

# Chaplain of Death Row

Eddie Roberson

Prisons are meant to protect society from criminals. They are not a place for renewing one's spirit. However, they provide fertile ground for ministry.

The Tennessee Main Prison is an imposing gothic structure located in West Nashville overlooking the Cumberland River. From 1898 to 1992, it was the home of the Tennessee State Prison. Like many similar penal institutions of the day, the Main Prison witnessed many riots. It was such a situation that opened the opportunity for Marshall Roberson to go to the Main Prison.

An important institutional function of prison chaplains in the 1950s was to try to bring about peace and tranquility among the prison population through religious services. Often, inmates are angry and feel rejected and neglected by the world. Such deep-seated and pent-up emotion over time begets violence. Prison riots give inmates a forum for expressing their frustration with society. But typically it is a vocal minority that causes prison riots.

In 1955, such a riot took place at the Main Prison. Replacing the previous chaplain was one of the corrective actions taken by Governor Frank Clement. Marshall Roberson accepted the challenge. As he entered the heavy, gray prison doors for the first time, he requested to go into the yard where the inmates congregated for recreation. Upon introducing himself as the new chaplain, one inmate attempting to size up the young preacher asked him, "Are you going to be the administration's chaplain or the inmates' chaplain?"

Roberson looked squarely in the eye of the convict and responded boldly, "I am the chaplain of this institution." He further said that some of the guards needed Christ as much as the inmates. The message got around the yard that the new chaplain was no mouthpiece for the administration.

Each Sunday, Marshall would conduct a service at 2:00 p.m. at the men's prison and a 4:00 p.m. service at the women's prison. Counting the two services at his pastorate (Meridian Street Church of God), on most Sundays he would preach four sermons to over 1,000 souls. The pace did not seem to tire him. He was on a mission from God.

When Marshall conducted his first Sunday afternoon service at the prison, few attended. Marshall's preaching, however, soon piqued the inmates' attention, as it was full of human-interest stories and humor. He also decided to change the worship music of the services. The stately hymns were replaced with a more contemporary style of gospel music.

Marshall brought along his minister of music, Max Morris, to lead the singing. When Max played the piano, he would jazz up the gospel songs, creating great excitement among the inmates. Max remembers that many inmates gave their hearts to Christ during those services. And an interesting by-product happened in the prison—the riots and violence decreased. Christ can calm not only stormy seas but also prison yards.

Marshall grew quite attached to certain inmates. One such prisoner came to Marshall and confidentially alerted him there was going to be a riot in a particular cellblock on the following day. Marshall informed prison officials. The officials imposed a lockdown on the instigators and prevented the riot.

On another occasion, a trusted inmate came to Marshall and informed him that his wife was going to divorce him. Tearfully, he said if he could only visit his wife on the outside, he believed he could convince her to continue the marriage.

The inmate, serving time for robbery, was due for parole soon. Marshall was compelled by the inmate's story and moved by the sincerity of his desire to save his marriage. Then, Marshall did something that showed love but little reason. He allowed his compassion to rule his head and agreed to arrange for the inmate to visit his wife one afternoon in East Nashville. The next day, he brought a change of clothes, stowing away the inmate in the back floor of his car under a blanket. He drove past the guard stand with no problem and dropped off the inmate at a local hotel at 11:00 a.m. so he could meet his wife, with instructions for him to return to the drop-off location at 5:00 p.m.

"That day was the longest of my life," Marshall recalls. "I knew what I did was wrong in the eyes of the law, but my compassion to help my friend save his marriage overwhelmed me. I said to myself, What if he doesn't show up on time? How will I explain my actions to authorities? I arrived early and exactly at 5:00 the inmate showed up."

He changed into his inmate uniform and lay in the back floor of Marshall's car. Marshall reentered the prison, and the inmate melted back into the population without anyone knowing of his marriage-counseling adventure. The marriage survived.

