resting place is a pauper's grave, with no one at the services but the prison chaplain (if they have services at all). Their final indignity is a prison number on the grave marker instead of a name. Their lives end as faceless convicts, executed by the state and buried in nameless graves. No one notices their passing or mourns them.

You have the power to change the isolation of death row. You can bring a ray of light and hope through the dismal darkness. At the same time that ray of light might touch your

own heart and teach you things you never imagined.

It's as easy as writing a letter. Letters can be that ray of light and hope to a prisoner. That's why the Death Row Support Project, a pen pal service for death-row inmates, began.

The experience of writing often has a profound effect on the individuals involved—on both sides of the correspondence. The persons on death row know that someone is concerned about them, and that makes them better able to deal with their difficult life. Those persons on death row who feel connected to support on the outside are less likely to waive their appeals and volunteer for execution. Those persons on the outside learn that to know a prisoner can dispel

misconceptions and fears. Many prisoners have become interested in life beyond the bars, even writing for newspapers, magazines, and newsletters. They may become actively involved in support groups and causes.

Jesus clearly calls for us to visit those in prison. Correspondence can be your way of visiting. So how can you get involved? For the name and address of a condemned person, write to: Rachel Gross, coordinator, Death Row Support Project, Department R, P. O. Box 600, Liberty Mills, Indiana 46946; or call 219-982-7480. Tell her Michael Ross sent you.

*Michael Ross is on death row in the state of Connecticut and is active with the Death Row Support Project.*