



the connection

Spring 2023



ReNew HOPE 2023 Edition

4 Days

8 Speakers

9 Facilities

11 Music Groups

48 Chapel Services

145 Participants

Countless Lives Impacted for Eternity!

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By Kevin Kennell

In January 2015, I attended my first ReNew Hope with We Care Program. I spent the week traveling around the state of Alabama with Don Metzler, and we entered several facilities per day. That was the beginning of my time with We Care Program. Most people who have served with We Care over the years have been introduced to the ministry of We Care through a ReNew Hope experience. Since my initial involvement in 2015, I have seen this introduction to prison ministry unfold every year for so many other people, and each year it blesses me to see it happen. I am always encouraged as I see new volunteers taking part and as I watch their spiritual life grow because of their experiences in prison.

ReNew Hope 2023 was much the same, yet it was very different in some ways. One new aspect was that the Department of Corrections training took place online prior to arrival. The orientation was an afternoon service that took place in Atmore, which was different. We entered only seven institutions in Alabama, instead of the twenty-plus of past years. This was the first time to conduct this event in Alabama prisons since the COVID shutdown, and it was the first time to do both Alabama and Florida at a significant level. In the past, only one Florida prison was included with the Alabama ReNew Hope, but this year we included three Florida facilities! The Florida prisons were very accommodating, and the Alabama prisons were trying to get back into the groove of a We Care ReNew Hope week. As always, there were veteran volunteers as well as some first-timers. And once again, I saw spiritual lives get challenged behind the fences!

We love to hear highlights of the week from our participants, and we are passing along some of this

year's highlights in this newsletter. The highlights and testimonies each year remind us that this event is worth striving for. Yes, it takes effort to put it together, and yes, there are disappointments and setbacks as we plan and work with the Department of Corrections. However, the stories of victory and growth make the work and frustrations worthwhile. Hearing testimonies of individuals accepting Christ and His hope for their lives ReNews my Hope as well!!

I am hopeful that ReNew Hope will continue for many years and that we will see the torch continue to be passed to new participants. I am very grateful for each one who helped to make the 2023 event possible. As I reflect on ReNew Hope 2023, I am reminded of a scene in the prison chapel one day. While the music was being shared, I looked at the crowd of inmates and team members worshipping our LORD together. Men recently set free from drug addiction were worshipping with tears in their eyes while standing next to volunteers also worshipping in spirit and in truth. Some men had tattoos all over their arms; some had no tattoos at all. This was GOD'S church! This was HIS peculiar people! I hope that mental picture never leaves me. I believe it is a foretaste of heaven, where people of all nations and tribes and peoples and tongues will be worshipping together!! There is no reason to question denominations in prison; the focus is on being a follower of Christ who has redeemed each of us from sin and death.

If you haven't experienced a ReNew Hope week with We Care Program, I encourage you to try it for yourself. But beware, you may be changed! Also, you will walk away with mental pictures that you may never want to forget. I thank God that He gives us these opportunities. Will you receive this gift? How about ReNew Hope 2024?!?



The Century Team



The Frank Lee Team



The Fountain Team



The Fountain Annex Team



The Holman Team



The Kilby Team



The Santa Rosa Team



The Okaloosa Team

ReNew HOPE

2023



The Montgomery Women's and Tutwiler Team

Please describe one or two specific situations where you saw God at work during ReNew Hope.

- A young man came to me before our morning service and requested prayer because he was “going home” on Friday. I could tell he was excited but also a bit anxious. I believe ReNew Hope was there “for such a time as this” in that young man’s life! I could sense God was filling him with the hope he needed—that he could thrive outside of prison if he would yield his life fully to Jesus. Later in our meeting, as the singers were ministering, the group leader said he felt led to sing a Paul Overstreet song called “Going Home.” To me this carried with it a special touch from the Lord. I know my new friend was really touched by it; his eyes were still wet with tears as we departed the meeting. Our God is a personal God! His arm is not short to reach in and touch our deepest need! He brought people together from hundreds of miles away and used us in harmony to meet a specific need. That’s our God! - *Alvin Landis*

- The first day I talked with a young guy in segregation who seemed pretty down in the dumps. Before I moved on, I asked if I could pray for him regarding some of the issues he had talked about.



The Thrift Store Team

When we went in again the next day, he came quickly to talk to me saying that some of the very things we had prayed for had changed since the day before. He attributed it as a direct answer to my prayers. The main thing that happened was he and his father had reconciled through a phone call. He told me he had allowed me to pray for him thinking nothing would actually happen. When it did, he was totally amazed. All of a sudden he had hope for the future, with a promise from his father to walk with him during his time in prison and when he gets out.

- *Wade Burkholder*

- I can’t really think of a specific situation, but just the fact that a group of volunteers from different denominations across the US came together for the same purpose and goal. I’d say that’s God at work. And it’s because of God’s work in their own lives.

- *Japheth Miller*

What is one significant memory or “God moment” that will stay with you from ReNew Hope?

