

broken parole system

By JERRY HANCOCK

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Many people concerned with the injustice that is rampant in Wisconsin prisons read with interest the Journal Sentinel article that the state Department of Corrections had found a way to maneuver the state personnel system to give six prison wardens raises of from 8% to 13%. There is no doubt that being a warden is a job with great responsibility that deserves fair compensation. But why can't the Department of Corrections use the same creativity to fairly review the nearly 3,000 inmates who are currently legally eligible for parole?

In addition to my position as director of the Prison Ministry Project, I am the former administrator of the Division of Law Enforcement Services in the Wisconsin Department of Justice. As a result of my experiences in the criminal justice system, I have no illusions about crime and criminals. I have sat with rape victims and the families of murder victims, and I have listened to victims tell how their lives have been changed forever. But by spending time in prison, I have learned how offenders and their families also suffer.

Recently, the Department of Corrections announced "about 95% of the men and women eligible for parole are violent criminals." That is untrue. All of those men and women *were* violent criminals. The question is how many are *still* violent criminals? The judges who sentenced them under "old law" assumed that the parole system would give them a fair chance to change. Maybe some have. Maybe some have not. What is true is that all old law inmates have lost a fair chance at parole.

It is also clear from recent reports that even when inmates are granted the possibility of parole, the Department of Corrections refuses to implement those plans. This creates a cruel and heartbreaking cycle for the inmates and their families who have hope restored by the Parole Commission only to be taken away by a bureaucracy accountable exclusively to the governor.

The Department of Corrections also announced that politics play no part in parole decisions. In fact, politics are at the very heart of parole decisions. Gov. Scott Walker apparently believes that people convicted of crime cannot change. That is why he, as a state legislator, was one of the authors of Truth in Sentencing, why he refuses to grant pardons and why paroles have virtually come to a standstill. The secretary of the Department of Corrections and the chair of the Parole Commission were appointed to implement Walker's view of human nature.

That view is not morally or factually supportable. Every major faith tradition believes in the possibility that people can change. In my own Christian tradition — which I share with the governor — at the heart of Christian forgiveness is the possibility that people can change. But change is also a fact.

A Stanford University study of 860 murderers paroled between 1990 and 2010 showed that none committed another murder and only five committed *any* new crime, for a recidivism rate of 0.006%.

Some people who are in prison need to be there. But those people in prison who are legally eligible to be released, and who have used their time in prison to change, need the fair chance to come home as the law allows.

If the governor really believes in the moral principle of change or the principle of fiscal responsibility, he can prove it by ordering an immediate review of the 421 parole-eligible inmates in minimum or community custody. The release of these inmates, who have met the Department of Corrections' own standards of safety, would save taxpayers more than \$12 million a year and restore some credibility to a broken and unfair system. It also would help pay for those extraordinary pay increases for wardens.

The Rev. Jerry Hancock is director of the Prison Ministry Project.