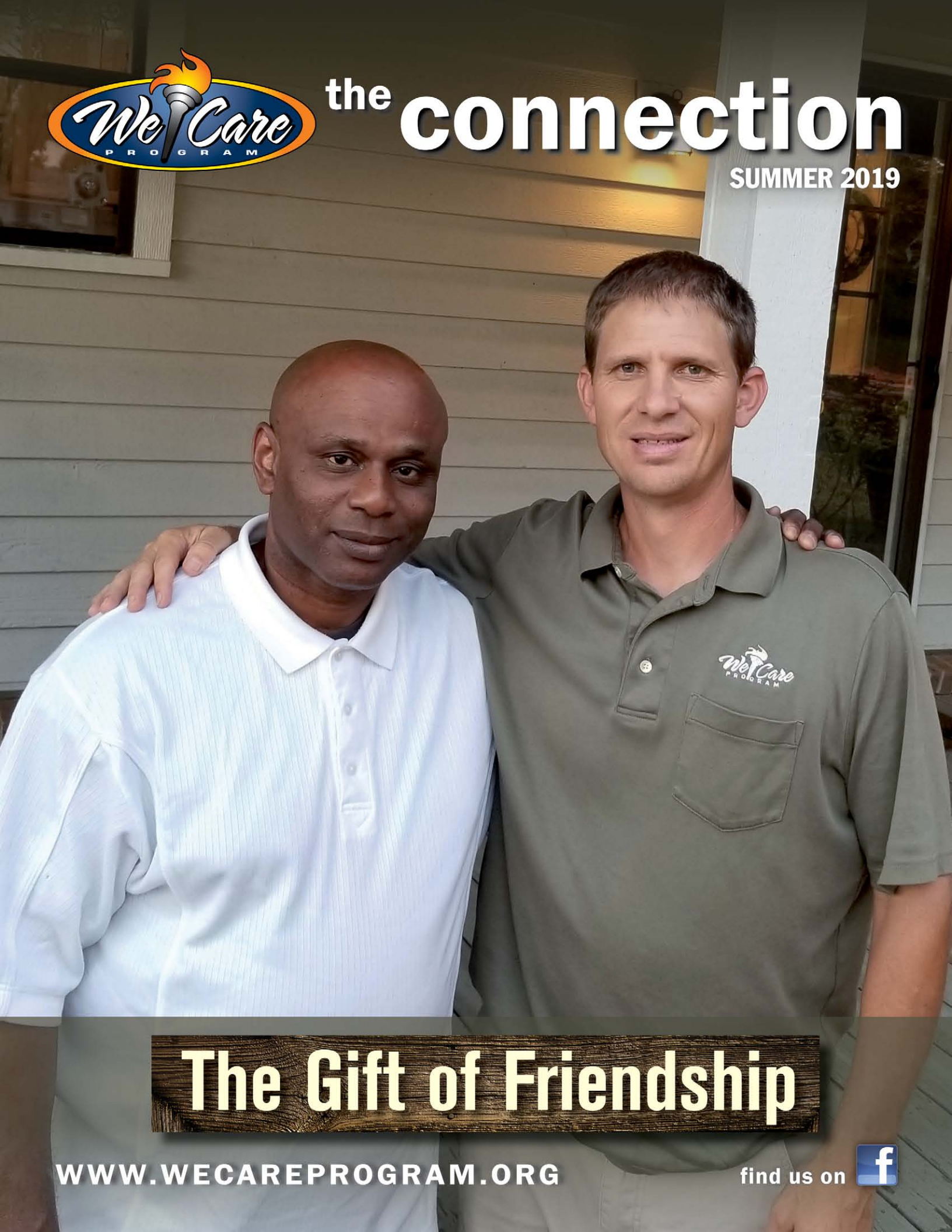
the connection

SUMMER 2019



The Gift of Friendship

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The Gift of Friendship

by Billy Jones

I was raised by my grandmother in Huntsville, Alabama. I was one year old when my father received a life sentence for murder. When I was around two years old, my mother ran off and left me. I grew up going to church without understanding the significance of the sermons and songs. To me, church was simply what the family did on Sundays. I was at church and I was in church, but my mind and interest was far from the church. So the church wasn't in me. And that right there was the problem. Because of my lack of faith or any real commitment to God, I found myself easily drawn to the streets. I began stealing from stores and followed that with breaking into houses. At thirteen I started breaking into stores. At age fourteen, I got my first arrest for house burglary and served about six months in a juvenile facility. Before long I was back on the streets committing the same type of crimes.

