



Remembering Tamms: An Introduction

This memoir recounts the story of eleven men, guided by the Holy Spirit, who were called to lead the first-ever Kairos Weekend presented at a “supermax” prison in the spring of 2012.

Working in God’s special time, the mission of Kairos Prison Ministry is to bring Christ’s love and forgiveness to all incarcerated individuals; their families; those who work with them; and to assist the incarcerated in the transition to becoming productive citizens. The heart of the ministry is to enable and support Prayer and Share Fellowship, while establishing a Christian community within the prison.

An outgrowth of the Cursillo movement, Kairos has been involved in ministry at maximum- and medium-security prisons for more than 30 years. It has active programs at 350 prisons – including facilities in 34 states across the U.S. and in eight other countries. Kairos also has a program for youth offenders called “Kairos Torch,” and a program for the loved ones of the incarcerated, called “Kairos Outside.”

All Kairos Weekends are staffed by volunteers from many different Christian communities and denominations. Often, the volunteers begin their formation period as strangers—growing into a unified team through a series of meetings that provide an opportunity for faith sharing and spiritual development. Over the course of several months, they learn to imitate Christ and his model of obedient servanthood.

Typically, Kairos Weekends involve teams of 30 to 40 volunteers—serving an equal number of inmates. Unfortunately, this successful model cannot be used inside a supermax prison like Tamms, due to its unique security requirements. Instead, the team had to adjust its approach. We knew going in, for example, that the Weekend would serve just five residents; and that each of them would be shackled into place at individual seats rather than gathered around tables during presentations and discussion periods.

Could Christ’s love penetrate, even into such a restrictive setting? We invite you to join the team from Tamms #1, as we reflect on a remarkable journey that ultimately made Christ present to us all.

(For more information about Kairos, visit www.kairosprisonministry.org.)

Remembering Tamms

In this book, Theophilus, I will tell you about how the risen Lord appeared to us in unexpected ways and in unexpected places during the early months of 2012; how first his Holy Spirit gave us instructions, and prepared us for a task that both stirred our hearts and tinged them with fear; how he himself appeared to us, and was made present to us through many proofs in and around a supermax prison in southern Illinois; and how he enjoined his witnesses to continue proclaiming this Good News.

Initial Team Meeting

We gathered as a Kairos team for the first time on a blustery day in mid-February, seated around the dining room table at St. Mary's Convent in Chester. The fellowship was warm, as we got reacquainted with teammates from Chicago, St. Louis, Marion, Herrin, O'Fallon and Murphysboro. Because the two-story brick building had been there longer than any of us had been alive, its windows provided an indifferent barrier against the elements—so that many times throughout that day, the room where we met was filled with the sound of a strong driving wind. The Spirit speaking to us, perhaps? We listened not only to the wind, but also to a teammate (the one we'd come to know as 'Rebel') who asked us to call to mind the men we were about to serve: Prisoners in solitary confinement, stripped of everything—left with nothing but Christ and his mercy.

We heard from Fran, too—our leader, who reminded us what the Kairos ministry is all about:

- *We come as foreigners in a strange land.*
- *We come with no agenda, except to be servants.*
- *We humbly acknowledge that, as team members, we are a tiny part of a much bigger picture.*
- *We are drawn into a profound mystery: that somehow, Christ can use the broken vessels that we are, and mold us to become an answer to someone's prayers.*

Kairos, Fran said, is about “Christ’s love; not my love. It is Christ’s love, being delivered through me.”

Myron, in his heart, reflects on an encounter he’d had some years before during a Kairos weekend at Stateville. It was there that he had encountered Dori M., who said she worked for the DOC at Tamms. She asked Myron then whether some day it might be possible to bring Kairos to “her boys at the supermax,” as she lovingly called them. “We prayed that it might come to pass,” Myron recalls.

Our minds turned to practical matters, too, as Fran recounted what he, John Brahler and Brent had learned about the facility itself during their site visits:

Making the Kairos program work in a Supermax will prove to be a challenge. First of all, the working area of the Chapel wing at Tamms is about the size of a two-car garage, with a 30’ ceiling. The first time I saw the Chapel Wing, it had no chairs in the open area: It was simply a large room with five cells and a shower room on one side. This layout was duplicated on the second floor (accessible by a stairway).

We returned some weeks later, after our initial sponsor, Warden Johnson, had left Tamms through a promotion. We met with acting Warden Greg Lambert, who said they were committed to going forward with the Kairos retreat. He walked us back to the Chapel Wing, to show off the five newly installed chair/desk units, where the inmates would be seated throughout the retreat. Designed by Warden Johnson, the seating units were quite serviceable, but they were really spread out, taking up most of the open area of the wing. In effect, these new permanent fixtures closed up the room and really put usable space at a premium.

Now, the very structured Kairos program calls for three areas to work from during the weekend: the Conference area, the Chapel area, and the Dining area. Due to security concerns, the inmates were going to eat in their Chapel Wing cells, so that left us to deal with establishing the Conference and the Chapel areas. After much thought and inspiration from the Holy Spirit, John B. and I fashioned a solution: Since the inmates could not move from the chair/desks (to which they were shackled), we would have to figure a way to change the layout and make it work as two distinct areas.

We started by developing the concept for a colorful ribbon banner that could be positioned on the bare concrete wall, to become the centerpiece of the “Kairos” area. The banner would be visible from each inmate’s chair. During Conference parts of the program, we could move the podium in front of the ribbon banner and on center. When we’d “go to Chapel”, the conference podium would be moved aside, and a second podium would be positioned to one side of the ribbon banner. We could then place a small rectangular table below the banner,

decorated with a simple cloth table runner. For a final touch, we placed a battery-operated pillar candle at the center of the table and turned it on (it actually flickered!) **Note:** The table runner was made by my nephew's wife, Rita, from Milwaukee. A gifted seamstress, Rita agreed happily to make the table runner and become part of our ministry—like so many others throughout the Christian community.

By making these arrangements, we would be able to “move” from the Conference area to the Chapel area and back, with just a few shifts of the furnishings. It really worked out well (thanks to the Spirit's inspiration). One of the real benefits of this small area is that it created an intimate atmosphere for all of us, the team and the inmates, throughout the weekend.

