

# 'Wall of silence will work only if we let it'

By JADE DELL

Last April 19, a four-bus caravan from the Chicago area drove 200 people to the gates of Marion Prison in Marion, Illinois, to protest an inhuman lockdown which for two and one-half years now has subjected prisoners to isolation, beatings, denial of contact with family and other prisoners, and denial of religious freedoms. The demonstration at Marion was part of a series of concurrent demonstrations that took place all over the country and in Puerto Rico. Other demonstration sites included: Lexington Federal Prison in Lexington, Kentucky; the Metropolitan Correctional Centers in New York City and Tucson, Arizona; the San Quentin State Prison in San Francisco; and the Rio Piedras State Prison in Puerto Rico. The focus of all of these actions was to dramatize and confront these prisons as fortresses of repression.

## The lockdown

In 1979, Marion Federal Prison, located in our own state of Illinois, became a Level VI prison, the top maximum security prison in the U.S. The permanent lockdown began in October of 1983 when two guards were killed in isolated incidents by two prisoners. Although there was no prison riot, authorities seized this opportunity to repress violently the entire prison population, turning the prison into one huge "Control Unit." The conditions of the lockdown mean that:

- For 23 hours a day, prisoners are locked into individual cells, denied contact with each other and forced into total idleness.
- During the initial stage of the lockdown, 60 guards equipped with riot gear were shipped in from other prisons and assisted Marion guards in systematically beating 100 handcuffed and defenseless prisoners.
- All Control Unit prisoners are subjected to humiliating and degrading finger probes of the rectum every time they leave the unit for a court date, hospital visit, etc.
- All contact visits were ended; no prisoners can touch or be touched by parents, wives, children.
- All work programs and group educational activities were shut down.
- All religious services have been outlawed.

In its efforts to justify its actions, the Bureau of Prisons has tried to perpetuate the myth that Marion contains "the most vicious, predatory prisoners in the system." The fact is that the criteria for placement at Marion are vague, and 80% of the men there are eligible for placement at less restrictive prisons.

As might be expected the Control Unit produces in prisoners feelings of intense rage and helplessness that are inevitably expressed in violence — either against themselves or against others. The Marion Lockdown is a dismal failure. It promotes the very violence it claims to be trying to prevent.

## The CEML conference

The Committee to End the Marion Lockdown, an ad hoc group of Chicago area religious and political progressives, held a well-attended conference in October of 1985. Entitled "A Conference for Education and Action on the Second Anniversary of the Marion Prison Lockdown," it featured distinguished speakers such as Father Daniel Berrigan, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Michael Deutsch and Jan Susler who addressed the specific issues of Marion and the general role of prisons in our society. Encouraged by the interest in this conference, two prison solidarity groups began planning the demonstration and asked the CEML to participate. Thus began the effort to raise funds, obtain bus charters, produce literature and recruit persons to travel to Marion on April 19, 1986.

## Prisons and society

Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote that to understand a society, one should look within its prisons. What does a glimpse behind U.S. prison walls tell us about our society?

From 1980 to 1984, the prison population grew by 36% to about 1/2 million people. By the year 2000, there will be an estimated one million people in prison — Black people and other people of color being incarcerated at rates eight times higher than white people.

A growing disparity exists in this country between those who enjoy a comfortable life and those who must struggle to survive. It is these "have-nots" who fill the U.S. prisons.



The demonstration at Marion Prison

The society that delivers such a disproportionate number of Third World people to the prison doors is one that has produced a generation of Black and poor youth — 75% of whom are unemployed, who are trapped in deteriorating public housing projects, who drop out of schools at alarming rates, who lose their lives to drugs, crime and violence, who have inadequate medical care.

What our government does offer to the poor is more and bigger prisons, the death penalty, and more police. In the 1980s, prisons no longer pretend to rehabilitate — they are simply warehouses. All attention has been turned away from the social, political, and economic roots of crime and instead blame is directed at individual "bad" people.