Billy and David at David's truck lettering and graphics workshop.

During the next several years, my life snowballed out of control. I was in and out of all sorts of penal institutions, from juvenile to local lockups and the county jail, for one crime or another. I had no hope for a future. One thing led to another, and eventually I was arrested for burglary and escape. The authorities told me the only plea bargain they would offer me was a term of life. I was twenty-eight years old at the time. The judge sentenced me to life on one count of burglary and a separate life sentence on one count of escape. Over the years I was transferred to one prison after another. For twenty-two years I watched the days turn to night as I went to sleep, trying not to think about how hungry or broke I was. I watched the seasons pass painfully slow, month after month, year after year.

When I first entered prison, I picked up a Bible and started reading. It wasn't long, however, until I put it down because I felt like a hypocrite looking to God just because I had two life sentences. This feeling lasted for years—it messed me up so bad I stopped reading anything. It was years later before I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. Even then, I didn't change automatically or immediately. I was still living in sin and lust, cursing and all kinds of things. A couple months passed, and the Holy Spirit started moving in me and I started feeling guilty and convicted for things I was doing. I repented and got serious with the Lord.

In 2014 I was transferred from Draper to Atmore Work Center. There I found myself sitting in the chapel with David R. Landis, who was not only the volunteer prison chaplain, but also worked at We Care Program. David and I got to know each other, and I learned a lot from him during our time together. I knew nothing about We Care at the time, but I was happy and content to be in David's presence because he seemed genuinely concerned about inmates as people and not just another number in somebody's system.

Little did I know then that his attitude and personality is representative of all those who serve with We Care. To this day, I haven't met a single person connected to We Care who is not genuinely concerned and passionate about people, especially inmates, getting to know Jesus. It still amazes me how something as simple as a bar of soap, a deodorant, or a toothpaste can bring the toughest and meanest inmate to tears. But I know this approach of We Care works, because I've witnessed first-hand how it has worked on countless inmates–including myself. Opening the Bible and sharing a few scriptures from the gospel message is one thing. Demonstrating the gospel message, which can include those simple things I mentioned above, is something else. It's not about trying to buy or bribe inmates to look, listen, and learn about Jesus. No matter how big or small, whether material things or otherwise, the love and support We Care has given to incarcerated men (and women) has led many to Christ who would otherwise not receive the witness they need and may have died in the midst of their darkest despair without ever knowing Jesus. So I ask the question, "Is it enough to send a few volunteers into a prison of a thousand (or more) lost inmates?" No, that's not enough. Are a few volunteers better than none? Yes. I thank God for people/organizations like We Care. There are people behind bars who think they are not only rejected by the world, but are also rejected by Jesus because of the crimes they committed. The efforts of We Care are helping those people to understand that Jesus is the Savior of the world, including themselves.

Billy works the chicken fryer at another part time job.

Since first meeting David at Atmore Work Center, I have met many other We Care chaplains. One in particular is Kevin Kennell. When I first met Kevin at J.O. Davis, I was trying to receive permission to teach a discipleship class in the prison chapel. Kevin eventually helped me teach this class. My experience teaching the class was a blessing, but the way the Lord used Kevin to speak into my life was especially wonderful.

