

Faith-Based Prison Ministries Leave Legacies of Transformation

Across the United States, dynamic outreaches to inmates and ex-offenders are helping reduce recidivism rates

Christian prison ministries across the country are reducing recidivism rates of countless ex-offenders. But more than simply changing statistics, these organizations are credited with transforming lives.

Robert Valdez, 29, spent most of his life selling drugs in the streets of New York. Today, for the first time ever, he earns honest wages working as a land surveyor—thanks to House of Hope of Alachua County, an after-care prison ministry in Gainesville, Fla., that houses converted inmates immediately upon release.

“I would have gone right back to the things I was doing before if it wasn’t for this place,” Valdez said. “The most important thing I have learned is that without my relationship with Jesus, I am lost.”

Since its humble beginnings in 1996, House of Hope has been home to more than 150 men, and the organization has seen dozens of lives drastically changed.

According to a recidivism report released by the Florida Department of Corrections in July 2003, approximately 40.5 percent of male inmates re-offend after three years of release from prison. This is in stark contrast to House of Hope’s recidivism rates—only 17 percent of their total number of

graduates have ever re-offended.

Thomas Johnson, executive director of House of Hope, said his program offers the world what it is looking for: an answer. "The world has no answers for the state of self-destruction that it's in," Johnson told Charisma. "There's no answer other than Christ."

A recent study conducted by Byron R. Johnson, Ph.D., director of The Religion and Civil Society Program at The Witherspoon Institute in Princeton, N.J., found a significant relation between faith-based mentoring and decreased recidivism rates.

The study reports drastically reduced recidivism rates for Texas inmates who completed InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI)—a pre-release, faith-based program that was launched in April 1997 under the recommendation of then-Gov. George W. Bush.

According to the study, IFI program participants were "significantly less likely than the matched groups" to be either re-arrested (17.3 percent vs. 35 percent) or re-incarcerated (8 percent vs. 20.3 percent) in the first two years after release.

"Findings are consistent across a wide range of studies," Byron Johnson said. "When religious commitment goes up, crime goes down."

There are four key elements regarding IFI's success, Johnson added. The program encourages inmates to experience a spiritual transformation, it relies heavily upon volunteers and mentors, it provides support systems for inmates upon

release, and it emphasizes education, work, life skills and mentoring built upon a foundation of biblical principles.

IFI is operated by Prison Fellowship Ministries (PFM), the largest prison ministry in the United States, through a contract with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The organization was founded by Charles Colson, a former aide to President Nixon who was imprisoned on Watergate-related charges.

According to Mark Earley, president of PFM, relationships are critical to its participants' success. "We match them with someone early on so that there is a relationship developed before their release," Earley said. "Our key to success is that we don't finish involvement when they leave prison. We get them hooked up with a local church, a job, an accountability partner."

Though recent statistics are promising, it is the lives of IFI's graduates that reflect the true change, Earley said.

After serving 13 years of a 35-year prison sentence for the murder of his wife, IFI graduate Robert Sutton said he experienced true freedom before ever walking out of a jail cell. "I was taught that even though my body was confined, my mind and spirit could be freed through Jesus Christ," Sutton said.

Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives said Sutton's life reflects the effectiveness of faith-based organizations all over America.

"[Robert Sutton] left prison a different man," Towey said.

“When you look at how he has spent his life since being out of prison, it’s astounding to see the contrast from before.”

Today Sutton is on staff at The Greater Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Houston, where he has been a faithful member since his release in 1998.

It is the story of everyone who has had a spiritual conversion, Towey said. “They are desiring to do good, one day at a time. You can see that in Robert Sutton’s face.”

Suzy Richardson