Myron's heart is moved by Fran's description of the conditions and routines at Tamms. And whenever when Myron's heart is moved, he prays. In this case, he remembers praying...

Lord, help us learn how to serve inmates who are shackled at all times. If it be your will, see to it that we would not have to be witnesses while the inmates' feet are being chained to the floor!

Formation Continues

In the ensuing weeks, our formation meetings provided many opportunities to reflect on scripture, and how the mighty deeds worked by Jesus during his time on earth also applied to our situation today. We recalled the story of the paralytic lowered through the roof by his friends (Mark 2:15), contemplating how perhaps we too had been called to carry our brothers – the prisoners – into the Lord's presence. We reflected on Jesus' promise: “All that you ask the Father in my name, He will give you.” (John 15:16) We remembered how Jesus says He comes to us: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock...” (Rev 3:20). Jesus, the Lord of the Cosmos, presents himself as a beggar, awaiting our invitation to enter in.

The Listening Circle became an important part of our efforts to prepare our hearts and minds for the environment of a supermax prison. The residents, we knew, did their time in solitary confinement. How open would they be to conversation? How ready could they be for the simplest human interaction? Would they let us touch or hug them? So we practiced Relational Presence in the circle—spending time just being with the other, and learning how to allow the silence to speak.

Fran shared with us how—in keeping with the Kairos model—he had begun to invite others to participate in the ministry at Tamms.

I had been asked in February to give a talk on volunteering in prison ministry to the 8th grade, during Catholic Schools week. It went very well as you can imagine. They were very attentive. I asked them to join in our ministry by drawing placemats and making cookies. They thought it was a neat idea that they could be part of our ministry. Well, the PR person for the school took some pictures and they were run, along with a short story, in the *Chicago Tribune*. I thought it'd be good publicity for Kairos.

On my next visit to Tamms, a prison official said I was causing them some problems. He was referring to the article in the *Trib*, which said children were making cookies for Tamms. He had been called by the IL DOC lawyer, who wanted to know why kids were making cookies for the prisoners. "What if they put arsenic on them?" the lawyer asked. When I heard about the controversy, I replied that if homemade cookies presented a problem, we could use store-bought cookies.

Just to be sure about the cookies, I went back to IC Grammar school and told the kids that cookies could be a problem, but said that they could participate another way. They could all bring ribbons to be sewn on a banner. A mother of one of the children is a seamstress and holds a sewing class for the 8th grade girls; she agreed to put the banner together for me. And so it happened that the ribbon banner became the central decoration for the Chapel Wing at Tamms: It was the gift of the 8th grade class at my parish grammar school, Immaculate Conception.

*The publicity in the **Trib** led to other remarkable gifts for the team, as well. It prompted a call from one of Fran's neighbors, a WWII vet, who wanted to talk about the ministry and share his own personal story of forgiveness. The vet also told Fran that he had become a crafter in his retirement years, and dearly loved making crosses. Would Fran like to take some of them to distribute to his team? With that, he handed over a cigar box filled with the tiny treasures: Twelve oakstained wooden crosses adorned with a Spirit-dove emblem—just enough, it turned out, so that Fran could present one to each member of the Tamms team.*

As formation continued, news stories broke about the future of the prison. Due to a state budget crunch, the governor had slated Tamms for closing. There were other stories, too, about conditions inside the joint—and those who were advocating for changes in its policies and procedures. We talked about the news coverage and its potential impact on our ministry. And Fran reminded us to keep our focus on the main thing: that, as Kairos volunteers, we are called to be advocates for Christ—not for the inmates or for the prison; we are disciples on a journey, and therefore we are not in control; our job is to focus on the love of Christ, not our differences;

we are going into Tamms to present God's holiness, even though we ourselves fall far short of that mark; Jesus is the bridge between us (as sinful, broken vessels) and the Father. "Only the Father is good," (Luke 18:19) we are reminded; and we are strengthened, through Christ, to do the Father's will.

At our final meeting on March 31—the Saturday before Holy Week—we learn the names of the residents we will be serving. As Fran recounts:

I asked Warden Lambert to give me only the first names of the men. I didn't want any of us to look these men up on the DOC website and form an opinion before we met them. I was able to tell our team that we do not know why these five men are at Tamms, and it really isn't important to us. The idea is, "We want to meet you and go forward with you from today on." I believe they liked that approach.

In this account, we are using the following pseudonyms, in order to honor the promise of confidentiality that we made to our incarcerated brothers: Hosea; Leon; Billy; Charles; and Thomas. And the alternates: Hector; Galileo; Samson; Henry; and Hobbes.

Going In

Fran, Andy and John B. served as our advance party—picking up materials in Chester and transporting them to Tamms, about an hour and a half south, near the Kentucky border—the day before the Kairos weekend was to begin. Was God planning to smile on our endeavor? According to Fran, the load-in experience provided an initial clue.

I picked up the banner on Good Friday and brought it to Tamms on the following Wednesday—along with the other supplies—entering through the sally port. We had prior approval for the banner, and for the rest of our materials, since we had explained to the Warden what they were all about. It was a relatively small load compared to a typical Kairos, in part because we would be serving just five men.

As I was unloading the bins of cookies inside the sally port, a prison official was on hand to supervise the process. He commented with a wink, "I see you brought those store-bought cookies we talked about." I told him yes, store-bought and specially packaged into zip-loc bags! We both laughed.

The rest of the team joined Fran on Thursday afternoon, at our home-away-from-home: the America's Best Value Inn, just off I-57 at Ullin, Illinois (about a

tenminute drive from Tamms). And that gave us the chance to do one last Listening Circle—to center ourselves and call down Christ’s grace on our work before going in. For John Schroeder, this time together became an unexpected Easter moment.

My heart was filled with many emotions—and a lot of unbridled energy—in the hours leading up to the beginning of the weekend. I wasn’t fearful, exactly. But I did feel unsettled...unsure: How could this thing possibly work? How could men in shackles, chained to their chairs, be open to a message about love and forgiveness? And there was much chatter in the air, too, chatter about the details: ‘What if our tape doesn’t stick to the walls?’ ‘How can a man drink coffee through a straw?’ ‘Should each participant have a host?’ ‘What’s the rest of the team going to do during table sharing?’ So I was grateful that we had planned some centering time—a chance to remind ourselves to keep the main thing, the main thing.

