

No Common Sense in Prison System
By Representative Glenn Grothman

The share of the Department of Corrections in the state budget has grown dramatically over the past ten years. Today about seven percent of your income and sales tax dollars goes to our prison system.

At any given time, approximately 22,000 inmates are in the system. While it is important to incarcerate dangerous criminals, it is also important that the people operate the prisons efficiently and use common sense. The vast majority of prisoners will eventually be returned to society.

Recently the committee which I chair held what I thought would be a short hearing regarding a matter which should have been handled with a little common sense. Some ministers who visit inmates in prison wanted to give their parishioners wine as part of a communion ceremony. The Department of Corrections refused.

A belief in God and a continued connection with a prisoner's local church are clearly both advantageous in leading these inmates toward a more productive life once released from prison. It would seem that the Department of Corrections should be doing all they could to encourage clergy to minister to the inmates. While there are clergy on staff in the prisons, one must remember that only three years ago when the Department of Corrections had an opening for a chaplain, they felt the most qualified candidate for a job was a witch. (The witch is still on staff at the Waupun prison. – I checked.) I assume the ministers and priests from back home do a better job. They also can continue to minister to the inmates once they are released.

Why would the Department of Corrections decide to throw up an obstacle to local clergymen and refuse to allow them to bring in an ounce of wine? They had three excuses – none valid. There is a statute forbidding outsiders from bringing intoxicating liquor into prison. However, an exemption already is made for medical purposes and one cannot get intoxicated on an ounce of wine. Secondly, they are afraid if they let Catholics or Lutherans bring in wine some Native Americans will want to smoke illegal drugs. But illegal drugs are illegal substances, wine is not.

Finally, and most absurdly, they are afraid wine will cause a problem for alcoholics. According to Dr. Michael Bohn, of Gateway Recovery in Madison, there is no research indicating an ounce of communion wine will cause an alcoholic to relapse. The Department claims eighty percent of the inmates have alcohol problems. I question such a high number. But more to the point, upon release these prisoners will be in a world full of alcohol. Ministers deal with alcoholics all the time in their home churches. Upon questioning the warden from Fox Lake if it would be all right to give a prisoner an ounce of one part wine, five parts water, this warden believed it could still be a problem for alcoholics. With this lack of common sense, what other ridiculous decisions are being made at Corrections?

Ironically, I am reliably told we have a big problem with illegal drugs being somehow smuggled into our prison system. I'm also reliably told that some in our prison system feel a crackdown on drugs would cause more trouble than it's worth. Oh well, at least we crack down on priests and ministers.

Some ministers have found an attorney who will go to court. A federal appellate court has ruled that a Catholic prisoner cannot be denied communion. So, in federal prison we do not have this problem. If the Department of Corrections does not change its opinion, they will wind up spending attorney time on a case they will lose. The Department should find more important rules to enforce.

Please let me know what you think on this issue. Contact me here in Madison---please call 1-888-534-0058.