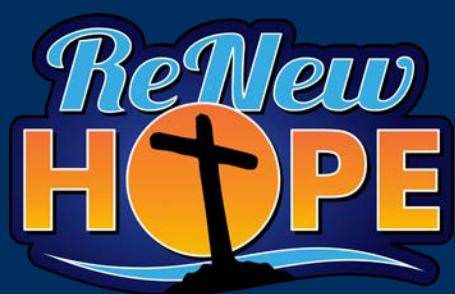




the connection

Spring 2024



2024 Edition

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ReNew Hope 2024

January 21 - 25



By Don Metzler

ReNew Hope 2024 felt both familiar and different when compared to pre-COVID years. While some things will never be the same again, we made some great strides in that direction. For the first time since 2020, the Sunday orientation was again held in the Montgomery area. This year also saw our largest group of volunteers going into the most prisons since 2020. Praise God with us for these steps of progress.

Our time together on Sunday consisted of worship in song led by various music groups, a message from Michael Liles, and some final training input by Kevin Kennell. After fellowshipping over a light meal, the volunteers spread across the state in preparation to begin serving on Monday morning. Those whose assignments were not in the Montgomery area, dispersed to either Atmore, Troy, or Birmingham.

Monday morning, and each morning thereafter, started differently than in the past. Instead of a group session at the beginning of the day, the volunteer teams went directly into the prisons for their visitation ministry. After connecting with the state chaplains, teams were able (for the most part) to go to various parts of the prisons where they could meet the men and women "on their turf." At all but one prison, the chapel services were held during the day instead of in the evening. Some of the services in Florida were even held

first thing in the morning. The music groups, families and individual singers who shared in song were greatly appreciated by the inmates. Anything out of the "norm" is a huge blessing for those in prison. With the music groups, speakers and volunteers all sharing their talents and the love of Christ, the men and women in prison were extra blessed during ReNew Hope.

Because of the early morning start in the prisons, teams then exited the institutions in late afternoon. This schedule enabled a first for ReNew Hope this year. All the volunteers in each area were treated to a meal each evening, Monday – Wednesday. The meal was provided by We Care and served by a team of volunteers. Following the meal was a time of worship, input, and sharing stories and testimonies from that day's ministry in the prisons. Of course, there was also plenty of fellowship with friends both old and new.

We praise God for the lives that were impacted through this event. Not only were the lives of men and women in prison impacted, but so were the lives of the officers and staff at each prison where we served, as well as the lives of the ReNew Hope participants. Souls were saved, the church on the inside was encouraged, and volunteers who served had their lives forever changed. Thank you to everyone who helped make this outreach possible in both large and small ways.

Sunday Orientation

Location:

Hunter Hills Church of Christ
Prattville, AL

Total number of volunteers, including musicians and speakers = **239**

Registration: 1:00 – 3:00

Program: 3:00 – 5:00

Team Meetings: 5:00 – 5:30

Supper (eat in or to go): 5:30

This was the first year post COVID that we gathered all the volunteers in the Montgomery area. Since the Department of Corrections training is now done online prior to arrival, we only needed a half day for the orientation. This enabled us to use a church facility. We are very grateful to Hunter Hills Church, where several of our chaplains attend, for opening up their facility to our group.



Atmore Area

Prisons served: Fountain, Fountain Annex, Holman, Century, Santa Rosa, Santa Rosa Annex