What I hadn’t counted on, though, was the setting for our Listening Circle. The only common space big enough to accommodate us was the concrete deck surrounding the indoor pool. Not an auspicious start to the circle—the air heavy with the odor of chlorine, and the sound of water splashing from the fill-pipe. Still we circled up to pray, and to enter into relational presence with each other.

And soon enough, I became tickled by the improbability of it all: The Lord must be risen indeed—and he must have a sense of humor—because he has called this unlikely group of men together to sing his praises at a truck-stop motel! Fran and Brent, from Chicago. Gian, Andy and John, from St. Louis. Mark, from O’Fallon. John and Bill, from Murphysboro. Chad, from Herrin. Doug and Myron, from Marion. What other power, indeed, could have brought these 11 together on this Thursday afternoon to spend time gazing silently and lovingly into each other’s eyes?

It’s hardly a garden spot, the indoor pool deck at the America’s Best Value Inn. And yet, this is where we find a piece of Your glory: Eleven men, all aware of their individual inadequacy, and all nevertheless excited to get started...to see how You will choose to use us in the hours and days ahead. And as I look around the circle, it dawns on me what I’m witnessing in this moment: **You** are here—in the Body of Christ all around me! I have found the risen Lord on this Easter Thursday, not on the road to Emmaus, but at Exit 18 off I-57 in Ullin, Illinois!

We make the 10-minute drive east from the motel to the prison, and all along the way, we notice the yard signs: ‘Save Our Prison; ‘Tamms Saves Lives.’ The paved entryway takes us past the shooting range on the outskirts of the property. An officer is taking target practice, and the sound of gunfire is by far the most menacing aspect of our approach. The prison itself—built in 1997—could be mistaken for an industrial warehouse, low-slung and featureless. Even the

razorwire is hard to detect, visible only along the fence and sally port that stretch just beyond the main entrance. The long walk from the parking lot to the front entrance proves to be a trial for Myron, who suffers from a lung condition called COPD.

And he is moved to pray...

Lord, I hope we have plenty of paper towels inside as tissues just will not do. I am afraid that it is going to be a very long weekend for them as well as me. Please, Lord, don't let me be a distraction from what you are doing in this place.

Once inside the building, we queue up to sign in, handing off the only personal item we've brought with us: a driver's license. In exchange, we each receive an official visitor's badge. And it's a distinguishing mark of the place that there aren't enough badge clips to go around. Tamms isn't accustomed to receiving 11 visitors at a time!

Inside the first sliding door, we meet Officer K., assigned to pat-down duty (and, as it turns out, our Chapel Wing escort for all of the "second shift" hours we'll spend in the prison during the weekend). Once we clear the pat-down, we exit the anteroom through another massive sliding door and head into the windowless maze connecting the eight cell-block pods that comprise the prison. We pass the employee dining room and break area, and head into the tunnel. (We know it's a tunnel, because there's a sign overhead labeling it so. But except for a dip in elevation, it's hard to distinguish this hallway from any other on the inside. Windows and natural light are few and far between.) A left turn through a sliding door, then more hallway down past the laundry...just before we arrive at a twodoor holding chamber, situated at the entrance to the two main intersecting hallways that connect the groups of pods.

The long walk provides an opportunity for additional intentions to surface in Myron's heart...

As we walk along I whisper, "Father, I hope that Dori is here this weekend so she can see that you answered her prayer. Maybe she will give me a hug. But Father, forgive me: This weekend is not about me—it is for them, the residents, the inmates."

The holding chamber resembles an airlock, except for the nickel-sized holes in its metal doors. Officer K. packs us in and counts heads after the first door closes, securing us in the chamber; then he nods to the officer in the control room, just

beyond the chamber at the intersection – who opens the second door...and then the next door, providing entry to F pod, home of the Chapel Wing. We pass the Medical Unit on the right...and the Mental Health and Library Units on the left, before arriving finally at F. Another sliding door...another control center... and we see Officer K. use a tube to slide his keys up to the officer on duty in the tower—keeping them well beyond the prisoners’ reach. Finally, beyond one last sliding door, we are able to see the Chapel Wing for the first time.

Thursday

Our Kairos brothers-to-be are there, waiting for us – just as they will be every time we enter the wing: Prisoners-in-place, shackled about the ankles and waist, and chained to the floor, any time the team is present. (Myron acknowledges that one of his prayers has already been answered. “Merciful is our God,” he whispers in thanksgiving and praise that we will not have to see our brothers being moved, or their dignity further compromised. Still, the restraining devices are difficult to ignore. Andy puts it this way: “I noticed the sound of shackle chains clinking when they shifted through the handcuffs that fastened the men to their seat/desk units. This was a haunting reminder for me throughout the weekend of their constant constrained condition.”) We take a moment to say hello upon entering, and pass out name badge stickers to all. We learn then that we have an alternate on the weekend – Henry, instead of Billy.

This initial encounter with the inmates is not entirely without incident, as Myron recalls...

As I entered, I looked at Hosea’s manacled hands and gently slid my hand towards his. Then he gently pulled me towards himself and whispered to me that he could kill or maim me in 11 different ways at that very moment, but would not, as he wanted to see and hear what we were about. He did not know that the presence of the Holy Spirit was so powerful on me at that very moment that nothing would happen without the Lord’s permission. I knew that my—our—lives were in the hands of the Lord, not in the hands of Hosea. I said, “thank you,” and moved on...while whispering to the Lord, “he is going to be a tough one.” Just then, the Holy Spirit reminded me of a giant called Goliath, who had four brothers...and who met his match in the person of a young shepherd boy named David, with his sling and five stones.

Five team members – the hosts – pull up chairs next to each desk unit, and start getting to know their Kairos brothers. The hosts are pleasantly surprised at how the inmates begin to open up.

Here's how Myron recalls his first encounter...

I did not learn until that very day (and much to my horror) that I was to be a host. I thought, I have nothing to give—"LORD help!" At which point, Charles started to pour out the Word of God in a torrent to possibly rival the apostle Paul. He confided in me that he had done a very, very bad thing to be sent to Tamms from another maximum security prison. And it had been another 6 ½ years before he decided that he must change something in his life. So he started continually studying the Word of God.

