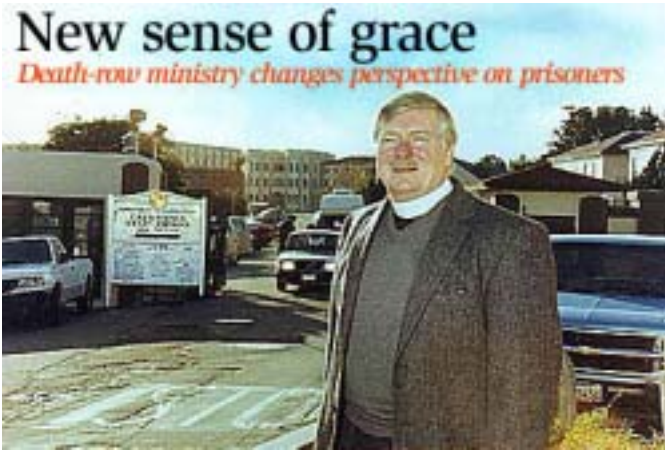




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THE PRISON IS HIS PARISH

The Rev. Bruce Bramlett has for six years counseled San Quentin death-row inmates and their families

Photo by **Dick Snyder**

By DICK SNYDER for **Episcopal Life**

IT BEGAN WITH a phone call from his bishop "asking me if I would do a job for him."

It has resulted in the Rev. Bruce Bramlett having served as spiritual adviser for several California death-row inmates and as one of the official witnesses of the execution for one of them. He currently serves as adviser and friend for a death-row inmate.

The death-row ministry allows Bramlett "to really experience a level of compassion and a sense of the grace of God that I never had before at any level."

Bishop William Swing of the Diocese of California phoned Bramlett about six years ago and asked him to meet with a death-row inmate whose mother Swing had met at an event in Southern California.

The bishop had determined that California State Prison San Quentin, home of California's death row, was "in my parish," said Bramlett, who is rector of St. Paul's, San Rafael.

Bramlett met with the inmate, whom he calls Joe. "We liked each other almost simultaneously. He was bright, very attentive and very polite. And very cautious, very stand-offish."

Continuing relationship

Bramlett has continued meeting with Joe every week since then, except when Bramlett is out of town. He was instrumental in helping Joe get his first appellate lawyer two years ago, after Joe already had spent eight years on death row.

Joe's mother died three years ago, and Bramlett represented Joe at the funeral, sharing Joe's thoughts and feelings there with his father, brothers, sisters and extended family. "I took pictures so that (Joe) could have something" from that experience, said Bramlett.

He explained that the former visiting procedures allowed him to meet and talk with other death-row inmates and their families in a "visiting room that was wide open."

It was through such visits that Bramlett met Manuel "Manny" Babbitt and served as his spiritual adviser until Babbitt was executed on May 4, 1999. Bramlett described Babbitt as a "beautiful spiritual being."

Thomas M. "Tommy" Thompson was executed on July 14, 1998. There was a memorial service for him at St. Paul's. Thompson's girlfriend has become a member of the parish.

The visiting situation that allowed Bramlett to meet with these and other inmates and their families changed dramatically two years ago after a brief fight between two inmates that involved a sharpened pen as a weapon. All visits were stopped for a while.

They have resumed, but they take place within cages "that you can't leave and are kept from other visitors," noted Bramlett.

"Now, you just don't know other people like before," he added. "As for having real relationships for the families, it's a pretty grim process."

It was Joe, who lived on the same tier as Robert Lee Massie, who asked if Massie wanted to meet with Bramlett. Massie said yes, and that began a "journey with him that lasted about three months."

Massie had decided to give up his appeal process, and Bramlett served as his spiritual adviser and eventually as one of the official witnesses to the execution. Bramlett called that process "my toughest assignment."

"I genuinely liked and respected Robert, whom I had come to know as a

bright, wise and spiritually sensitive person," he said.

They met regularly, and during the last week the meetings lasted five to six hours daily. Bramlett said he "was armed with what I needed most: my deep faith in the God of resurrection life and a conviction that I had been called here and now to be a witness to the love of Christ whatever would come."

He found himself struck with "how the prison bureaucracy makes every effort not just to reduce inmates to objects but to systematically demean and degrade them at every opportunity."

During the last day, March 27, 2001, he talked with and counseled Massie and Massie's family and visitors. He presided at a Eucharist for Massie and his visitors before joining the other official witnesses to the execution.

After Massie was strapped down and injected with the needles that would transmit the drugs that would kill him, "Robert raised his head one last time, we caught each others' eyes; I mouthed the words, 'I love you,' to which he responded, 'I love you.' He rested his head down and closed his eyes."

Bramlett said that it has taken a long time for him to return "from my descent into this bizarre and malignant world of state-ordered murder."

However, he said, "I do know and am convinced that even in the depths of this inner circle of hell, a gracious and loving God was indeed real and present for me and for Robert."

He explained that his interaction with death-row inmates has allowed him "to begin to see these guys not as deranged monsters, but to see them as people just like me who made terrible mistakes, who have done hideous things. Often they are very limited, or just downright crazy. But their craziness doesn't deny or negate their humanity."

He noted that he agrees with the need for incarceration. "I'm not a bleeding-heart liberal wanting to release everybody back on the street. But 95 percent are just guys who have had incredible journeys -- the most horrendous stories you could ever imagine hearing about in life."

"And they did things that they are deeply sorry for and deeply regretful of," continued Bramlett. "Even the most hardened really turn around, really become different."

He added, "What they held up for me was a mirror of the human experience, the human predicament."

'I really don't understand'

He explained that he opposed the death penalty even before Bishop Swing's phone call, "but it was a head connection. Now it is a very deep passion."

"I really don't understand how Christians -- if they take Jesus seriously, if they take the incarnation seriously -- can ever, ever, suggest that the dignity of anyone can be taken away by another human being.

"It is simply wrong to kill. Period. Wrong for anybody to kill," he continued. "It is wrong for our government to kill as much as is wrong for any individual to kill. And it doesn't add one ounce to the level of justice in this world to murder somebody because they themselves have killed."

For the future, Bramlett said, he would like to see church leadership move from pronouncement to action. "Clergy need to engage their congregations with this issue and do it in a gospel way," he said. "We have to stand up and say that state-authorized murder is wrong, and we can't allow it as Christian citizens."

Otherwise, he explained, the church is "complicit with the state in that violence."

In the meantime, he will continue meeting with Joe.

"And, God willing, I will see him outside these prison gates some day."

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