

## HIS MESSAGE: JAILED BUT NOT BARRED FROM GOD

Tierra Nueva's chaplain reaches out on the inside

Story by RALPH SCHWARTZ; Photos by MATT WALLIS, Skagit Valley Herald



*Bob Ekblad, chaplain for men at Skagit County Jail (right) leads a prayer with his assistant, Chris Hoke, during a jail ministry session Thursday night.*

The door to a meeting room in the Skagit County Jail suddenly clanged open and a handful of inmates, clad in red jumpsuits and sandals, drifted in.

Guards call the space the multiuse room or library, and it serves that function with tattered paperbacks stacked in tall piles, a table and some plastic chairs. The room is dark, its cinderblock walls painted a dull brown.

But the inmates seem happy to be here. They hug and shake hands with Bob Ekblad, the jail's volunteer chaplain for men, and his assistant, Chris Hoke, who is holding his guitar.

They sit in a circle, and Ekblad starts with a prayer. He thanks God for not giving up on the inmates, even if everyone else has. He asks that a little light shine in the dim confines of the jail:

“Even though we have to be tough back in the pods, we ask you would allow us to be tender in our hearts.” As Hoke plays his guitar and sings hymns in both English and Spanish, Ekblad moves around the circle, putting his hand on inmates' backs and on their heads. The inmates soak up the contact. “People need affirmation. They need love so bad,” Ekblad said. Inmates have told Ekblad that his touch has relieved them of back or neck pain. Amazingly, he said, he's become something of a healer. “It will be immediate sometimes,” he said. “It startles them. It startles us, actually. I never expected to be involved in a healing ministry.” “God seems to be answering prayers, so maybe God exists after all,” he said. Ekblad is not preaching to the choir. His parishioners typically avoid God at first because they perceive themselves as too sinful, he said.



*Inmates reach out to each other during a prayer led by Bob Ekblad of Tierra Nueva Ministries (center). Ekblad's assistant, Chris Hoke, sings and plays guitar during the weekly ministry inside the Skagit County Jail.*

The conversion experience Ekblad is aiming for is to get people to see God not as a “celestial police officer” but as a shepherd, herding lost sheep.

“What do you have to do to be found? Get lost,” Ekblad said in an interview. “There’s not much needed to qualify for help from God, just distress.”

As he lays hands on the inmates, Ekblad whispers an almost silent prayer, fervently shaking his head as if casting out demons. That may not be far from the truth.

The jail houses convicted sex offenders, admitted drug addicts, and accused rapists, arsonists and murderers. Some of the men carrying these labels are with Ekblad Thursday night. They put their arms around each other, sing out loud and bow their heads in prayer.

Everywhere he looks in the Bible, Ekblad sees an affirmation of his calling to instill Christian faith in outcasts.

“The people who God calls are sometimes the most violent people,” Ekblad tells a group of five inmates at one of the sessions Thursday. He moves fluidly between English and Spanish as he speaks.

“Moses murdered someone. . . . David was a murderer. . . . The Apostle Paul arrested those who believed in Jesus and stood by when the first martyr was stoned,” Ekblad said.

Ekblad’s words were meant for people who think they are too flawed or have made too many mistakes to ever gain God’s favor, he said.

“God likes violent men and calls them to something bigger,” he told the inmates.

Ekblad encourages those in his ministry to take the message outside the brief weekly meetings. Some inmates start Bible studies in the pods. Some attend Tierra Nueva’s worship services in Burlington after they are released and rise to leadership positions in Ekblad’s ecumenical church.

Jail Director Gary Shand said the ministry relieves boredom among inmates, who are confined to their cells 20 hours a day.

The ministry helps new inmates establish positive contacts in the jail and helps ease their transition into confinement, Shand added.

“We’d like to add more as far as educational items, but we can’t because of the population we have right now,” Shand said.

The Skagit County Jail was built to house 83 inmates. The population is constantly in flux, but on Wednesday afternoon 175 inmates were inside the jail walls. At night, after work crews and inmates on work release were to return, the number would rise to about 200, Shand said.

Boredom puts a lot of people in jail to begin with, an inmate named Matt said. Matt said he’s been in and out of the Skagit County Jail for 20 years.

“There’s a lot of bored people in jail,” Matt said. “They have plenty of ambition, but they’re not focused on what they want to do.”



**An inmate, wearing a cross made of string around his neck, reads the Bible during Thursday's ministry at the Skagit County Jail.**

Loneliness, not boredom, oppresses native Mexicans who often wind up in jail, said Cesar, an inmate who came to one of the later Bible readings Thursday.

Because only two inmates showed up for that session, Ekblad chose to engage them in conversation rather than lead a formal Bible study.

"My friends when they feel afflicted, they get carried away with drinking too much — false pleasures," Cesar told Ekblad in Spanish.

"People who opt for drink, it's because of homesickness," Cesar said, using the Spanish word "nostalgia."

"It's not like people say," Cesar said, remembering what other Mexicans told him about the United States before he arrived here 18 months ago. "The North is superior in everything, in money and work, ease and everything.' But it's not like that. There are some who have luck and others that don't."

What's hardest about living in "El Norte" are insufficient job opportunities and isolation from family and friends, Cesar said.

"As soon as you cross the border, you don't have any of that support," he said.

Cesar said he spends most of his time in jail reading the Bible. Ekblad asked him what strikes him the most when he reads.

From memory, Cesar recounted the story of Jesus meeting an infirm man at the side of a healing pond that he could not walk into himself.

"Jesus came and said to him, 'Do you want to be healed?' and he said, 'Yes,'" Cesar said in Spanish. He paused to wipe tears from his eyes.

"But he didn't have anyone to take him to the water. Jesus told him to get up and take your mat and go, and he got up."

Cesar stopped there and broke down in tears.

A few minutes later, the lock clanged loudly in the library door. A jailer, politely but firmly, said, "It's time, gentlemen." Cesar briskly wiped tears from his face before returning to his pod.

"I love the people in the jail," Ekblad said in an interview the previous day. "I've dealt with thousands of people in the last 12 years, and I've never met anyone who is downright evil."

"I'm not saying they all need to be freed," Ekblad said, right after Cesar and the other inmate left the room. "But they do need to be heard and understood and respected. Their dignity is real important."

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*Bob Ekblad (right) and other inmates pray to relieve an inmate's back pain during a session of the Skagit County Jail ministry Thursday. Ekblad says praying and the laying on of hands sometimes has instant results. "I never expected to be involved in a healing ministry," Ekblad said.*