He confided that he had been behaving quite well—and even thought that he should have been sent back to a maximum security prison ahead of a couple of other inmates. But after seeking the Lord, he'd come to the conclusion that the Lord was preparing him to preach the Word when he did finally get released back to Menard, Pontiac or Statesville. Even at Tamms, he leads a Bible study with five or so other inmates. To communicate, they have to holler from cell to cell. Oh, and they also play chess by hollering cell to cell, as well.

For Andy, the get-acquainted period was a time of grace and humor:

From the first night, I felt a peaceful energy whenever I was near Hosea. I commented to him about the positive energy I was experiencing. My first question was "Am I sitting too close?" Hosea: "No you're fine, in fact, I want to suck all the humanity I can out of all of you, so close is good. I was beginning to forget what it feels like to be human." I offered him coffee, lemonade or water on Thursday. Told him it was institution coffee & water and the Kairos Team brought the lemonade. He asked: "who mixed it?" - The staff - "no thanks I'll have water. If you guys don't keel over tonight I may change my mind tomorrow." And sure enough: on Friday morning he asked for lemonade 'cause I was still standing upright!

As the hosts and participants converse, the rest of the team continues with the initial set-up of the room: Podiums and leader's table set in place; four plastic '3M Command Adhesive' hooks applied to the two-story concrete wall, as high as we can reach...standing on our chairs; and finally, the ribbon banner is unfurled, its gentle pastel colors now dancing in the breeze generated by the air-handling system. We feel a bit self-conscious, not having had the opportunity to set the room before welcoming our guests. But this is a supermax, and it has its own unique rules and rhythms. Soon enough, the weekend begins in earnest – with Fran presenting the opening remarks.

We move next to introductions, and all our fears about how we might be received are immediately washed away. As Fran recalls...

It was an explosion of Love from the first moment, an explosion ignited by the Holy Spirit. Meeting men who have been in solitary confinement for 7, 15, even 19 years. While I think we did a very good job of preparing as a team in the formation process, I was surprised by their openness from the very outset. I guess I was expecting them to hold more back, to be slow to open up (if you will) since they have been by themselves so long. Especially because of what I have read about the supermaxs and the effect it has on the individual. Well, all that worry was thrown out in the first few minutes.

With the introductions, we were off and running. Asking each man why he came to this Kairos weekend, Hosea opens with excitement about the multicolored ribbons on the banner. He said that simple gift of color made his weekend; and everything else that happened from that point on would be a bonus. Hosea's reaction made the all effort worthwhile.

As we came to appreciate throughout the weekend, Hosea has a compelling presence and a powerful way of expressing himself. (Who can ever forget what he told us on Thursday evening? "I want to suck up everything I can from you guys. I want to suck in all your humanity.") And our other Kairos brothers made an impression, too: Charles and Henry, both professing to be followers of the Way; Thomas, not quite sure of what he'd gotten himself into...but still willing to keep his mind and heart open to the possibilities; and Leon, nodding and smiling nervously throughout the first evening—wanting to believe (but almost not daring to believe) that this love, this brotherhood, these spiritual gifts were being poured out for him in this place.

To close out Thursday evening, we reset the area as Chapel for meditations and night prayers. It all works quite well: By moving a few chairs...and adding our candle and cloth runner to the table, we effectively reclaim the meeting area as 'sacred space.' And we know that surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

When the time comes to leave, it feels a little strange and inhospitable for the team to be "LIFOs – last in, first out." But our Kairos brothers don't seem to mind. They understand the drill. It's been their lived reality for years.

Friday

When Friday dawns, there's time for a quick breakfast at the motel. The manager went out of his way to accommodate us—including his decision to add a special

treat to the continental breakfast array: sausage, biscuits and gravy...made special just for Kairos. The manager assured us, "These aren't just any biscuits, they're Pillsbury!" Um...um...um: lip-smacking good!

After breakfast, it's off to Tamms, where we attract a lot of attention from the dayshift employees. Many seem curious, and a few are put-off by our presence there. Others actually thank us for coming in and putting on the weekend. After checking in and getting our badges, we meet our day-shift Chapel Wing escort for the first time: Officer M. T.

And there's a story there, too, as Fran recalls...

The officers assigned to the Chapel Wing, one on the first shift (M.T., 7am to 3pm) and one on the second shift (K., 3pm to 11pm), were hand-picked by Warden Lambert. As it turns out, Officer M.T. is a member of the Warden's church; and Officer K. is one of the most respected officers at Tamms—so we knew we were in good hands. Officer M.T. also happens to be married to a Lieutenant at the prison. During lunch hour one day, a Tamms administrator asked how the program was going. I said, "OK, but we're having some difficulties with the officer on duty in the Chapel Wing" (because I knew her husband was standing nearby when the question was asked). Lieutenant T. turned and looked quickly when he heard my complaint. But before he could say anything, I said, "Just kidding!" And we all had a good laugh!

Back on the Chapel Wing, the Friday session began in earnest – with talks by Chad ("Choices"); Doug ("You Are Not Alone"); Brent ("Friendship with God"); Gian ("The Church"); and Andy ("Opening the Door").

One Kairos tradition – the Table Family Posters – had to be reinvented for the unique environment at Tamms. By design, the residents' chair/desks were set in concrete – with more than an arms-length distance between them. This enhanced security, but made it all but impossible for participants to collaborate on a single design for their poster following each talk. So we devised a "patch-work quilt" tactic – asking each participant to contribute a panel illustrating his reflections on the topic, and then taping them together before attaching them to the wall on either side of the ribbon-banner.

As Fran notes, we often had to be flexible...

Another challenge was the Kairos program itself. This very structured program had to fit into the time allotted and allow for the prison's scheduled lunch and dinner breaks. The inmates

would break for one hour for lunch (10:00 a.m.) and one hour for dinner (4:30 p.m.). We added half-hour breaks on Friday, Saturday and Sunday so the men would not be sitting for prolonged periods of time.

