News
Ministry



Religious Sisters of Charity Sr. Edidiong Etim, prison chaplain, talks with inmates at the Kirikiri Correctional Facilities in Lagos, Nigeria. The Religious Sisters of Charity teach inmates how to produce creams, candles, perfume and liquid soap as part of their ministry to help them reintegrate into society upon release. (Courtesy of Edidiong Etim)



by Joanna Kozakiewicz

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

October 22, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Behind the prison walls of the Kirikiri Correctional Facilities in Lagos, Nigeria, Sr. Edidiong William Etim has felt transformed by her ministry. In her role as prison chaplain, she empowered 182 inmates through hands-on vocational training, all of whom have impacted her more than she expected.

"Over the past year, my journey within the prison walls of the Kirikiri Correctional Facilities in Lagos State has been nothing short of transformative, not just for the inmates, but for me as well," Etim wrote in a report she titled "Bringing light behind bars." "This ministry, rooted in compassion, dignity, and the Gospel of hope continues to affirm that even in the darkest places, the light of Christ shines brightest, as Venerable Mary Aikenhead would say."

Mother Mary Aikenhead, the foundress of the Religious Sisters of Charity, laid the foundations for the work of the congregation in Ireland, in the early 1800s by founding a hospital, establishing a school, visiting the poor in their homes and beginning a prison ministry. The presence of the sisters in Nigeria started in 1960 with Sr. Mary de Chantal and Sr. Mary Paschal Guerin, who began Pacelli School for the blind. From there, the sisters spread to other parts of Nigeria and are now ministering in three areas in Lagos.

"One of the ministries she [Aikenhead] treasured was the prison ministry, because she could not judge the people on the margins and the less privileged, although they may have sinned," Etim told Global Sisters Report. "As far as all of us are created in the likeness of God. Therefore, she never judged them, and she always went out of her way in helping them."



Sr. Edidiong Etim took over the prison ministry at the Kirikiri Correctional Facilities in April 2024. (Courtesy of Edidiong Etim)

Etim joined the Religious Sisters of Charity in 2010 and took over the prison ministry from Sr. Justina Suekime Nelson in April 2024. Nelson, who has worked in Nigeria for 17 years, is a dedicated social worker and tireless advocate for women in the anti-trafficking field. She has been working to raise awareness in schools, markets, churches and communities.

There are three correctional centers in Kirikiri, maximum security, medium security and a female correctional center. Etim visits all three prisons.

"Prison ministry is a very challenging work," Nelson said.

She described the prison as congested, and the inmates having "to stand, sit or kneel to manage the space in the cells, being unable to sleep." Many young inmates do not belong in prison and end up convicted unfairly when picked up on the road, without their parents even knowing, Nelson added.

"Some could even be in prison for up to five years," she said.

Nelson also told GSR that medication for the inmates is scarce and difficult to obtain from the pharmacist. Unfortunately, some inmates will die due to poor health and inadequate medical treatment, she said. The sisters also reported that "the government gives less than $1 [a day] to feed the inmates."

Etim witnessed Nelson facilitating the release of 35 inmates from the maximum and medium correctional facilities in Kirikiri with the help of a woman who paid their fines for their release.



Body soap created by the inmates at Kirikiri Correctional Facilities in Lagos, Nigeria (Courtesy of Edidiong Etim)

"Each release represents not just a legal victory, but a life restored; a soul given the chance to begin anew," Etim said. "Through collaboration with legal professionals, generous sponsors and committed volunteers, we were able to remove barriers and bring hope to those who had long been forgotten."

However, some inmates struggle with reintegration into the community upon release.

"When they come out, there is nothing for them to do, so they go back to their gangs committing the same crime that brought them into prison," Etim said.

For this reason, Etim asked her congregation for help to empower the inmates with vocational training and to help them reintegrate into society.

Men and women have learned to produce candles, liquid soap, body oil, hair products, and perform practical skills such as tailoring, carpentry and gardening. “Watching their pride grow as they created something beautiful with their hands was a humbling gift,” Etim said.



Religious Sisters of Charity Sr. Justina Suekime Nelson and some members of the Catholic chaplaincy at the Kirikiri Correctional Facilities in Lagos, Nigeria, arrange food and other items brought by parishioners. (Courtesy of Justina Nelson)

Tina Ukpo, a 34-year-old who was recently released, told GSR how Etim and the sisters impacted her time in prison.

"Sr. Edidiong empowered me with skills in soap making, cream and perfume production, candles, and science classes, things I never imagined I could do. She always facilitated, provided food, clothes, medicine and, more than anything, they (the sisters) gave us dignity," Ukpo wrote in a note shared with GSR.

In addition to vocational training, the sisters conduct Communion services every third, fourth and fifth Sundays of the month. This is a special time for inmates to gather in prayer and reflection. These services have become lifelines for many, offering peace amid pain and faith amid fear.

"Today, I stand as a free woman not just because the gates opened, but because God met me in prison through the prison chapel and the sisters who never gave up on us," Ukpo said.

"While inside, they helped me find my faith again. Through their prayers, communion services, and words of encouragement, I discovered that God's mercy reaches even behind bars."

"Because of her support, I didn't just walk out of prison; I walked into a new life. Today, I am rebuilding with hope, and I carry the lessons I learned inside with pride," Ukpo added.

Etim also offers counseling, adult literacy programs, teaches catechism, is involved in the choir, provides legal assistance, establishes contact with inmates' families and provides food and clothes for them.

"These services are essential in restoring not just individuals, but relationships, especially those that are fractured by years of silence, distance or trauma," Etim said.

Etim also teaches basic science to help prepare interested inmates for the West African Examinations Council exams, which open doors to academic and vocational

opportunities. Some inmates are discovering their talents and passions for the very first time. To Etim, education is a form of liberation and one of the greatest tools for transformation.

Advertisement

Simon Benson, a 46-year-old inmate, also wrote a thank you message to Etim.

"You have shown exceptional commitment not only to the church but also to the overall well-being of inmates here," Benson wrote in a note shared with GSR. "Having you as a reverend sister in this chapel has made a lasting impact on all the inmates."

"Your presence has brought transformation, hope and empowerment to this correctional facility," Benson wrote. "Thank you for your tireless dedication, support and love."

Etim also mentioned the generosity of the pupils of Nazareth School in Lagos, who organized donations of clothing and food items for inmates across the three correctional facilities. "These gifts brought tears to many eyes and reminded the inmates that they are still seen, still valued and still loved," Etim said.
Nelson said the inmates' conditions have improved greatly compared to the early years when the ministry started.

"This ministry is more than a program; it is a calling that invites me daily to walk with the broken, listen with my heart, and be a vessel of God's mercy," Etim said.

"While the road is not always easy, the grace is always sufficient. As we look to the months ahead, I remain committed to deepening our impact, expanding partnerships, and most importantly, continuing to serve with love, patience and purpose."