- Going into prison and finding a part of my spiritual family, my brothers in Christ. - *Jerald Miller*



Volunteer Appreciation Evening hosted by the officials at Santa Rosa C.I.

- An inmate who is a believer and dying from cancer managed to get to our last chapel service. I felt the Spirit prompting me to go and kneel with him as the singing group sang the song, "The God of the mountain is the God of the valley." As they sang, we wept. - **John Smoker**

- Early in the program at Century we noticed a guy with a hard countenance and who seemed very troubled. Actually, it was tough looking at him. Abigail and I spotted him separately from our vantage point on stage. She prayed in her heart that he would respond. I prayed that the Lord would go get him. Both happened. After the message was shared and an invitation was extended, he came to the altar weeping. He was a wayward son returning to his Father. Conviction. Repentance. Forgiveness. It was beautiful. Because of an incident elsewhere in the prison, none of us, including the inmates, could leave the chapel for a while. This gave more time to visit with the guys...including this new believer. His smile at the end was as notable as the troubled countenance he showed up with. He left totally different. Have you ever wondered how our Father feels when his children turn around and come home? No doubt it means so much to Him. Oh, the goodness and mercy of our Lord! - **Kent Fraser**

- My "God moment" would have to be on the last day when I was in Seg. I met a man that had already talked to a few volunteers, and I could see in his countenance that he had joy. The only thing I thought to do for him was sing...so that's what I did. I was taken back by his response; almost immediately he fell to his knees at his cot and worshiped the Lord. I was truly humbled to be a part of the Lord's presence! - **David Friesen**

Please briefly share with us why you chose to participate with ReNew Hope.

- It is an intense time of spiritual focus and growth that urges me to do better in my daily life. - **Derric Miller**

- This being my fourth visit, I have developed a connection with the inmates, and it also is a source of spiritual growth for myself. - **Steve Hershey**

- ReNew Hope is a place of refuge. It's the true meaning of serving without a prideful spirit. - **Winston Pearson**

Why will you come back next year or why might you not come back next year?

- The power that there was in talking to inmates and other volunteers was so encouraging! And all the moments I could see God moving. That's why I'll be back, Lord willing. - **Connor Stauffer**

- I'd love to come back because I always get far more out of it personally and spiritually (from interaction with the other volunteers and also the inmates) than I can ever give. - **Japheth Miller**

- Having the privilege to share Jesus in these facilities, to see the church grow, to see the faithful men, to walk with broken and lost men and to share the love of Jesus with them. - **Jim Nolt**

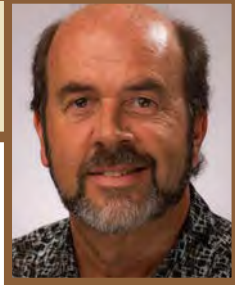
Mark your calendar!

January 21 - 25, 2024

From the Field

Irvin Martin

Century Corr. Institution
Century, FL



Not long ago Daniel came brokenly to our chaplaincy team after a revival service and invited Jesus into his life. He was gloriously born again! Later he told me that when he first came to prison, he felt nothing but hatred towards God. He tried everything in pursuit of happiness just to feel better, but he felt strongly that God was not for him. At one point he became a leader in a pagan religion and went deep into witchcraft. He said, “Everywhere I turned I could not get away from the Name I hated, Jesus Christ! I felt so bad. I can’t even describe my feelings. I just wanted to die! I knew only darkness.” But now a light has clearly shone into Daniel’s life!

Daniel, age 22, serving a 25-year sentence, is learning how to be a prison chapel clerk. He is a diligent observer and does his work as though he’s serving God. When I asked him how he is growing in his Christian faith, he responded, “I am in Bible studies and prayer. And yesterday I shared my story with an unbeliever, and he was very interested in what I had to say.”

Just recently he came to me with some more exciting news. “I talked to my dad, and he went to church yesterday!” Daniel’s newfound faith is making a difference in the lives of his loved ones and those around him. Praise God!



Ben Nolt

Fountain Corr. Facility
Atmore, AL



Wow, that guy looks familiar!” I thought to myself. I was on my way to church for worship practice early one Sunday morning and had just passed a man walking down the road. It sure looked like Joseph, a man I knew for several years at Fountain. I had not seen him in quite a while, and to my knowledge, he was still somewhere in the system. I reached the next intersection and came to a stop, feeling prompted to go back and check in with Joseph, if that was even him! Back and forth I went in my mind, but quickly decided he would have to wait. Worship practice took priority! I was just beginning to pull away when the crossing arms dropped at the railroad, blocking the road ahead. It immediately became clear to me that this was no coincidence. “Ok, Lord,” I thought, “that’s my sign. You actually put a train in my path to turn me around!”

After backtracking a couple minutes I pulled over and offered a ride to the man. It was indeed who I thought it was! We both had big, incredulous smiles on our faces. It was a joy to give Joseph a ride, invite him to church and simply re-connect with him. All because God put a train in my path to slow me down.