Additional service locations: Atmore and Flomaton Thrift Stores

Number of volunteers based in Atmore = **52**

Evening meal and group meeting held at We Care Headquarters

Area Coordinator: *Kevin Kennell*



The Thrift Store Team



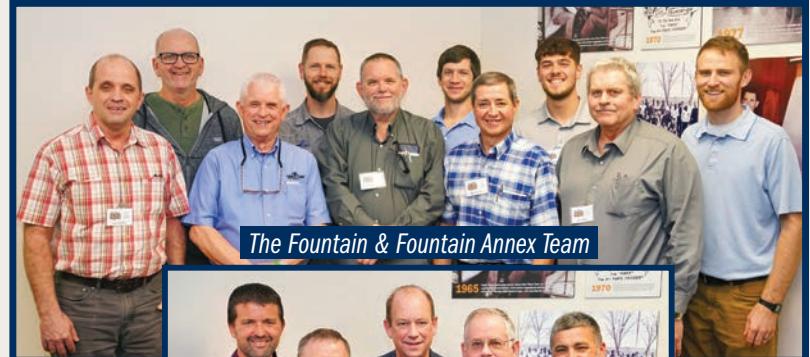
The Atmore Food Service Team



The Century Team



The Santa Rosa Annex Team



The Fountain & Fountain Annex Team



The Santa Rosa Team



The Holman Team

Birmingham Area

Prisons served: Bibb, Donaldson, Birmingham Work Release

Number of volunteers based in Birmingham = **23**

Evening meal and group meeting held at Flint Hill Baptist Church

Area Coordinator: *David Bucher*

Pastor J J Stanbridge of Flint Hill Baptist Church willingly opened up his church for our use even though he had no previous knowledge of We Care or ReNew Hope. He was a huge blessing to us, and we were gratified to see how much he enjoyed meeting the volunteers and music groups each evening as he helped out with whatever was needed.



The Bibb Team



The Donaldson Team



The Birmingham Work Release Team

Montgomery Area

Prisons served: Elmore, Frank Lee, Kilby, Tutwiler, Tutwiler Annex

Number of volunteers based in Montgomery = **36**

Evening meal and group meeting held at Hunter Hills Church

Area Coordinator: *Durell Orendorf*

Staton and Montgomery Women's prisons were scheduled to be served, but on Sunday we found out that both of them would be closed to volunteers for the week. We were able to reassign the team members listed for these facilities and thus enlarge teams serving in other prisons.



The Elmore & Frank Lee Team



The Kilby Team



The Tutwiler Team



The Tutwiler Annex Team

Troy Area

Prisons served: Bullock, Easterling

Number of volunteers based in

Troy = **10**

Evening meal and group meeting held at Bush Baptist Church

Area Coordinator: *John Yoder*

We were privileged to have the first two evening meals and sessions at Bush Baptist Church, but on Wednesday the church needed the space. Our local host made arrangements for our group to eat at a diner in town, and a generous donor paid for the meal. Although the eating arrangements were a bit different that night, the teams still enjoyed a time of worship and sharing.



The Bullock Team



The Easterling Team

ReNew Hope Survey Quotes

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

During altar calls we saw men coming to the altar with tears in their eyes, and we knew it was the Lord touching their hearts. Also during worship, we had several come up and tell us how the song ministered to them. God was moving!

- Leslie Moore

God was already present at Santa Rosa Annex. It was such a blessing to see a vibrant Body of Christ already established and serving and worshipping Christ. We were there to join in what Christ was already doing.

- Darren Bishop

Seeing the large group of diverse volunteers at orientation was evidence of God at work. Also the fact of us going into the dorms freely when other ministries that I talked to in the chapel weren't allowed to. One day a man came forward to the altar call so broken that his tears formed a puddle on the chapel floor, and I knew God was at work.

- Russel Wenger

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

I have served here in the past, and I am always greatly blessed by the fellowship of other believers in prisons and among the volunteers!

- Jerold Miller

I wanted to be involved in a mission outreach where my goal was to share the gospel intentionally for a few days.

- Marvin Bender

I've done time in prison before, and I know what's it like to be depressed and just want to give up on life. I get a chance to bring joy into an atmosphere that God has ordained victory in.

- Winston Pearson

Q: What is one significant memory or "God moment" that will stay with you from ReNew Hope?

