

The Connection

THE NEWSLETTER OF WE CARE PROGRAM

AUGUST 2005

Mission Field Behind Bars

by *Mike Strehlow*

This is a foreign country,” said Chaplain Brian Eskelinen. “This is a mission field.”

Dave Landis, Don Metzler, Randy Bruckhart, and I were sitting with Chaplain Eskelinen in his office at Fountain Correctional Facility in Atmore, Alabama, when he made that remark. He could just as easily have said, “This is OUR mission field.”

Having been part of We Care Program’s ministry to Fountain for about the

last year, I think that America’s prisons are a mission field. As of last year at this time, according to the Department of Justice, there were over two million prisoners held in state and federal prisons and county jails in the U.S. Out of 193 countries in the world, the entire populations of 55 of them are lower than the number of people we have locked up.

Like a foreign country, prisons have their own culture and language. A free world volunteer needs to learn it, but unless he has spent time in prison himself, he’ll never be a part of it. Like the foreign missionary, to some extent the prison volunteer is always on the outside looking in.

The value system in prison is like that of a third world slum.

Inmates will fight each other over a bag of potato chips or an unpaid debt of a few pennies. They will stand in line for an hour to get a bar of soap or a Mother’s Day card. They spend the month looking forward to ministry cook-outs where they can get a barbecued chicken leg. Like starving street orphans, many inmates will come for a message only if they can get something in return.

The learning curve in prison ministry is much like that of a missionary in the field. Inmates often relate well to volunteers, but it’s something they can turn on and off almost as if with a switch. In prison, all is never exactly as it seems to the volunteer, and one has to get used to it. Some of the best Christians I know at Fountain are serving time for committing some of the worst crimes. When I commented to an inmate that I was surprised to have met so many good men in prison, he said, “We are good men. We’re also criminals.”



In this issue...

News of Note	pg. 3
From the Field	pg. 3
Perspectives	pg. 4
The Bottom Line	pg. 4

Fulfilling the Great Commission in America's Prisons

www.wecareprogram.org

Last Call! for Young Adult Internship Applications

deadline: Aug. 31
term: Oct. '05 - Mar. '06
call: 251-368-8818
or email:
dave@wecareprogram.org

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Published eight times a year, *The Connection* provides news and views to friends of We Care Program. We Care Program is a non-profit, interdenominational organization consisting of Christian men and women who share a burden for and commitment to helping incarcerated men and women. We are accomplishing our mission by recruiting, funding, training, placing, and administering missionary chaplains and chaplain's assistants in prisons to provide friendship evangelism, teaching, peer counseling, and encouragement.

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Mission Field (Continued from pg 1)

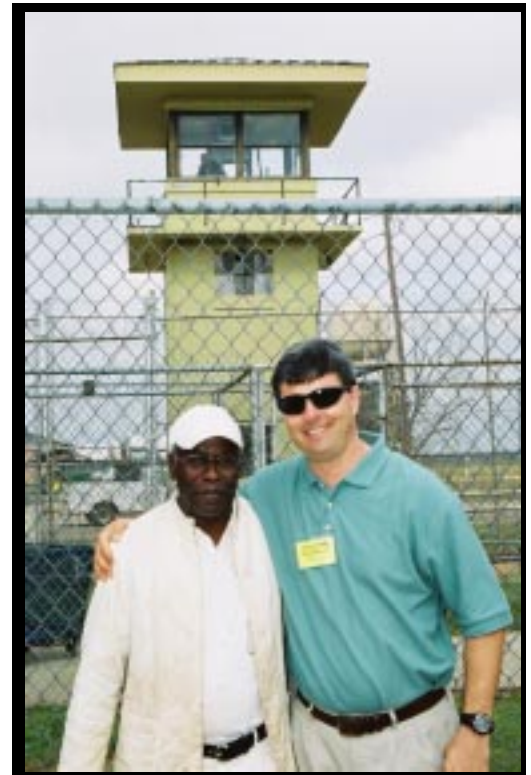
As in the mission field, every step forward in prison ministry is a victory. In February of this year, Fountain of Life Bible College suddenly was, appearing almost out of thin air. We have one semester under our belts and are making plans for our second this fall; currently we are conducting summer classes. God goes through red tape as if it isn't there; He has provided administrative favor for the school. He has also spoken to His saints; some have responded as volunteer teachers, while others send prayers and money to support a college they'll (hopefully) never attend themselves.

And as in the mission field, there are many disappointments. I have had men quit on me and on themselves. I've watched inmates sink into despair despite my best efforts to help. It doesn't do much for the Bible teacher's ego either when one of his students misses class because he's been locked in solitary confinement for fighting.

But the one thing everyone heading for the foreign mission field needs is a call. A wise man once told me that whenever he interviewed a candidate for the mission field, he would say anything he could to convince that person not to go.

"If I can talk you out of being a missionary," explained my friend, "then you shouldn't be one. If you have a call of God on your life to go to the mission field, nobody can talk you out of it."

Having worked at Fountain for the past year, the last six months of which I have been the academic dean of Fountain of Life Bible College, I heartily agree. One needs a call from God to work in prison ministry. My call gets me through the hours, the prayers, the progress, and the lack of progress! It keeps me from getting up on myself when things go well and down on myself when they go sour. My firm conviction is that God wants there to be a Bible college at Fountain Correctional Facility and that the time for this college is now. And I know in Jesus' name that I need to be part of it. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.



