

NPR segment by President Larry Schall, Oglethorpe University, Atlanta.

Hope or despair. Redemption or retribution. Dignity or degradation. As I enter my fourth year as president of Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, these words may seem odd to be at the forefront of my thinking. While life as a college president is not easy, despair, retribution and degradation thankfully don't describe too many moments in my life. Then again, it's been only three years. No, these words are fixed in my mind not because of my day-to-day work, but rather because of a break from that work. Two Oglethorpe alumni who have become dear friends invited my wife, my daughter and me to join them last weekend in prison: Angola Prison, part of the Louisiana State Penitentiary System. We were the outsiders on the trip, the other 40 travelers work in the Georgia State Prison System as wardens, chaplains or nurses and were visiting to learn how their own prison communities might become reflective of the ideals of hope, redemption and dignity.

Angola is infamous, both for what it was and what it has become. It's the place of *Dead Man Walking* and *Monster's Ball*. For decades, Angola was America's bloodiest prison and it remains the largest maximum-security prison in the country with 18,000 acres and over 5,200 inmates. Today, with sentencing laws among the harshest in America, the average sentence at Angola is 88 years. Of the 5,200 inmates, 3,600 are in for life with no parole. Ninety percent of those who pass through the gates of Angola will die there. If these numbers don't represent despair, retribution and degradation, I don't know what does.

Here we were, husband, wife and 16-year-old daughter, dropped among 5,200 inmates, mostly lifers, all of whom have committed very serious offenses – murder, armed robbery, aggravated sex crimes. Unless you've been to Angola you might chalk the rest of this story up to the tale of a do-gooder with his head in the sand, but it's the truth so help me God. Our first night at Angola we wandered into a church at about 9:00 p.m., one of five churches now at Angola. The bell on this church is nearly 100 years old. The inmates love the bell and tell its story something like this: after it was created and before it had the chance to ring anywhere, it fell and killed a church member. The first time that bell ever rang was at Angola – the bell was a killer and now it's been redeemed, and they call it a born-again bell. As we entered the church, we passed one guard quietly sitting. There were maybe 100 or so felons scattered in the church pews with an inmate preacher up front. He stopped for a moment, welcoming us to their house, to God's house, and urged us to sit among them in prayer. So we all sat shoulder-to-shoulder among the men. The next day, we joined inmates for a meal, again sitting side by side.

Picture this: my daughter, talking to a 40-year-old man who has spent half his life in Angola for murder, not scared, not even nervous. "It's odd," she said later, "It was just like talking to anyone else." For three days, I never heard one curse word, and I can't remember when that has ever happened. In fact I don't recall being among so many dignified men in my entire life, how can that be? How can men who have committed such serious crimes, locked away for life, maintain any shred of dignity?

That brings me to Warden Burl Cain. His job, as he sees it, is not to punish the men under his care. After three years, virtually no inmate receives a single visit in a year. His men are in jail for life. They have been punished. Society has locked them up. His job is to give them an opportunity to give back. You have to do what you can where you are says the warden. In a Christian world, there is always a chance for redemption -- hope and dignity.

Hope at Angola is everywhere, and it's not the hope of one day being released, since that almost never happens. Instead I believe it's the hope that comes with regaining one's dignity, through taking responsibility for one's acts, finding ways to take care of others, through God and through work. Everyone has a job at Angola. The newest inmate makes two cents an hour working the fields. A 15-minute call to his loved one costs \$6. That's 300 hours of work, or about eight weeks, for that phone call.

The violence at Angola is almost gone. Warden Cain says it's this simple: the thousands of men of God in his prison won't tolerate violence.

Hope and despair. Redemption and retribution. Dignity and degradation. All exist within the walls of Angola. And I am left in awe to have discovered that within such a place of despair lies so much dignity.