Any time the inmates had to be moved, the entire team had to leave the Chapel Wing. Even with this arrangement of breaks, we were able to present the entire Kairos weekend program without skipping anything. It went smoothly because the breaks were set for about every two hours.

Still, the prison's layout proved to be a challenge—complete with some unexpected blessings—for Myron.

Most of the time, when we had to leave the Chapel Wing, we had to walk all the way back to near the front entrance. It was a very long way for me with COPD and all the coughing. But the Lord fulfilled His word: “My grace is sufficient for you for in your weaknesses, there my power is made perfect.” Praise the Lord for that grace, amen.

And wouldn't you know it: While walking back from lunch one day—huffing and puffing and coughing and weeping—I heard a voice call out my name. When I turned, I saw Dori! We hugged and cried (more weeping!), and I whispered, “The Lord has answered your prayers!” But OOPS! Officer M.T. is looking—so I better hurry up! Don't want to mess anything up for anyone this weekend, because it's not about me. And my breathing got a little bit easier...I noticed it was not so hard to walk those distances now.

Of course, it wasn't just Myron. We all found ourselves making concessions to the daily routines of the prison. On two different occasions, the door to the Chapel Wing slid open – in the middle of a talk – and a nurse walked in, to distribute medications to a prisoner. In this not-so-subtle way, we were reminded that we were still in the Warden's House. But we were rewarded, too, when the nurse told us they had heard us singing—our joyful noise had traveled through the ductwork to the Medical Unit, several hundred yards away.

After each of the talks, our Table discussions required a bit of improvising, too, since the five participants and three table facilitators were spread out over a distance of some 20 feet or more. But that didn't seem to dampen the quality or quantity of the discussion, as John S. recalls...

I was amazed at the level of interaction, right from the start. We went in thinking that solitary confinement might have robbed these guys of any desire for conversation. We discovered that just the opposite was true: They loved to talk, and loved to be listened to. And their insights and questions revealed a remarkable spiritual maturity.

Thomas' questions (after Gian's talk) in particular just blew me away: "If 'we are the Church'," he says, "then are we also the Word? Who – or what – is the Word? And which is more important – the Church or the Word?" As he was asking the questions, I found myself thinking about the prologue to the Gospel of John, in which we read that Christ is the Word. And here, in this unlikely place, I gained an insight into what that really means.

I remember saying something like this to Thomas, "Yes! Exactly! Christ is the Word. And we are the Church – the Word's body. And it is all mystery. We do not understand, exactly, how it works...or where it will lead us from here. But we do know the fruits of the mystery. We know, for example, that the faithful response of the Kairos brothers at Menard helped to open the door to Kairos at Tamms. It's a miracle of the Word that no one at Menard – and no one on this team – expected. And yet, here we are, the Church, the Body of Christ...at Tamms...breaking open the Word with you. How does it work, Thomas? How does it all fit together? The truth is, we do not know, my brother. We just see...and believe...and move forward in faith."

Hosea tells us something remarkable at some point in the day: That he has been praying for this weekend, this encounter, this reconnection with humanity, for 20 years or more. And we wonder, why does his faith persist? What keeps his hope alive? But the Creator is faithful, he tells us: The Creator has answered his prayers in way that he could not have imagined, in ways that are beyond words.

We learn a little bit more about the journey he has taken over the years. Hosea tells us that while in prison, he has schooled himself in a variety of protective skills. "I know a thousand ways to hurt you, even from here...sitting in this chair," he says. "But I have now chosen a different path—the path of humility. I choose not to lash back out of anger or fear. I have discovered this to be a different kind of strength. An unbeatable form of strength. Consider water," he says. "It is soft, too. But it can be extremely powerful—as it was recently in Japan and Louisiana." He says he relishes our presence: "You come here, out of the blue, and you don't want anything. You're real. You've treated me like a human being for the first time in 25 years." And he reminds us of just how depersonalizing imprisonment can be: "People here have seen parts of my body that I can't even see...that I don't want to see." It is, on the whole, an eloquent spirituality. It is wisdom, born of considerable pain. And for John S., it becomes yet another Easter moment...

As I sat listening to Hosea talk about the path he has chosen, it struck me that I was hearing something more than the lament (and gratitude) of a prisoner on this Friday afternoon in the second week of Easter. I was hearing scripture: our Hosea, paraphrasing the great prophet

Isaiah (53:7) – “like a sheep that is silent before its shearers...” I took note, too, of where we were—gathered inside a locked room—with our very own Thomas on hand, wrestling with the Good News he’d been hearing from our mouths all day. And suddenly, Hosea’s words began to make the Lamb of God Himself present to me behind all those locked doors.

That’s when a torrent of witness came pouring out of my mouth: “I see Christ in you,” I told Hosea. “I see Christ in the choices you make to bear all those indignities with humility. We know you are strong—because you’ve told us so: strong enough to hurt us in a thousand different ways. But you choose to be weak. In that choice, I see Christ, who though God, did not cling to godliness, but emptied himself—becoming a slave, accepting even death...death on a tree. Yes, I see Christ in you,” I said. “Christ, who himself was persecuted; Christ, who himself was imprisoned; Christ, who himself was executed. Yet he opened not his mouth.” It was—and is—a remarkable blessing to have been there, standing on that holy ground.

Along with the formal periods of discussion, we had many opportunities to chat with the participants one-on-one throughout the day. A team member would simply pull up a chair, offer a cookie, and allow the seed of brotherhood to take root and grow. The Kairos room provided fertile soil for this miracle to unfold, as proved by a quiet moment that Fran recalls...

On Friday night, Leon said that tomorrow he was going to ask me for a HUG. I said, you want a HUG, I’ll give you one right now and with that we stood up and Hugged. It turned out to be the FIRST HUG he has had in fifteen years!

Saturday

Upon returning to the Chapel Wing on Saturday morning, it was remarkable to see how the Kairos community (both in the room, across the country and around the world) had begun to transform the bare concrete wall of the cellblock. A day’s worth of posters and agape now surrounded the ribbon banner – and it was flanked on one side by the print-out of the 24-Hour Prayer Vigil, stretching to nearly eight feet in height.

The Vigil roster offered its own curious God-incidence. As we passed the sheets around before posting them on the wall, one of the prisoners—Henry, the alternate on the weekend—saw a familiar name: His God-mother, it turned out, was one of the many taking a half-hour to pray for us...even though she could not have known (because we didn’t know) that Henry was going to be a participant in the event.