One of the inmates came up to my dad and me after finding out my mom had passed, and he just prayed over us and encouraged us in a way that no one else could! Here I was coming to encourage him, but instead he encouraged me and blessed me! So it was a huge "wow" moment during my time there, and I will never forget that!

- Chandler Yoder

It really touched my heart to see the prisoners taking such good care of the elderly prisoners! They were so kind, loving and gentle. They loved on each other as if they were their own family. God's word says he puts the lonely in families. I saw God's word in action through these ladies!

- Sandra Hunsberger

There was a big thing going on outside of the chapel with an inmate badmouthing the officers. The inmate chapel worker begged her to break it up and go inside to us for prayer. She finally convinced her. The lady was shaking in anger and admitted she was very angry. We pleaded with her to share her heart with us and tell us how we could pray for her. She did that, and after we prayed, she was very relaxed and she said, "I have a total peace!" It was definitely a divine appointment that God had for us and her!

- Romaine Hollinger



Mark your calendar for January 26 – 30 and plan to join us for ReNew Hope 2025!

From the Field

Charlie Sytsma

Century Corr. Institution
Century, FL



My journey at Century Correctional started about five years ago after the start of the faith-based program. In that time I witnessed much pain and loss. I have also seen hearts grow with compassion and love for one another. Many of these men work hard every day to make the program successful; they honestly care. Some of the men did not know Jesus at all, some were following Jesus before I arrived, and some were just trying out different religions. All were opportunities to speak about and share Jesus.

Everything I have witnessed started with one thing—love, real genuine love. It is love that opens doors and is the primary force used to reach people. With the love of Jesus as our strength, we can overcome anything and reach the world in the name of Jesus. Amen. “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:2)

Ben Nolt

Fountain Corr. Facility
Atmore, AL



Sorry to bother you again, it's James. I got my certificates for the Gospel Echoes study, and I got 5 more guys wanting to do the study!!! It's exciting... There is light starting to shine in our dorm. I feel so blessed to be here right now. I have been so depressed and unmotivated, but I was not seeing what God was doing all around me. I asked you about King Saul and my fear that God was done with me like he was with Saul, but it was self-pity. God was here the whole time. God's not done with me and I'm not done with Him anyway. A sixth man just asked me to be involved while I'm writing this! So please send 6 copies of the Bible study courses (and two more Bibles). Thank you and have a great day! Your friend, James”

This note was on a request slip we recently received at the chaplain's office. "James" is in a protective housing

dorm, which is somewhat a "prison within prison." It is generally a restrictive and unpleasant place to do time. But in the middle of this particularly discouraging environment, there is "light starting to shine." There is a hunger to study the Word. I was so blessed and encouraged by this glimpse into God's ongoing work and presence in the dorm.

I gathered the requested materials and quickly penned a response, ending with 1 Corinthians 15:58, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." Praise the Lord for the work He is doing in James' life and others around him!

Steve Stoltzfus

Bibb Correctional Facility
Brent, AL



We serve a living God, a God who wants us to do His work right where we are called to. I believe He draws us to Himself and asks us to join Him where He is at work. I am learning more about what God is doing in the world around me "behind the fence," and He is asking me to join Him there.

I am teaching the class "Experiencing God," two groups of 40 each. Some of the men are new in the faith, others are experienced in the faith, and others are wondering where they belong. All are hearing the word of God. As I plant the seed, I pray it will fall on good ground and produce fruit. It takes time and patience for the seeds to grow and bring forth fruit, and the yield is not always the same. God gives the increase.

After class I stay and chat with the guys at their "rack" and discuss what they are learning in the class. One day after chatting with an individual for a while, he said, "Six months ago I thought I was going to heaven on good works and because I am a good person, but today I don't know if I am saved." I shared with him the plan of salvation and assured him that if he confesses his sins and believes that Jesus died for him the Bible says he will be saved. "I finally get it," he said. "Thank you, Chaplain Steve." Another time I spoke with a man who needed some encouragement to not give up but to keep on the path God has for him. The journey is not easy, but God works through the valleys and hard lessons enabling us to

grow in Christ and become more like Him.