What tempts a man to take such personal risk for someone of dubious background? An act of that magnitude can only be explained through the compassion of a shepherd's love for one of his flock. Years later when Marshall met this man on the outside, he gave him a high compliment: "Chaplain, your belief in me helped me save my marriage. I shall never forget your kindness." After the man was paroled shortly, he never again crossed the law. Sometimes all a person needs to turn his life around is for another person to believe in him.

But not all prison experiences turned out this rosy for Marshall. Perhaps the most difficult task of the Main Prison chaplain was to participate in the carrying out of capital punishment by means of the electric chair. Marshall participated in seven such executions. In each of the early dawn executions, Marshall was vividly reminded of a familiar childhood memory—his Uncle Homer's execution in Georgia for murder. Perhaps this was one reason he had so much compassion for the men as they walked the "Green Mile."

The final route to the death chamber down the Green Mile was the same for all men. On the eve of the execution, the inmate's head and legs are shaved to provide good contact points for the electrodes to the inmate's body. In a last token of comfort, the inmate is allowed to select his final meal. As chaplain, Marshall chose to arrive the night before and be available for counseling, if the inmate desired it. Most did. In these wee hours of the early morning, shortly before their date with destiny, some convicts would open up to Marshall and convey their deepest regrets, and question him about the afterlife. They were resigned to the fact that they were about to pay the ultimate price for their crime.

Marshall had visited Charlie Sullins over the course of several weeks and had developed quite a rapport with him, leading the condemned man to Christ. In Marshall's mind, Sullins' conversion was genuine. He approached his death without fear. The final word on their execution came on Sunday, July 31, when Governor Clement, along with Marshall, visited both Harry Kirkendall and Charlie Sullins to inform them, "I have reviewed your court record and find that the sentence was in accordance with the law. Therefore, prepare to meet your God on August 1, 1955." Sullins was to be executed first, followed by Kirkendall.

On the night before the execution, all Sullins wanted to talk about was eternity—not an uncommon topic for a man facing imminent death. One question he asked seemed to stump Marshall momentarily: “Chaplain, what will I see when I get to heaven?” Marshall quoted the scriptures on heaven and tried to explain the beauty and splendor of this eternal abode where families are united and all things are made new for believers. He said, “Charlie, you will see Christ there.”

Marshall’s description, as inadequate as he thought it was, seemed to bring about a peace in Sullins’ mind and even anticipation. He then asked Marshall for a favor that no other death-inmate had ever been given: “I know it is not allowed this close to my execution time, but can you arrange for me to see my wife one last time?”

Marshall was touched by the sincerity of the request and immediately went to Warden Bomar and made the request. “Chaplain, we have never granted such a request, but I am going to grant it this time,” replied Bomar.

Marshall then went to the waiting area and summoned Sullins’ wife. He told her that the warden had granted one more visit and for her to remain strong for her husband. When she entered the cell area, they caressed each other through the steel bars. Though separated by cold metal, they still showed the tender and passionate love of a husband and wife. He kissed her and, looking square into her eyes, told her again how sorry he was for the terrible way his life was to end. He promised her that he would see her again one day in heaven.

In accordance with his death wish, Marshall helped officiate at Sullins’ funeral two days later in Wilson County, where the crime was committed. He was able to say to the small crowd of family and friends that Sullins undoubtedly had accepted Christ before his life ended. Without any children, Edna had to bear the reproach of her husband’s crime alone. She lived an additional 52 years alone, never remarrying. Her remains are buried next to Charlie’s at the Wilson County Memorial Gardens.

Marshall Roberson was not content with simply pastoring his thriving church; he had to try to help the outcasts of society. The adage that there are no atheists in foxholes is true in the death cells of convicted inmates. It is the supreme act of love and goodness that God will hear the desperate cries of the hopeless in the moments before death and allow forgiveness. God places individuals in unique circumstances to set the right example and say the appropriate words to fulfill His mission and show His mighty love to all mankind.

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