Clearly, the outpouring of agape amazed all five of our Tamms brothers. As one put it, "These people don't know me from a can of paint, and yet they're praying for me!" And first thing Saturday morning, Gian reported that this assembly had turned out to be pretty good at "agape," too. We had circled up to pray for Gian's mother on Friday afternoon, just as she was about to go in for complicated surgery at a Chicagoland hospital. Our prayers were answered, Gian said: The surgery was a success, and his mother was deeply touched to learn that the 16 of us had raised her up to the Lord the previous afternoon. ("Mama mia!" she had exclaimed in delight!)

Along with the growing collection of agape, there's another subtle change to environment on Saturday. Because this is the day we introduce the men to Jesus Christ, we pulled back the ribbons on the banner, exposing what had been concealed behind its shimmering streaks of color: a gold cross on a background of white cloth.

More talks and meditations followed: Mark ("Discovery"); Myron ("Christian Action"); John S. ("The Wall"); and John B. ("Forgiveness Wind-up"). Team members also have an opportunity to learn more about life at Tamms, as Andy recalls:

During the weekend I went up to the cell (on the second level of the Chapel Wing) that had been open to us for use as a toilet room. I spent some time there trying to get a feel of what it was like to live in this space. I lay down on the concrete shelf that formed a bed surface and just noticed the surroundings. I stretched out my six-foot frame to see that wall-to-wall was seven feet. Everything was a colorless gray. A concrete shelf jutted out of the wall next to the head of the bed, forming an eating and/or writing surface. A single fluorescent light fixture was on the ceiling about 9-10 feet high.

I stood on the bed surface to try to see out of the narrow window slit near the top of the wall. I could reach the bottom of the slit with my eyes only to discover the window was frosted so one could not see anything anyway. There was a stainless steel toilet/sink combo next to the door that dominated the room. It was probably the first thing to come into the field of vision when awakening each morning. I don't remember seeing a mirror. The door was a steel plate with dime size holes spaced a half inch apart over the whole area of the door.

The sliding door was electronically operated from outside the wing. Looking through the door one could only see the stark gray concrete wall on the other side of the wing. One could only see another person if he stood directly in front of the door. I had trouble imagining

myself in these confines for any 24-hour period, much less the 19 years that Hosea had spent living like this.

As the team prepared to leave the Chapel Wing on a break, there was a brief uplifting encounter between the CO on duty and one of the prisoners. Later that day, the prisoner told one of the team members what the conversation had meant to him: “In all my incarceration, I have never experienced any officer connecting with me with such an open natural human spirit,” he said.

At mid-afternoon, we distribute Personal Agape to the participants, too—brief notes of encouragement written by team members to each of the men.

The bond of community is growing. The participants begin to share with us their treasured dreams and memories. Thomas talks about finding Christ in the gentle encouragement of those on his cellblock. When he learned, some years ago, that his brother had died unexpectedly, another inmate has encouraged a day of silence on the wing...to help Thomas mourn. Leon’s eyes well up when he recalls the great love that his mother and father have for him, and his own regret at having disappointed them. Hosea reveals his dream: that one day, when he’s out, he will organize a drill team of 300—using the discipline of marching and music to mold those kids in the neighborhood before they can be poisoned by the culture of the street; to teach them something about the spirit of cohesion he himself has experienced this weekend. Charles talks about the great disappointment in his life—that as the months turn into years at Tamms, other prisoners seem to come and go; but he’s still here, even though “I’m not trouble.” He wonders if God has been preparing him, so that his heart would be receptive to this weekend.

There’s an extraordinary moment in the sharing period after Personal Agape. Fran tells the five brothers that he has secured permission for them to bring the letters back to their cells. Then Hosea responds with a special request. “I have one thing I’d like to ask, and I just hope my request can be answered,” he says. “I hope it will be OK.” And silently, we begin to wonder: what could he possibly want, beyond what we’ve already given? More importantly, what could we possibly give him in this restrictive supermax environment? Please, Lord, see to it that we don’t disappoint!

Soon enough, our silent prayer is answered. “I can’t see this Jesus you talk about, and I can’t touch him,” Hosea says, “But you eleven men have shown Him to me

this weekend. So what I'd like to request is a hug from each member of the team before you leave here tomorrow."

Well, it certainly didn't take much to set that process into motion! As Andy recalls...

I was next to Hosea and spontaneously jumped up to give him one. What followed was an explosion of hugs for everyone in the room. The hugs were awkward because although the team members could wrap their arms around the inmates, the handcuffs that went from wrists to waist-chain only allowed them to put their hands on each side of our bodies at waist level. No mater, the hugs were complete in every way physically possible.

It was like a dam had burst: We'd been cautious about initiating contact beyond a hand-shake to that point, because we were told that anything more might overwhelm the residents after so many years in solitary confinement. But now, having built true community in this holy place, our brothers invited us in – and asked us to wrap our arms around them in a loving way. Before long, Hosea had gotten the 11 hugs he asked for—and then some: Remarkably (and no doubt, bewilderingly to the C.O.s on duty in the control room), Officer K. lined up to hug the prisoner, too. They say "love conquers all." And we certainly saw love—in all its revitalizing glory—on display that afternoon.

Or, as Myron puts it, perhaps what we'd just witnessed was a miracle of biblical proportions...

My heart almost burst with joy, the toughest one...the Goliath! The Lord God Almighty did it again! Yes, God indeed is God. Amen!

Saturday evening, the mood softened a bit...as we prepared ourselves to participate in the Forgiveness sequence. Fran set the tone for introspection, advising the participants and the team that we would be leaving in silence at the conclusion of the ceremony – with no hugs – not because there's any less love to be shared among us; but because it will provide time and opportunity for the Spirit to continue moving in our hearts.

And move the Spirit did, at least for one of the participants. As Andy recalls,

Leading up to the rice paper exercise on Saturday evening, Hosea told me he had forgiven everyone that had hurt him years before so he did not have anyone to put on the list but himself. Then he remembered that he had never formally asked forgiveness from the father

of his victim so he wrote his name down. His ‘Jacob Moment’ came later that evening. On Sunday morning I asked if he had a good night. Said it was rough, only slept a half hour. During the night he had written a six page letter to the father of his victim of thirty years before. Like Jacob, he had wrestled with the Lord during the night.