These men challenge and encourage me to grow and be the person God created me to be. They are my fellow comrades. One man, who is a Christian pillar in the dorm, told me, "I am your brother in Christ. Let us encourage one another to do good works."

David Bucher

Bibb Correctional Facility
Brent, AL



"Chaplain Dave, will you please give me an application and consider me for a bed in your Pathway to Freedom (PTF) dorm?"

"Good morning, Chaplain Dave, I signed up at (fill in blank) prison to come here to Bibb to take Pathway to Freedom. Are there any beds open?"

"Chap, I have been here at Bibb for four months, and I have not been able to make it into PTF or any of the other program dorms."

"Chap, do you have a spot for me yet?!"

"Dave, how much longer do you think it's gonna be??!?"

"Were you ever even planning to give me a spot in your dorm?!!!"

"I should have never signed up to come here to Bibb!!!"

"If I knew it might go like this, I certainly would have stayed at (fill in blank) prison!!!!"

You will notice the progression of frustration, even desperation, in these questions and comments. We started PTF in May 2023. Overall, this effort has gone well. Many men's lives have been touched deeply for Christ. Souls have been saved and believers have been strengthened.

But...the beds are full. There are men in the dorm who are definitely "coasting." They came for an easier life in prison, not necessarily to grow in Christ. The battle against complacency is real! Some are still in deep drug or sexual addiction. Some current residents are seeking to live for Jesus and grow in Him every day.

Now let's talk about prospective residents. Some of those are looking for an easier life in prison. Some are looking for a way to "look good" to the parole board. Some are really desiring freedom from addictions and growth in their walk with Christ!

Please pray for God's wisdom as we oversee these men and guide them daily. Pray we have wisdom to help the "fakers" move out to make room for those who God would have reside there. Pray those truly struggling and seeking freedom from bondages would indeed find freedom and victory in Jesus from addictions. Please pray for God's miracles and His power to be very evident through the PTF dorm!

NEW THRIFT STORE UPDATE



- The engineering process is nearing completion.
- We anticipate having the City of Atmore approval by early April.
- Construction volunteers will be needed beginning this summer to help with framing, plumbing, electrical work, trim, painting, etc.

► Interested in helping?

Please email: **Don Metzler**
don@wecareprogram.org





COLLABORATION, NOT COMPETITION

A MESSAGE FROM DON METZLER, PRESIDENT

don@wecareprogram.org

Often when we think of two teams, we automatically think “competition.” On February 9 and 10, two teams joined forces instead of competing. Gospel Echoes Team Prison Ministry held a Freedom Rally at Holman C.F. in Atmore, and We Care assisted them. We Care was blessed and encouraged by partnering with Gospel Echoes personnel and volunteers for this outreach.

Friday afternoon found the ladies working together in the kitchen at We Care preparing parts of the meal for Saturday. That night when most everyone else went to bed, two of the volunteers fired up a huge smoker and kept the fire burning all night smoking Boston butts to perfection. Other volunteers got up well before daylight to begin cooking baked beans. In spite of rain on Saturday morning,



the We Care and Gospel Echoes teams set up tents at the prison and assembled the plates of food, along with plastic bags containing various literature items and a hand-colored card telling the men Jesus loves them. This was all followed by singing and a message as the meals and literature were distributed to the men.

A few days later we received a letter from an inmate. He wrote, “I want to thank you for all you’re doing for us here at Holman. The gospel concerts, testimony, witnessing, fellowship with all the volunteers. So much smiling faces, joy, encouragement. Prayers, kindness.... The meal was delicious. The personal (cards), prayers, tracts, books, all a great blessing.”

I extend a special thanks to Jon and Karleen Sommers for all their work in organizing and leading the Freedom Rally. Through collaboration and cooperation rather than competition, many lives were touched and blessed.

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

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