Fast forward to April of this year (2019), after my release from prison. I can now see how We Care is truly concerned about people, in prison…and beyond. I am reconnecting with many of the We Care chaplains I met while incarcerated. Since making parole, I am staying at a double-wide trailer I rent from We Care. The conditions of this place are like a beach-front resort compared to where I was just a month ago. I am so blessed. God is doing awesome things in my life and is opening doors. I have reconnected with Kevin. He is teaching me the importance of not living above my means and has invited me to be a part of his beautiful family. I proudly call him my brother. Two of the things I like most about Kevin are 1) his willingness and desire to serve the Lord with all his heart no matter what might be asked of him, and 2) his genuine concern for people. I thank God for putting Kevin in my life. Now that I am no longer incarcerated, our friendship has continued to blossom and grow even stronger. In addition, I am overwhelmed to think how blessed I am to work part time at David's new graphic design shop. Words cannot express my gratitude. But even more important to me than the work is our friendship. Next to David and Kevin, there are other people at We Care whose friendship is a wonderful gift I have received from the Lord, but too many to name in this article.

I spent all of my 30's and 40's in prison, so it is taking me some time to adjust to the "outside" world again without making myself look too out of place while doing it. But I know it can be done. Others have left the confines of prison and done it. With the continued support of people like We Care, I will also adjust and make a successful re-entry.

Discover with We Care Program

*by **James Smoker** - Recruitment Director*

Discover 2019 is now history! Wow, it seemed like we had only finished planning it and in a blink it was over. This year we were thankful for two young men, Josh and Travis, who committed four months of their lives to serving men in prison. These men had the courage to relocate and follow God's leading into unfamiliar territory, prison ministry in Atmore, Alabama. Josh joined us from Pennsylvania and Travis from Virginia.

I am always encouraged to see young men willing to follow God even when the path ahead looks rather adventurous or when it feels like "How can I possibly do this?" It takes me back to my first experiences in prison ministry and how I felt. I was confident that what God did for me He would also do for Travis and Josh. God provides exactly what we need for the journey to which He has called us.

According to Travis and Josh, God was indeed faithful in giving them what they needed in their time with Discover. Josh shared that God answered his prayer. "Before I came, I prayed for help and I got my help I wanted."

One aspect of Discover that stands out to me was helping these guys see the gifts God gave them and then watching as God used them ministering in the prison. We met once a week and went through a study called "Experiencing God." One session emphasized that God is not limited by our weaknesses. It was great to see these guys understand what was being taught and apply it as they reached out to the men in prison. Several inmates told me it means so much to them when young men, like Josh and Travis, take the time to come into the prison to serve. One of them said, "There are so many other things they could be doing with their time, but they chose to visit us in prison."

When asked how Discover impacted his view of God, Travis replied, "This internship helped me realize just how much my Savior loves me and wants to have a relationship with me that is real and personal!" Would he recommend Discover? "Absolutely!" he responded. "God can use you in much bigger ways than you might believe! It'll make you more bold with the Gospel!"

2019 Softball Outreach May 16-18

*by **Don Metzler** - President*

Fifty-two softball players participated in this year's Softball Outreach on May 16 – 18. In addition to a handful of We Care staff, men came from Virginia, Pennsylvania, Georgia, South Carolina, Iowa, Arkansas, Maryland, and Mississippi to play in prisons across Alabama. Five teams went into 13 different prisons, entering a total of 25 times. Varying prison schedules allowed for games two or three times at some prisons and only once at others. With an average of 2.5 games of five innings per game, we played over 300 innings of softball in those three days. That, my friend, equates to a lot of sore muscles and tired bodies! It also equates to many inmates receiving the opportunity to "leave prison" through the game of softball. No, they could not actually leave the facility, but the experience of playing ball against "free world" guys gave them a chance to mentally disengage from normal prison life.

The ball games were not only impactful for the inmates but also for the volunteers. Some of the words they used to describe their experience were "amazing," "fantastic," and "awesome." Volunteer Kyle Bass had this to say, "This has been an absolute blast! From laughing so hard I'm about to cry, to watching inmates weep from seeing the love of Jesus. To be a small part of such a wonderful thing is incredibly humbling."

