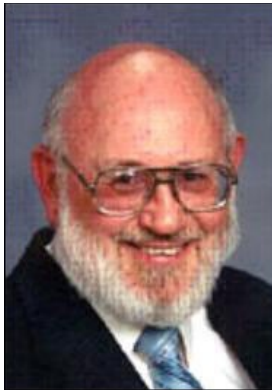




Encounter with Dahmer changed minister's life

— It was an average-sized room that resembled a doctor's office. Nothing on the walls. Sterile. Roy Ratcliff sat alone at a table in the center of the room.



He noticed sweat trickling from his forehead, and he could hear his heart pounding in the silence.

Ratcliff, minister for the church in Madison, Wisc., was to meet with a prisoner who wanted to be baptized. He had never met with a prisoner before.

The inmate was a murderer, and everyone would surely question his sincerity. Perhaps it was a stunt.

The door opened, breaking the silence. A 6-foot man with blond hair, blue eyes and glasses entered the room. Ratcliff stood up to greet him. The man shook his hand and said, "It's good to meet you."

The guard did not enter the room. The door closed behind Jeffrey Lionel Dahmer, leaving Ratcliff alone with him.

Although Ratcliff was a little frightened to meet the serial killer from Milwaukee, Dahmer was the more nervous of the two in that room at the Columbia Correctional Institution April 18, 1994. "He was worried that his crimes would be the dominant theme (of the conversation)," Ratcliff said. He didn't want to hear that from a minister.

Between 1978 and 1991 Dahmer killed 17 young men and boys. Police arrested him in 1991 and found victims' decaying bodies in Dahmer's apartment. Accusations soon surfaced that Dahmer practiced necrophilia and cannibalism.

"Do you have any religious background at all?" Ratcliff asked. He was surprised to learn that Dahmer attended a church of Christ until age 5.

Dahmer had started Bible study in prison through courses he received by mail after a "Dateline NBC" interview. A church member in Virginia, Mary Mott, and a prison minister in Crescent, Okla., Curtis Booth, sent him material. He studied on his own, and then inquired about being baptized. A minister in Milwaukee contacted Ratcliff.

Ratcliff realized that Dahmer was serious about his decision. They arranged to use a

whirlpool at the prison. Dahmer climbed in and got into the fetal position to fit underneath the water. On May 10, 1994, three weeks after they had met, Ratcliff baptized one of the world's most notorious serial killers.

After the baptism, Ratcliff insisted that he meet with Dahmer each week for Bible study to continue to bring God into his life.

Ratcliff knew little about the man he baptized, so he started to read books about Dahmer's crimes. The monster he read about and the person he knew didn't seem like the same man.

Dahmer mentioned his crimes on occasion, and showed a sense of sorrow for what he had done, Ratcliff said. But at no time in their conversations did Dahmer say why he committed the crimes. That was something Ratcliff — and the rest of the nation — could only guess.

A jury rejected Dahmer's insanity plea in 1992, and based on his conversations with the inmate, Ratcliff agreed with the decision. "He knew it was wrong and tried to cover it up," Ratcliff said.

On one occasion, Dahmer said he should be put to death for what he did. Ratcliff said he agreed. But Wisconsin has no death penalty, and Ratcliff told him suicide is a selfish act. He should strive to be a good prisoner and live to serve God.

"Most people struggle with the idea of Jeffrey Dahmer repenting," Ratcliff said. "All they can remember is the heinousness of the crimes."

On his answering machine at the church, Ratcliff received one profanity-laced message that said he was foolish to believe Dahmer was a candidate for baptism. However, to his face, Ratcliff received praise. "Can an evil

person turn to God? I have to believe that,” Ratcliff said. “What part of the blood of Christ can't save him, but can save you?”

Over the months, Ratcliff saw a gradual change in Dahmer. He went from a man with a death wish to a man who wanted to help other inmates with Bible study. Dahmer's father, Lionel, noticed a change in his son as well, Ratcliff said.

But there was a part of Dahmer that remained immature, Ratcliff said, and he believed Dahmer had trouble distinguishing good from bad.

“(At age 34) he was still kind of a little boy yet,” Ratcliff said.

On July 3, 1994, a prisoner from Cuba taped a razor blade to his toothbrush and attacked Dahmer from behind during worship service. Dahmer survived with three cuts. Prison officials assured Ratcliff that great steps would be taken to make sure Dahmer was safe.

But as Dahmer and Jesse Anderson, another convicted murderer from Milwaukee, were doing janitorial duties Nov. 28, 1994, inmate Christopher Scarver used a steel bar from weightlifting gear to bludgeon both men to death, according to the Associated Press. Ratcliff acknowledged that he felt a sense of betrayal.

The Wednesday before his death, Dahmer had given Ratcliff a Thanksgiving Day card thanking him for his friendship. It said he was looking forward to seeing him the next week.

“I didn't get an inkling he was in danger,” Ratcliff said. “I thought we would be two old men (someday) studying the Bible together. I wasn't going to give up on him.”

Ratcliff led a memorial service with Dahmer's family at the Madison church after the murder.

A sister of one of Dahmer's victims attended the service to support Lionel.

Afterward, Ratcliff said, she came up to Lionel and said she thought she could forgive Jeff now.

A decade after Dahmer's death, Ratcliff still preaches, and now visits seven inmates in four state prisons.

“Because of him I have been involved in more prison work. There's more of a compassion from me for people in prison settings,” Ratcliff said. “A part of my heart goes out to them.”

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