
Book Review**Nancy Hastings Sehested,
*Marked for Life: A Prison Chaplain's Story***

Long one of our finest preachers, Nancy Hastings Sehested now takes her place as a supremely gifted writer among us. Sehested's new book chronicles her 13 years as a chaplain in two men's prisons in North Carolina, the last 10 in a maximum security facility where she distinguished herself as a sensitive, no-nonsense pastor to inmates, many convicted of particularly brutal crimes.

Hers is a no sugar-coated account of life in prisons all too typical in the United States today; their brutality is confronted in gut-wrenching honesty – the brutality of the facilities themselves, that of some prison officers in confrontations with inmates, and that of bloody battles among prisoners themselves. Nor is this the chronicle of a benighted liberal making judgments from some exalted platform. Instead, it is an honest, self-reflective account of a minister who unexpectedly found herself at a crossroads in her pastoral ministry that led her into prison chaplaincy. This sensitively written book instantly takes its place as essential literature in a field long ignored, yet “ripe for harvest.”

Although she states her objective was not “to offer an in-depth analysis of the criminal justice system and the prison industrial complex or to reflect on the inherent racism and classism of those systems,” she actually exceeds such expectations in the numerous vignettes of individual inmates in decisive moments of their lives inside the prisons where she served. Every one of these men comes to life in her recounting of conversations with them, conversations painstakingly recalled in passages so precise they read like the contemporaneous notes taken by intelligence officers following important encounters that must be remembered accurately. Sehested’s mastery of this method, sometimes referred to as the “verbatim” in pastoral counseling, is nothing short of astonishing as she reconstructs with precision the privileged conversations in which she engaged with inmates.

Neither the decision to become a pastor to hardened criminals nor to write a book about her experiences ministering to warehoused inmates was easy. In one of several passages revealing difficult personal struggles, Sehested acknowledges that she “abandoned the writing several times” given the “tension between bearing witness and keeping confidentiality.” That sensitive dilemma she resolved by not using inmates’ names in telling their stories, something she does brilliantly throughout the book.

Far harder was the plunge into prison ministry itself. Sehested recounts her family’s move from Memphis, where she had been pastor of Prescott Memorial Baptist Church, to western North Carolina with the dream of starting a retreat ministry with friends already in the

area, the prospect of which ended within months of their arrival. “In hindsight that was good,” she writes, “but it didn’t seem so at the time. And the truth was that *I* was the one in need of retreat. All I knew was what I’d left behind: a high-profile life as a city pastor, my identity in the church, my aging and bewildered parents, the financial security of a regular salary, a disappointed congregation. I left feeling like a failure. My acute sense of loss and disappointment followed me like a bloodhound.”

Following her only interview with the lead chaplain at the first of the two prisons where she ended up working, Sehested received an email from Chaplain Bill that read in part: “Whatever else I have to tell you, if your heart is sensitive, be prepared to hurt when you come to work here.... And as Wendell Berry says, practice resurrection.” Already encouraged by husband Ken to keep an open mind about the prospect, she added: “Resurrection. I was longing for it. Was it obvious? Though it was odd to think it, I had to concede that inside those grey, ugly buildings might be the place for mine.”

While praising her mentor colleague Chaplain Bill, Sehested recounts the outright skepticism she encountered from other prison officials. One of these, a lieutenant, stopped by her office shortly after her appointment to declare: “I want you to know that I don’t think women have a place in a men’s prison. I’ve worked for the department for over twenty years and I’m old-fashioned.”

One of the head chaplain’s clerks, when introduced to Sehested, asked, “Do you have thick skin? Most of the guys will treat you with respect, but some of them will test you every chance they get. What’re you going to do if one of them asks for a phone call home because they haven’t heard from their family in six months and you say ‘no’ and then they say, ‘You’re the worst chaplain in the state.’ Can you handle that?” To which she replied, “Well, I’ve been called the ‘anti-Christ’ and the ‘whore of Babylon.’ And that was from Christians. So that sounds comparatively mild.”

What followed for the next 13 years in Chaplain Sehested’s ministry was a breathtaking series of encounters with prisoners. Many were heartbreaking, as in conveying the news of family deaths, one of her principal duties. Others were heartwarming, including chapel services during which inmates testified to profound changes for good. Among the most surprising events was the call she received at home on a Saturday afternoon informing her of the prison superintendent’s suicide and the consequent urgent need of her presence to minister to shocked colleagues and perplexed prisoners.

And what was it that kept her going? “Mercy. It was my one-word prayer, the plea I found myself saying daily, repeatedly, in a kind of pray-without-ceasing kind of way. Sometimes I said the word audibly. Mostly it was my inner cry.

“Mercy is not going soft on crime. It doesn’t flinch from our cruelties and deceptions. It doesn’t avoid looking at the constellation of people still suffering the aftermath of crimes, from grieving parents, to bewildered children, to surviving victims, to a wounded community. The miracle of mercy is that it can be clear-eyed to our hatreds and horrors but still interrupt our ceaseless rounds of retaliation and vengeance.”

■ *Stan Haste*y