We are very grateful for several sponsors who helped to cover some of the expenses for this outreach. The generosity of Ebersole Spreading, Poly-Wood, Wenger's Construction, StallWorks, and Miller's Plumbing & Electric is much appreciated.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the permission granted from the Alabama Department of Corrections, specifically the wardens at each prison. Because of that, it means a little extra when we hear from a warden after the ball games. Here are two such replies:

"We thank you for your continued support of St. Clair CF. The inmates expressed they were thankful for the opportunity and hope next year they will win. Thank you." **– Warden Karla W. Jones**

"You all are most welcome, but we are the ones that are thankful and grateful for you including us. We are looking forward to next time. Much blessings to you and yours. Team Elba." **– Warden R. M. Butler**

Softball Outreach is a very special time of connecting with men on the ball field. Sharing the love of God in this tangible way is a blessing to both the inmates and the volunteers. I hope many of you can join us next year as we once again look forward to hearing those two rousing words, "Play Ball!"

From the Field

Ben Nolt

Fountain Corr. Facility
Atmore, AL

There's an older gentleman at Fountain whom I've grown to know well over the past few years. "Joe" is a friendly, warm believer who I consider a very good friend. I try to stop in his dorm on a weekly basis to sit on his bunk and catch up on life. Four years have flown by since we met, including numerous major life changes for me, but I'm struck by the fact that Joe is still on the same rack where I can almost guarantee I will find him. Every inmate's life is "on pause" in a sense, but it's especially true for someone like my friend Joe whose health is failing and mobility is limited. Two years ago we were excitedly talking and praying about his upcoming parole hearing. I remember Joe picking up his Bible and carefully pulling out pictures of the home being prepared for him to move into. Then came the crushing news of his date being set off. As a much younger man, it feels odd at times to minister to the older, wiser men in prison, but Joe needed a friend to care, help carry the burden and point to a better day coming. I'm glad I get to fill that role for this season that our paths have crossed. (Joe's going home next January, by the way. Praise the Lord for that!) You probably have plenty of opportunities with the elderly in your circles as well. Don't neglect this important ministry! And while you're at it, would you please remember to pray for the elderly men and women who are incarcerated? Better yet, consider our chaplaincy opportunities and come meet them face to face!

Jeremy Miller

St. Clair Corr. Facility
Springville, AL

I met with my class for one final time as we wrapped up our first ever PF Academy at St. Clair Correctional Facility. It was a bittersweet time because of all the joyous times we spent together studying and growing as men of God, but also realizing the challenges connected to being incarcerated. We were in our last lesson on "Managing Your Life" and talking about the difficulties that await many when they leave prison when one of the younger men in the group said, "I won't have that problem. I'm never getting out." The rest of the class looked rather shocked by his words, although many knew the reality of a "life without parole" sentence. In fact, many in the class were serving just as much time - if not more - than he was. But his words had a ring of hopelessness to them, something that is often felt (but rarely spoken) by many men serving long periods of time. It was a solemn reminder of the hopelessness that is so prevalent inside of prison. The writer of Proverbs said, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick…" This means that without hope we can literally become sick. This sickness for many in prison leads to discouragement and depression. As a Christian, I am compelled to share with these men that hope can be found in a relationship with Jesus Christ. A relationship with Him and faith in His promises can give even the most broken and hopeless people hope. I believe in a God who CAN change hopeless situations around, and for as long as I live I chose to share Him to those I have the privilege to meet.

Board of Directors Retreat

We Care's Board of Directors and spouses met on April 25 & 26 at Fairhaven Ministries in Tennessee. President Don Metzler and Vice President Kevin Kennell and their wives were also in attendance. The two-day event at the retreat center was filled with meetings, food, fellowship and fun. We Care is blessed with a great team of godly men who lead this organization well.