Mike Strehlow with an inmate friend

Mike Strehlow first became involved in prison ministry through visitation with a friend. He is currently serving under We Care as academic dean of the Bible college at Fountain Corr. Facility in Atmore, AL. On the side, Mike really enjoys photography, and when he has a camera in hand, no one is exempt from the possibility of being captured on film. Mike, his wife Patty, and their two daughters live in Pensacola, FL.

Staff Retreat

In early June, prison ministry staff members and their families gathered at *Camp Sumatanga* near Birmingham, AL, for the second bi-annual We Care retreat. The two and a half days together were filled with teaching, sharing, prayer, recreation, fun, and laughter. The beautiful mountainous setting, the change of pace, and the warm fellowship created an atmosphere that is unmatched in the normal carrying out of duties and ministry. Setting aside such a time provided refreshment for the chaplains and their families and helped to deepen team unity and friendships.

Teaching sessions, led by *Steve Longenecker*, both challenged and encour-



aged us in prison ministry work as well as in our personal lives. Hiking up the mountain challenged the physical stamina of some of us, and searching for facial resemblances in baby photos challenged the powers of observation of all of us. Singing around the campfire was a special time, and no one present will ever forget the We Care Economy Shop Fashion Show!

Staff members returned home feeling refreshed and renewed, ready to again tackle the daily routines and challenges of prison ministry—and carrying lots of good memories!

Hurricane Dennis

On *July 10*, for the second time in just under ten months, Atmore and the surrounding areas were hit by a major hurricane. *We praise the Lord* for His protection and that damage to the properties of We Care Program and staff personnel was not as severe it could have been. Even so, some of the staff members are now facing making repairs to their homes because of the storm.

Read-A-Thon Reminder

Readers, don't forget to collect pledges from your sponsors and send in the money this month. Pledges received in the We Care office *by Aug. 31* qualify reader to be eligible for prizes.

Birmingham, AL

Donaldson Correctional Facility

In the fall of 2004, our president Dave Landis told me of a young man named Brian Miller, from Ohio, and his call from God to work with We Care for a six-month assignment. Dave was thinking of assigning Brian to work at Donaldson.

Our state chaplain and I were both very open to this, and Brian began ministering here with us in early January. Now if I am a chaplain's assistant, that would seem to make Brian a chaplain's assistant's assistant, right? Technically, he was an assistant to the chaplain, just as I am, but he often expressed the desire to assist me personally in the ministry areas where I was working.

Prior to Brian's arrival, I had several questions in my mind, such as: Would he be able to handle this high stress environment? Would he be motivated to get out in the "trenches" without me leading him around all of the time? Would he have a shining testimony and be able to be used of the Lord to really impact the lives of inmates? Would he have a submissive attitude and be willing to follow directions?

I was pleased to find out the answer to all of these questions was a resounding "YES!" Having a second We Care missionary in our institution was a great experience, and we are thankful for the Lord's sending Brian to us for this time.

This little article isn't about lifting up Brian. He wouldn't want that. This is about bringing praise to Jesus Christ who can work through a willing vessel.

Thanks again, Brian, for coming here. The plea goes out from all of our staff: Who will be next to allow God to carry you into these exciting waters of prison mission work? - Dave Bucher

Ed. Note: Brian completed his assignment in June and returned to his home community. We appreciated having him on the team for this short time and wish him God's rich blessings in the future.

Perspectives



David R. Landis
President

It happened during a Sunday evening class I was teaching for a small group of fellow church members in our home. I was coming to the close of the prepared lesson, already having experienced healthy and open discussion with the group. I had noticed toward the end of the lesson that one of the participants was struggling with something—tears were welling in her eyes.

I opened the remaining time for sharing and prayer requests, and like a broken dam, she spilled out her struggles, doubts, insecurities, questions, despair, guilt, shame, and fear. We listened, offered counsel and encouragement, and listened some more, but despair remained.

That's when my friend Willie, who "happened" to be staying in our home for the weekend and was sitting in the class, began speaking. Like a doctor pouring healing ointment into a child's wounded heart, he gently, humbly, and wisely offered God-breathed words of hope and encouragement along with a prophetic call that very clearly spoke into her troubled spirit. It was one of those moments that are hard to describe in words. However, everyone in the room knew with certainty that we had just witnessed a breakthrough. God was present. It was truly a holy moment.

What happened that night was a normal part of "doing church" as God intended, but what was unusual about it was that my friend Willie had just been released from prison three weeks earlier, after serving twenty-eight years for taking the life of another human being. It was during that prison sentence that God finally got Willie's attention and radically transformed his life.

Some might say, "Lock 'em up and throw away the key." *"But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty." (I Cor. 1:27 NKJV)*

Is it a waste of time ministering to the "least of these"? I don't think so. As for our Sunday evening class, I think they might have a new perspective on that question as well.

I'd love to hear from you.
Contact me at
dave@wecareprogram.org

The Bottom Line

For the first time since 1995, our fiscal year ended in the black. Although expenses were over budget, income was also higher than anticipated. We are so grateful to all who helped to make this possible.

12 months ending June 30

	Budget \$570,000
	Expenses \$580,944
	Income \$592,135

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