Sunday

On Sunday morning, our Kairos brothers have a surprise in store for us. With Leon as ringleader, they’ve teamed up to sign a greeting card. It’s not a “thank you” card, exactly...because they’ve taken note of our insistence that the team not be thanked for our work. But it is a marvelous sentiment nevertheless. The preprinted message on the front of the card reads, “With God, all things are possible...” and inside, Leon has written a long, loving note on behalf of his brothers. It reads, in part, “What each of us has experienced in these past few days will always be ingrained in our hearts and soul.” We could not have asked for a better witness about the impact of the weekend.

Of course, the program is not over for the weekend—not yet anyway. So we dig in to the morning’s activities, noticing too late that the EZRA software has tossed us a curveball: The automatically-generated weekend schedule includes just five minutes for the opening meditation (“Healing of Past Memories”)—a beautiful and important passage that takes the better part of 20 minutes to complete. As a result, we’re off to a contemplative start, but also behind schedule right from the get-go. Next, we hear the Rooster story; and talks by John S. (“Obstacles to God’s Grace”) and John B. (“Walking In God’s Grace”). Before we know it, the lunchhour has arrived – and everyone on team is wondering how we could possibly have gotten so far behind schedule! But it’s the Warden’s House...and it’s time for lunch...so away we go to the employee dining room for one last meal.

Which, it turns out, is really the only clunker we’d experienced during the weekend. It was a mysterious dish—maybe lasagne? maybe enchilada? Myron used his considerable charm to learn that the entrée is called Tamale Surprise (involving, he says, “a secret mixture of corn meal, cheese, soy and tamale spices.”) In an event, it touched off stories of other memorable meals we’d declined on previous weekends at Menard or Stateville. But on the whole, we were grateful for the grub we’d been served at Tamms—with menus that had featured barbecue chicken, cheeseburgers, fried chicken patties, grilled burritos, and a

macaroni-and-cheese recipe that Myron judged “the tastiest I have ever had—and I have been eating mac-and-cheese for some 64 years now.” The officers told us those menus were typical at Tamms – and we complimented the kitchen manager for her work!

We treated the staff, too, with tubs of homemade cookies offered free-for-the-taking in the employee break room. Such a blessing, to have so many cookies—giving the participants a chance to eat their fill, and still have “wicker baskets left over” (Mt. 14:20) for the prison staff.

As we headed back to the Chapel Wing, a team member had a brilliant idea: Let’s bring half-pints of milk with us, so our brothers can have milk and cookies before we leave! So five of us collected cartons on our way out...but as we were waiting to be re-admitted to the Chapel Wing, Officer M.T. caught wind of our plan, and told us it was a definite no-no. The prisoners were on strictly regulated diets...and they are supposed to get milk only with breakfast. Not wanting to cause a stir, we wound up chugging our milks, right there in the hallway – payback for a brilliant idea gone bad! At least one team member could claim complete innocence: “Praise God that I had no part in this dastardly deed, as I do not like milk,” Myron smiles.

After lunch, two guests join us for the closing session—Duane Weeks, serving as our Fourth Day speaker; and the Tamms Chaplain, Carl Miller. The Table Leaders demonstrate the model for a prayer-and-share group...and we encourage them to hold it in their hearts as a model of hope, a habit that someday they’ll be able to practice with Kairos brothers at Menard, Stateville or points unknown. Brent shares information about a ministry dear to his heart: Kairos Outside, serving the loved ones of the incarcerated. He encourages the men to inquire with the Chaplain about extending an invitation to the women in their lives.

Then Fran presents his Closing talk, reminding all present that this weekend—wonderful and amazing as it has been—is not Kairos. It’s just the beginning of the journey...the first step in a lifelong relationship with Christ. He tells the residents that they can start now, as soon as they return to their cells. “Start with prayer,” he says, “and share with Jesus each day—or with your wife or sweetheart or child—telling them how you are doing on your spiritual walk.” He reminds them, too, that we have an obligation to share this Good News with others. “You don’t

have to preach it,” he says. “Just live what you have learned here, and others will come to you, wanting to share in your peace.”

Following the closing remarks, it’s jam-time: One last chance to sing...any song of the participants’ choosing. Doug has been lobbying Fran all weekend to allow a rendition of “Pharoah, Pharoah” (sung to the tune of the Kingsmen’s “Louie, Louie”). But in the end, it’s another classic rock melody that strikes our brothers’ fancy: They want to hear—and sing—“Amazing Grace” to the tune of “House of the Rising Sun.” It’s safe to say that we raised the roof and rattled the ductwork with our final rendition of that song: We wanted to make sure the nurses could hear us in the Medical Unit!

And then one last piece of official business: Someone noted that, with only one Table Family established this weekend, we’d never gotten around to naming the Family. Fran opened the floor to a discussion, and it didn’t take long for our Kairos brothers to select a name that was perfectly suited to their situation: The Family of Job.

And here’s the odd thing: With that last piece of business conducted, the schedule was complete—but we still had an hour or more before the team’s scheduled departure. The early morning session on Sunday had been conducted at a frantic pace, thanks to the computerized scheduling snafu...but now, in the waning moments of the weekend, God had blessed us with an abundance of “found time.” Fran saw it as an opportunity for any and all to share about the spiritual gifts they had received during the past several days. Both participants and team members took advantage of the open mic. Fran was especially moved by one of the sharings...

I was taken by the way Henry handled the question of Tamms closing. He offered a prayer that asked for God’s will be done with regard to the situation presented by the Governor wanting to close Tamms. He could have easily prayed for a closing so he could get out of Tamms. A very spiritually mature response.

John S. reflected on a meditation he had heard recently, and how it applied to the experience of the Tamms weekend...

I was struck by what Hosea said yesterday – how he was thinking, ‘what’s it going to be like tomorrow, after these guys are gone?’ And it’s true: There is a deep sense of loss building in our hearts today. Just look at how we’ve transformed this room...how much beauty now

covers the walls...how much love there is now in our hearts. And in just a couple of hours, all the colors and the posters will be gone.

