

Gary Wyder
Prison Evangelist

The Florida Prison Evangelist

"...He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners..." Luke 4:18
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LAKE BUTLER CHURCH OF CHRIST

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My Chains Are Gone

was the theme of our Second Annual Fundraiser. Robert McConnell, a resident of Off The Chain Ministries, has been out of prison for 2 years. He shared how crime and the prison ministry has impacted him and his family. Robert's transformation through the power of the Gospel encouraged us all. Robert works for a brother in the church doing pest control. Robert is a tireless worker for the Lord and a great encouragement to each of the men coming out of prison.



Trent Wheeler, our preacher at Lake Butler, was the keynote speaker and he spoke of the heartache suffered by his family as his brother's son is in prison. Crime affects families in a powerfully negative way; our ministry changes families in a powerfully positive way. 62 attended and we raised 12k directly and another 6k soon there after.

We have already used some of the funds for special needs that our area Chaplains have for Bible materials. Our endowment fund is being established to guarantee sustainability of the ministry. We encourage you to prayerfully consider making a contribution to these needs.

40 Years Old

Pat and I recently turned 40 years old. Obviously, I am speaking of our spiritual age. It was 40 years ago that Pat and I were baptized into Christ at Chestnut Drive Church of Christ in Doraville, Georgia (suburb of Atlanta). We had studied with the minister, Jimmy Vest, and one of the elders, Raymond Hamby; viewing the Jule Miller filmstrips.

Chestnut Drive is a special place. We had been in every elder's home within several months. Over one half of the members were involved in the visitation program and through that we were able to build strong relationships with many of the members. That was crucial to our spiritual growth. Prior to be-

coming a Christian, weekends were about drinking, smoking pot and wasting time. Now we went to worship the Lord, visit those in need and have more fun than we ever had in the old way of life.

There were many special people who had a profound impact on our lives. Evangelist Felton Spraggins told me "one day you will be a preacher". I laughed in his face. Elder Dale McDaniel encouraged me to get involved with the preacher school, Southeastern Biblical Institute (SBI), and went with me when I spoke at other congregations to raise support.

SBI encouraged us to get involved in smaller congregations in the area, so we transferred our membership to Stone Mountain. They put us to work. One Wednesday evening, George Bible, the preacher and one of the elders, asked me if I wanted to go to prison. I said, "what are you nuts?" George was studying with some men in the local prison and felt that I would be a natural for that type of ministry. It began with one night a week and evolved into three nights. I realized that if I had continued my life of drinking and drugging, I would have ended up in a place like that. It was a great joy to see men hungering for a better way of life. I went weekly to the prison for the next two years.

Near graduation time at SBI, one of my fellow students, David Anguish, knew of the work I was doing and that the Lake Butler congregation was looking for a full time prison minister. David learned that from Greg Smith, an old friend he had grown up with and the current preacher in Lake Butler. Long story short, that was 35 years ago.

But I want to focus on one critical element from the brethren at Chestnut Drive, **mentoring**. Pat and I learned so much about our Christian walk from our time spent with the brethren. Bible study and attendance is necessary, but practical godly living is taught and modeled by mature Christians. They encouraged us, gave us sound advice, warned us about dangers to avoid and loved us in spite of ourselves. One family in particular, Andy & Helen Austin have taught us so much. They lived



Rachel, Helen, Ricky & Andy Austin

across the street from us in Atlanta and invited us over often. Even though they moved back to Tennessee, we visit them regularly. Andy & Helen grew up in the church, raised two wonderful, godly children and through many trials and tribulations have always remained faithful to the Lord. Andy & Helen have always “been there” for us, in counsel, encouragement and in prayer. They took us under their wings when we were new babes and led us into the path of righteousness.

This same mentoring that is so necessary for Christian growth. We all know those that have been Christians for decades and yet are still babes. We all need to be “spurred on to love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24). Those coming out of prison and addictions will **not** remain faithful without this guidance. Those that seek and heed godly counsel and wisdom before they make decisions grow and prosper in the Lord. Paul told Titus that the older (more mature) are to train and model godly living to those young in the faith.

When “iron sharpens iron” Proverbs 27:17, sparks fly. Men frequently do not want to hear the counsel we give them. They buck against it. Yet, if they know we love them and truly have their best interest at heart, they often will heed. Ideally, mentoring relationships are built even before conversion. We must provide this investment in the lives of others.

2018 National Prison/Jail Workshop

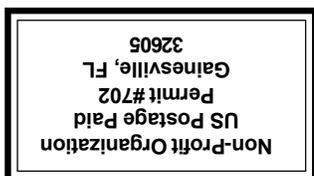
is sponsored by the Jefferson Street Church of Christ 1526 Jefferson Street Hobbs, New Mexico 88240 on June 13-15, 2018. Contact person is Clay Martin 575.708.0831. They minister three times a week at the Lea County Correctional Facility. It has 1200 inmates and a “God Pod”. More info. will follow.

God Gives The Increase

I recently baptized Patrick. He has a life sentence from a brutal murder he committed. Several of us had been studying with him for years seemingly getting nowhere. Patrick studied many religions, but was persuaded by none. He was seeking a changed life, not a set of rules. It was the faithful walk of several brothers, mostly Charlie that persuaded Patrick to study with me. Charlie leads a quiet, unassuming life. His gentle spirit, kindness and patience convinced Patrick to come to our Sunday services. He was surprized that we just studied the Bible together, with no rituals and pretense. The churches of Christ have a great advantage in prison ministry because we stick with the simple truth of God’s Word. It is truly the “dynamite” of God.

James Lee, evangelist for the Eastpoint congregation goes weekly to the Franklin County Jail. James just reported baptizing 4 women and 6 men at the jail. That makes 28 for this year.

County jail ministry has the advantage that most inmates are local, allowing opportunities to study with the inmate and the family. It often increases the benevolence budget, due to the many immediate needs present. For those that are sentenced to prison, James and other workers forward the names to us. Lake Butler has one of the State’s three reception centers where all incoming inmates are processed. We may not have long to work with them before they are assigned to their permanent camp. But the consistency of contact and coordination of Bible correspondence studies lead to conversions.



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