

FAITH

in the

BIG HOUSE

1 X 57 HD



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At a maximum security prison farm in Louisiana, a group of Christian evangelicals conduct a carefully-scripted religious retreat. Five felons, each of them misfits handpicked by the warden, join other inmates in this “Encounter with Christ.” The volunteer missionaries are preparing to host a three-day retreat for some 40 inmates. Warden Hooper knows every inmate in the yard, and he’s encouraged five misfits to “voluntarily” sign up for the weekend. Can a gang-banger, a self-styled theologian, a narcissistic rocker, a twitchy jock, and a former college football heartthrob find redemption? Will the intense submersion in such Christian fervor change these men? Can religion keep them from almost inevitably returning to lockup?

As the warden chose inmates to join the religious retreat at this prison farm, he rounded up those hardest to convert, the eloquent, and the most dangerous: Tyson, a feared gangbanger; Simmons, a practicing Muslim and a charmer who was riding high with a collegiate sports scholarship until an ankle injury ended his Cinderella story; Rusty Patterson, a guitar virtuoso and cocaine dealer who loves to shunt blame; and Timothy Anthony, who, just this once, put down his softball glove to join the others at the revival.

The technique used by visiting ministries is part indoctrination and part men’s group. Role playing, skits, good food, and long hours are all part of the formula, with a message of unconditional love and forgiveness.

Of the roughly 2,000 inmates released on any given day in America, three out of every four will be back inside within three years. Evangelicals insist that unless they are transformed through faith, the inmates will keep going back to prison, but that bible study radically reduces the number of inmates who are re-incarcerated.

Around 1800, Quakers tried what was then a brand new approach—one man per cell. They thought criminals—sinners—left in solitude, would find grace through penitence. In practice, the idea rarely succeeded, and many inmates were driven insane by the seclusion.

In the 1970s, missionaries delivered a new gospel—one that relied on rapport between ministry volunteers and inmates. Prisoners were called on to forge a personal relationship with Jesus, who, through the story of his resurrection, is cast as a forgiving friend. Today, thousands of highly trained Christian volunteers worldwide run bible study, literacy, and substance abuse programs, and administrate entire prisons as Christian facilities.

Many correctional systems, attracted by the promise of federal subsidies for faith-based drug counseling, have embraced the spiritual approach. However, long-term studies on the efficacy of faith-based programs has found that after more than five years outside of prison, graduates of Christian programs were re-incarcerated as often as those who had never participated in faith-based programs at all.

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CREDITS

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