It's the most natural thing in the world for us to want to hang on to all that...just as the disciples wanted to cling to Jesus when he appeared to them after Easter. I was listening to a meditation the other day that talked about those post-resurrection appearances – how Jesus kept turning up in unexpected places. Every time, it seems, it took the disciples a while to recognize him...and almost as soon as they did, he was gone!

Why is that, the meditation asked? Perhaps it's because Jesus doesn't want us to get stuck in our old ways of thinking about Him. Perhaps it's because Jesus wants us to continue to seek him. And we've had just that same sort of experience here this weekend, it seems to me. We have seen the risen Lord, here in this locked room – in the love we've shared with the Body of Christ. But we cannot cling to that experience. We have to let it go. Just as he did with his disciples two thousand years ago, Jesus is inviting us to continue to seek him today.

Hosea had much to say in the closing moments of the weekend, too. He talked about how the Kairos experience had changed him. "I was running on fumes when I got here Thursday evening," he said. "Today I feel like my tank is full. And it's not just one tank—I've got like a dozen 55-gallon drums of fuel to draw on, enough to keep me going for another 14 years."

More sharing ensued from all of the participants. Afterwards, Gian reflected on the long lens through which God seems to see our world...

Sunday's discussion is what reaffirmed for me that the Holy Spirit was there. Based on comments from the residents, it became quite evident they all had started down a spiritual path years ago. Many years, in fact, before I even knew what Kairos was, and long before I started down the path I am on today in my own spiritual life. Some of these guys had been studying scripture for 10 or more years. The Holy Spirit had planted the seed for this weekend into these men long ago. Even one of the prison administrators told us she was praying for years before that Kairos would come to Tamms.

So look at how the dots come together: Men getting familiar with scripture; people praying for Kairos to come to Tamms; the institution requesting a Kairos retreat without any prodding from Kairos; a group of 11 men gathered from different parts of Illinois and Missouri—brought together by the Lord in all different stages of their spiritual lives—to ultimately minister these five men.

This is all evidence that Kairos truly is "God's time" – not our time. Look how many years this weekend has been forming in the mystery of God's plan. The Holy Spirit was at work all

around us...and in the end, we just needed to show up. We just needed to be there in order for the plan to be accomplished.

Why these five, and not others? I am not sure what the answer is. However, when we were done on Sunday, it sure felt like these were the five men to help bring peace to this very dark place, a prison that sucks the humanity out of you, where you're locked up 23 hrs a day and no contact with anyone. I found it interesting that when we asked this group to pick a name for their table family, they chose "Job."

Something inside made me feel that these men had the ability to make major changes once they accepted Jesus totally. In my heart, it felt like one man in particular did accept Jesus; and like Paul, his conversion will make him a powerful evangelist. Interesting, too, that his name is Hosea, the name of a great prophet.

As it happened, Hosea asked Fran's permission to have the final words before we wrapped. He asked the team members to gather in a row against the wall, below the ribbon banner and to remove their name badges. Then, one-by-one, he addressed each team member by name—talking about the personal gift he'd be cherishing about that team member in his memory. In the process, he gave several of us nicknames: John Brahler – The Rebel; Mark Waight – Teddy Bear; John Schroeder – Sneaky Pete; Gian Alleruzzo – The Only Italian/Libyan I've Ever Known; Doug Janz – The Only Canadian I Have Ever Met, And The Real Deal ("keep walking on the path you're on"). Hosea's sharing touched Andy in particular, because Andy had spent a lot of one-on-one time with him as his host.

At closing Hosea said that at the beginning, we were 11 guys he didn't like or trust. As he spoke to each of us acknowledging that person's personal gift that he would cherish, he looked at me and said "you manipulated me." (Manipulation is what inmates refer to as the "con.") Since I was his host that comment was significant to me when later he explained that he was determined not to trust us or to cry and that his heart had become softened - open to change and to receive the love he felt.

I learned on Sunday his left eye had little vision, and his good right eye kept looking away from me on Thursday night. He apologized that he just wasn't able to look me in the eye after so many years of isolation.

By Sunday he was looking directly at me during our conversations. It was quite a Kairos contrast: The weekend took Hosea from a stance of not looking me in the eye or trusting the lemonade – to us both looking at each other directly and saying "I love you" to each other, and really meaning it.

Hosea was not only a prophet on our weekend; he was also a philosopher and strategist. He talked about God's inscrutable way of answering prayers... marveling at how all the dots had to be connected over the decades and across vast distances of geography in order to bring these 16 men together for this weekend. He reflected on the conversation that the five of them had been having since the start of the event: Why us? How did it come to be that this group of residents was chosen? And on Sunday, it became clear to them: All five are leaders.

"Now, it makes sense," he said. "Kairos wants leaders. God wants leaders. That's how God uses Kairos to transform a place like Tamms." Hosea, we'd come to appreciate, is nobody's fool. "When I came here on Thursday, I kept looking for the angle...kept looking for the string: What do you guys really want," he said. "But I discovered there is no string. And so that's what I have been telling them on the wing: I can't explain Kairos; you have to experience it; and I will also tell you this: It is the real thing."

Our "found time" ended at 2:00 on Sunday afternoon. We gave our brothers one last round of hugs, and left the Chapel Wing, knowing all too well that we might never see them again. And in fact, all five were gone when we returned after a half-hour break – the prisoner move accomplished, completely out of our sight.

The end went quickly: Posters and agape and Prayer Vigil sheets, stripped from the walls; the ribbon-banner rolled up and returned to its cardboard tube; other supplies packed, inventoried and loaded onto a large metal cart. And one last time, we made our way through the maze of hallways, tunnels and sliding doors. It felt very much like an ending, but also a beginning.

We gathered outside the front entrance to the prison, and circled up to pray for the final time as team for Tamms #1. There was gratitude in our hearts and on our lips as Fran led the closing prayer. Then we went our separate ways, wondering what mighty work Christ and his Holy Spirit have in mind for this place and for these men. And we knew, to a man, that it had been an extraordinary blessing to have been here. The journey continues...

(For more information about Kairos, visit www.kairosprisonministry.org.)