## Our response

The wall of silence around prisons will work only if we let it. Historically, most of us have become aware of prisons only after some terrible, violent event occurs, such as after the 1971 National Guard massacre of 41 prisoners who rebelled at Attica Prison in New York. Yet, right now, and for the

past two and a half years, the prisoners at Marion have been experiencing physical and psychological violence on a daily basis. And now a maximum security unit is being readied at the Lexington Federal Prison. What will we do?

Top prison officials have made it clear they intend to maintain the lockdown status permanently. So far two Congressional hearings, and a Congressional recommendation that the lockdown end, have not been effective. If you would like to address the issue of the Marion Lockdown, please send your comments to: Warden, U.S.P. Marion, Marion, IL 62959; and also to: Norman Carlson, Director, Federal Bureau of Prisons, 320 First Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20534.

If you would like more information you can write the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown at 59 E. Van Buren, 14th floor, Chicago, IL 60605.

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## Oehler heads Church Federation for second term

Carolyn Henninger Oehler, director of the Conference Council on Ministries, has been re-elected president of the Church Federation of Greater Chicago for a second consecutive term.

The first woman to head the Church Federation, she is former chair of the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women.

Ms. Oehler continues her leadership of



Carolyn Oehler

the federation of 22 Protestant and Eastern Orthodox communions as it celebrates 80 years as one of the oldest and most active interdenominational agencies in the United States. Founded in 1907, the Church Federation has a tradition of ecumenical leadership on significant issues of faith and life in metropolitan Chicago. Through interfaith events, a massive anti-hunger network, and a pioneering communications program, the federation is a catalyst for numerous ministries.

In an effort to serve as a bridge builder for peace and justice, the federation frequently is a coordinating host for forums with visiting religious leaders, such as Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, and for theological dialogues on such topics as the World Council of Churches' document on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry.

Local mission and ministry programs relate to refugee settlement, the Interfaith Council for the Homeless, new ethics legislation for Chicago and Cook County, the Chicago Covenant for racial justice, an affordable budget plan for low-income consumers, energy audit assistance for churches, airport chaplaincy, and educational projects for residents of federally subsidized housing.

The 125 member agencies of the federation's anti-hunger program receive food dis-

tributions three times each month. More than a million people received food in 1983, 1984, and again in 1985 through Church Federation pantries. But food is not enough. A service network launched in 1984 generates technical assistance for client screening, health care, housing and employment for recipients, food storage, record keeping, fundraising, and coordination with other major food dispersal agencies.

In the field of religious broadcasting, the federation is a voice for the church on issues and ideas that shape secular and faith communities. Its 30-year history of broadcasting has paved an important access to Chicago's major electronic media. The federation cooperates with the networks in the production of more than 200 television and radio programs annually on CBS/WBBM-TV, NBC/WMAQ-TV, ABC/WLS-TV, and WIND-AM radio. This amounts to nearly \$1 million worth of free studio and air time per year. With news and information services, teaching programs, seminars and consultations on telecommunications, intern placements, and leadership in national religious media organizations, the federation extends the church's mission at the crossroads of religion and mass communications.

Lydia Talbot, director of broadcast communications  
Church Federation of Greater Chicago

## Contact Chicago needs volunteers

Contact Chicago (Advance Special #503-43) is a volunteer listening service and telephone helpline for people who are lonely, hungry or homeless, and often despairing. Volunteers are needed to serve as telephone workers.

Contact Chicago will conduct the next series of training sessions from Sept. 16 to Oct. 30. The classes will be held from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays at DePaul University, Stuart Hall, 2324 N. Seminary, on the near north side of Chicago. For information, call Contact Chicago at (312) 644-4900.

## Clergy corner

The Rev. Marti Swords, currently appointed to work on a Ph.D. program at the University of Chicago Divinity School, is pleased to announce her engagement to the Rev. Dana Kent Horrell, a member of the Southern Illinois Conference and a Ph.D. candidate in practical theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School. An October wedding is planned.

Both Marti and Dana are serving two-point rural parishes this summer in southern Illinois, but will be returning to school in October, making their home in Hyde Park.