Pictured left to right are Brent Yoder, Loren Wissmann, Durell Orendorf, Daniel Martin, Dennis Nolt, Aaron Martin, Ed Ranck, John Yoder, Alvin Landis, Marcus Zimmerman, and Richard Graber.

Wilma Mullet

Ohio Reformatory for Women
Marysville, OH

She had forewarned me: "I'm 44 years old with 144 years of gunk inside me. I've been here 24 years. Next year I'm up before my 4th Parole Board. I'm so full of rage that I'm told I won't make it outside the fence. Women in here have literally turned and walked the other direction when they see me." When she was 15 her stepfather pulled her out of high school. He said she was too stupid for them to waste money on her school clothes; she wouldn't learn anything anyway. She ran away from home, living homeless and searching for love. "I've had more partners than I can count," she confessed to me. At 20, she had a one year old, a baby, and another one on the way with three different fathers. The pain, guilt, and stress kept building. And the baby wouldn't stop crying. One day, she snapped. I looked deep in her eyes and asked, "Has God forgiven you for all that?" "I can only hope," came her weak reply. She agreed that when Jesus came to earth, He came specifically to take everyone's sins onto Himself and, yes, she was one of everyone. And yes, He came to take 100% of everybody's sins. That must mean He came to take every last sin from her as well. "So do you choose to believe He has forgiven you?" I pressed her. "I want to," she responded. I answered eagerly, "It's a choice. Do you choose to believe it?" Her voice was stronger as she answered, "I want to!" "Okay, if you want to, then DO IT! Do you choose to believe the blood of Jesus washes you clean?" I asked in anticipation of her affirmative answer. "Yes…ah, I feel high! It's the only way I know to describe it! You know how you feel high?!" She exclaimed. "Hmm… yes and no!" I answered as I joined in her joyous laughter. And so begins her journey to more hope and freedom.

NEWS

Dale & Sharon Brubaker

David & Debbie Landis

FAREWELL

This spring, We Care said goodbye to a few chaplains. Dale and Sharon Brubaker moved from Wetumpka, Alabama, to their home in Harrisonburg, Virginia, after serving 4 and 7.5 years (respectively) as volunteer chaplains. Dale had served at Draper & Staton, and Sharon ministered to the women at MWF. We wish them the best as they discern God's plans for their future as a couple.

David R. Landis also stepped down from his role with We Care after almost 20 years of service. David started as a volunteer chaplain in 1999, then served as President of the ministry from 2001-2014. His most recent role was a part time chaplain/teacher in various prisons. David has moved on to running his own business in Atmore as well as continuing his role of part-time overseer for a group of local churches.

Ministry Follows Us Home

A MESSAGE FROM KEVIN KENNELL, VICE PRESIDENT
kevin@wecareprogram.org

In my four years at We Care Program, I have met a lot of men behind the fences. Some of those men I have forgotten, some are merely acquaintances, some are brothers in Christ, but some are considered friends. One of the latter group is Billy Jones. You can read his article in this newsletter. I assisted Billy in getting a class started while in prison years ago, and I saw God's hand was on Billy. I also saw that, in contrast to a life of sin, Billy now had a sincere desire to serve God as the Lord of his life.

Billy was transferred to another part of the state for a time, but recently, God has reconnected us on the "free world" side of the fences!! It has been extremely fulfilling to assist Billy as he begins rebuilding his life. I am encouraged as I watch him get back into society, and I enjoy being a part of his continued journey. The friendship and discipleship that began in prison is continuing on the outside.

This process reminds me that we are not meant to do life alone. God created us to be social creatures, and we need each other. Life is not a solo journey, and I would like to thank each of you who partner with us here at We Care Program to carry out our mission, both in prison and beyond! I also challenge each of us to look around and see who else God would want us to come alongside in this life. For me, one of those people is Billy. Billy is like family, and there is always a place at our dinner table for him. **Ministry doesn't stop when we leave our place of service... it should follow us home.** So I challenge us all to not look for a special place to do ministry, but rather, to see how you can minister to those who are in close proximity to you right now!

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

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