

Former NFL Star Tackles Prisons With Gospel

Mike Barber's game plan includes a 'Weekend of Excitement' in which Jesus is the only star

On a rainy Saturday night last October, nearly 1,000 male inmates packed into a huge outdoor tent at Hutchins State Jail in Dallas. A mood of anticipation filled the air as an event called "Weekend of Excitement" drew to a close.

Prison evangelist and former National Football League star Mike Barber had the prisoners' undivided attention. "You may be in prison, but prison doesn't have to be in you," Barber told them.

Barber committed himself to full-time prison ministry after retiring from football in 1986. He played tight end with the Houston Oilers and Los Angeles Rams during his 10-year pro football career.

"I thought I was born to play football, but I wasn't," Barber told Charisma.

At the October event, Barber started with a Thursday night service. On Friday, he and dozens of volunteer counselors went cell to cell to talk with inmates.

A discipleship class on Saturday morning gave them a chance to

teach inmates about the gift of salvation and answer questions about the Bible. Then counselors went back to cells Saturday afternoon for more personal ministry.

Barber showed a love and compassion for inmates that was too real to question, said Jerry Stevens, a volunteer chaplain at Hutchins State Jail.

"It's hard to con a con," Stevens noted.

Barber's open heart for prisoners has reaped souls for the kingdom of God. Take Reggie Manuel, for example, who had been denied parole nine times.

In 1990 Barber was at a Weekend of Excitement at the Coffield Unit in Tennessee Colony, Texas, where Manuel was serving time. Manuel went to receive a free bar of soap from the ministry team—but ended up getting his soul cleaned. He was miraculously released from prison in 1999 and today works for Kenneth Copeland Ministries, speaking nationwide.

Volunteer counselors are the backbone of Barber's ministry, and the difficulties of follow-up on inmates are left in their able hands, Barber said.

"We are evangelistic. We go in, get them stirred up, pray with them," he said. "But it's the volunteers that come behind, water and create growth. They are my heroes."

The church had better get busy reaching inmates, Barber warned. American prisons are filling 1,100 new beds each day and costing U.S. taxpayers an estimated \$70 million to \$80

million per prison. Texas has the third largest prison capacity in the world with 155,000 beds.

Since 1980, the number of women imprisoned in the United States has tripled, and 90 percent of those are single mothers. Some 85 percent of all inmates are eventually released due to overcrowding, and eight out of 10 will be back in prison in three years for committing more crime.

While the number of volunteers has grown, Barber isn't aware of an increase in charismatic prison ministries. But he is interested in helping train and sending "an army of charismatic Christians" into America's prisons.

"For many years, prison officers would not openly admit that Christian ministry makes an impact," he said. "As a whole today, they very much welcome Christians inside the prisons."

Some prisons, Barber said, actually chart the violence and disciplinary write-ups that take place three months before a Weekend of Excitement and three months afterward.

"The difference is typically night and day," he said. "In some prisons, there have been zero

write-ups 60 to 90 days after our departure."

According to Barber, the charismatic-style ministry that he takes into the prison system is welcomed by inmates.

"We're real and bring in some excitement. They love upbeat music. Let's get honest—the reason so many of them don't go to

church today is because it is boring. They want life. Our programs are full of life—and it's not about an individual. It's about Christ," he said.

Kenneth and Gloria Copeland have partnered with Barber's prison ministry for the last five years, supporting it financially as well as going into prisons with him several times each year. Satellite broadcasts set up at each Weekend of Excitement take the gospel into prisons in 22 states, reaching some 400,000 prisoners, and Barber's Proclaim TV show featuring prisoners' testimonies airs at 5 a.m. and 3 p.m. (CST) Saturdays on the Trinity Broadcasting Network.

Still, Barber believes the church must do more to reach America's inmates. In Texas alone, the number of prisons has grown from 18 units 15 years ago to more than 120 today.

"In the state of Texas, I believe we could have another five ministries and just touch the fringes," he said.