

Breaking the Chains

Prison inmates in Houston are finding that the answer to addiction is the power of Christ.

Four pairs of bare fluorescent bulbs emit a luminous glow, bouncing rays off the shiny cement floor. The corner of one ceiling tile rests in a cockeyed position. Amid plain white walls a blackboard carries the message: "AA Topics: 24 Hours Clean."

The faith-based Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting in this downtown Houston jail isn't taking place in the plushest of settings. Speaker Boyd Harrell strains to be heard over music wafting down the hall and murmuring that has to be hushed by the leader.

But once Harrell warms up, the crowd of nearly 60 men filling the room listens intently. This smiling 45-year-old, who overcame a drug addiction that sent him to the "big house" four times, knows their lingo.

"I'm here to be a beacon of light in a dark place," Harrell says. "I came in here to be rawboned real with you."

Then Harrell outlines his past—drinking by age 8, smoking marijuana and sniffing paint from a bag at 10, and shooting heroin by 13. Five years later he made his first trip to the penitentiary.

Continuing with a mixture of testimony, motivational pep talk and Scripture, he emphasizes the bottom line: Christ's power to set the men free.

"There's an anointing on the room that can change the rest of your life," Harrell says. "God loves you. He'll meet you right where you are. Jesus is lookin' for fish tonight."

After an hour everyone bows his head. When Harrell asks if anyone wants to make Christ the Lord of his life, 10 hands go up in the air. He prays.

When the meeting ends, several men stop to express their appreciation to Harrell, founder of . (Christ Over Our Life) Ministries, for making weekly visits.

"It shows he loves us and he cares," says Kelly Newcomb, 43. "Word has spread so much since he's been coming."

Thirty-year-old Doyle Clendennen doesn't know how to explain God's pulling him into AA two weeks earlier, but it changed his outlook. Although a Christian previously, he had drifted away because he didn't think God was listening to him.

"He talked about God not hating us and still loving us," says the restaurant manager. "I had heard that before, but not with that kind of power."

The men at the intermediate sanction facility in downtown Houston are among thousands who will hear the gospel this year through Harrell and his cadre of staff members and volunteers. During the first half of 2004, an estimated 12,000 attended prison meetings, one of nearly 20 support groups spread across Houston or a Saturday night service at . Church. Some 3,700 vowed to follow Jesus.

Harrell didn't track the numbers in the ministry's early days. His effort started in a 500-square-foot apartment that hosted one weekly meeting. The group was dedicated to helping people avoid the substances that had wrecked their lives.

Although Harrell today regularly goes into nine prisons and has visited approximately 40 in Texas and Louisiana, he resists labeling . a prison ministry.

"It's always been a world vision," Harrell says of the name that came to him during a meeting at a drug-treatment facility. "We-cool [the name of their Web site is] means 'World Evangelism.' ... But I always knew prisons would hold a specific place in my heart."

Likewise for David Stacy, associate pastor of the . congregation and ministry counselor. Drugs led him to two jail terms spanning seven years, the most recent ending in 2000.

"We love to go into prisons and get people off the streets," says Stacy, also 45. "These men see hope; they see a future. They don't have to be busted down and told they have no hope and can never get a job."

In addition to making voluntary prison visits, . members work with the Harris County drug court system, counseling nonviolent offenders and steering them toward its 12-step meetings, Stacy says. Inspired by the NIV Recovery Devotional Bible, each Christ-centered step includes scriptural references. Harrell says only when people get serious about surrendering to God will they find security.

After backsliding twice, he knows that is true. Although

Harrell first experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit in the late 1980s, when he received a fresh infilling in 1993 there was a huge difference. This time he heard two words: "Complete surrender."

"Nothing explains it better," Harrell says. "No more reservations or holding back. I can tell you from the depths of my heart that if I got a life sentence and was never released again ... I was prepared that day to go on with Jesus."

How did two former drug addicts and ex-convicts become known around Houston for helping others? Boyd and his wife, Jan, will tell you that God did it.

Staffers who either volunteer their time or work for modest salaries agree.

"I love this ministry," says Julianne Hall, an office worker who rededicated her life to Christ after hearing Jan speak in prison. "What they did with Jesus saved my life."

Although her duties are limited by the job that provides the bulk of their income and the responsibilities of raising a 5-year-old girl whose mother is still in prison, Jan is still an important part of . She visits inmates regularly and teaches weekly at a female halfway house operated by The Salvation Army.

Jan, 51, starts her day watching Joyce Meyer and John Hagee, whom she calls her spiritual mentors. At a Hagee book signing, Jan told the San Antonio pastor his sermons cut her open so God could get rid of "stuff."

"We're real people who have real problems who serve a real God who has real answers," Jan says.

Like her husband, Jan returned to God after getting hooked on cocaine. Her life in shambles and estranged from her two sons, she decided she was sick of her habit. From a jail cell in 1994 she prayed: "God, I don't know You, but if You can do anything with me, do it."

Soon after that, a minister visited her drug-treatment program with a blunt message: "Ladies, a lot of you are here who probably think God put you in the jailhouse. God didn't put you here. Your choices put you here."

"That's when I started to change," Jan says. "God put truth in my face."

Several years later, Jan and Boyd met in storybook fashion at the church pastored by the minister who helped turn her life around. Initially she wasn't interested, but they kept seeing each other at church functions. Finally, Boyd asked Jan to go to a Crystal Lewis concert. Six weeks later, they were married.

The following year they took in a baby whose mother was addicted to drugs. Although a judge resisted approving adoption because of their felony records, today they have legal custody.

After his release from prison in the summer of 1998, Harrell enrolled at the University of Houston Downtown. There he earned a degree in social sciences and held the first . campus outreach.

Rap artist Bobby Herring, founder of the Houston Holy Hip-Hop Alliance, remembers meeting Harrell three years ago. As the 20-something entrepreneur talked with Harrell, he found himself drawn to his visitor's vision.

"I get so many people who want me to do stuff," says Herring, who performs as Tre-9. "But he told me his background ... and I thought, 'I want to help this guy.'"

That meeting led to three concerts on campus and eventually to a prison performance in the summer of 2003. Since then, Herring has returned five times.

After several years of shoestring operations, . moved last January into a suite of rooms. But Harrell's dreams expand beyond larger office space.

Though no grants have been secured, . has already printed brochures for The Answer, a residential drug-treatment center focusing on spiritual intervention. Harrell hopes to secure funds next year to buy land for the facility, which he wants to open with 50 beds.

There's more: billboards and commercials promoting ., lines of clothing and sporting goods, and a contemporary Christian record label. The profits would fund drug treatment because few of the people he encounters can afford it.

While the world is obsessed with being cool, Harrell says his obsession is a spiritual one: "We can introduce people to the idea that you can have Christ in your life, be a person of honor, have integrity and do the right thing—not for someone

else but because you have such a love and respect for God. That is cool. That is really cool.”

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