The incident may not have been a huge deal to Joseph, but I was greatly impacted by the Lord’s sovereignty and timing that morning. Looking back over past years in prison ministry, and life in general, I have far too often neglected the opportunities before me. This experience helped give me fresh resolve to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit’s leading and to focus on what matters most—people.

Marcus Freed

London Corr. Institution
London, OH



Did God have a plan for a boy growing up in the Salvadoran Civil War? Silas Galdamez was six years old when war broke out. Living with his grandmother and younger sister and brother, Silas was forced, at that early age, to be the man of the house. When the armies of both sides demanded Silas’ enlistment at age 13, Grandma was miraculously able to send him legally to his mother in the U.S.



DIRECTOR'S CORNER

Nathan Kennell, Thrift Store Director

About a year ago we set out to update the façade and awning at our Monroeville store location. This was a much needed and long overdue project, and we were very excited to get to work on it. We were blessed to have Sanford Helmuth from Bridgewater, Virginia, come down and head up this project for us! He and his wife Sheila were an incredible blessing as they served with We Care. Two young men from the Lancaster area in Pennsylvania, Matt Smoker and Cedric Stoltzfus, also donated their time and sweat equity to the project. It was inspiring to see these young men serve so willingly.



The updated storefront at Monroeville Thrift Store.

In addition to removing the old wooden front and replacing the awning, we also had the windows replaced and new decals put up. David R. Landis, from here in Atmore, not only printed and installed the new decals on the windows but also hand painted the store name in very large letters. Thanks, Dave, for another job well done.

It might not seem that simply updating the store front would do much for business, but I have been pleasantly surprised! Since this work was completed, the Monroeville store sales have gone up significantly! Praise God! We are so happy with the way the job turned out and are forever thankful to the volunteers that made it happen.

Life in the States wasn't easy. He had to choose—listen to his mother or live street life. Silas chose the streets with its lucrative drug trade and ended up incarcerated for life in Ohio. The drug trade continued in prison, along with other forms of racketeering. Silas became a leader of criminal activities in prison and was repeatedly turned down for parole.

One day God prompted Silas' "bunkie" to sign him up for a Christian Kairos retreat. Silas agreed to go, only for the home-cooked meals and fresh-baked cookies. What he found was the love of God. Silas turned his life over to Jesus.

Led by the Holy Spirit, Silas went from drugs and crime to Bible studies and discipleship. The change in him over the next three years was so great it led to his parole in 2014. Automatic deportation made him a stranger in his homeland.

Christian volunteers from Silas' prison, who had witnessed the change in his life, connected him with a missionary group called "Joni and Friends Wheels to the World." Silas became a wheelchair mechanic, translator, and leader on the group's trips within El Salvador. March 2023 will be his 16th trip with the ministry. Silas is also a spiritual leader in his church, Iglesia de Dios San Jose Capulin. Praise God for salvation and redemption through Jesus Christ!

NEWS

BLESSED BY VOLUNTEERS

Early January through mid-March found the We Care headquarters a little fuller than normal. The David Friesen family was here for eight weeks, and the Abe Giesbrecht family for three and a half weeks. Both families blessed us with their presence and cheerful willingness to pitch in and help wherever needed—Thrift Stores, headquarters kitchen, yard, you name it. David and Abe were also able to serve in Fountain Correctional Facility several times. Thank you, Friesens and Giesbrechts, for volunteering with We Care during an escape from the winter cold of Manitoba!



VOLUNTEERS BLESSED BY DOC

A MESSAGE FROM DON METZLER, PRESIDENT

don@wecareprogram.org

ReNew Hope is always a highlight for all of us as We Care staff. We get to “experience” prison ministry from a fresh perspective and in a way that is out of the norm. Planning, preparing, and carrying out the details and logistics take a lot of work both on our part and on the part of the Department of Corrections, yet that week is one we look forward to. This year we were able to get permission from both the Alabama DOC and the Florida DOC to serve in some of their prisons.

One unique thing that happened during the week was a Volunteer Appreciation Meal on Tuesday evening hosted by the officials at Santa Rosa C.I. They invited not only the ReNew Hope volunteers who served at Santa Rosa, but also all those who served in any of

the Florida prisons, as well as other regular volunteers who serve at Santa Rosa C.I. year around.

Following a delicious meal, we were treated to “Thank You cake” and a short program. Warden Leavins and Region 1 Chaplain Vosbrink each thanked the group for their input and positive impact inside the institution. The special evening was capped off with each volunteer receiving a Certificate of Appreciation and a goody bag containing a few small gifts. (See group photo on page 5.)

To us it seemed we should be the ones serving the DOC, but they went out of their way to let us know how much they appreciated the time we gave to invest in the lives of the men at Santa Rosa. In some ways the occasion felt like the “cherry on top” of the week. It certainly was a blessing to our volunteers.

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

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