

God's Beacon of Hope In Houston

Bob Ferguson started a treatment program six years ago that has helped countless addicts kick harmful habits.

Come Friday afternoons, and Bob Ferguson is ready to pack his tackle, hitch his boat and roar off solo in his truck for a weekend of fishing. There's hardly anything he likes better. Hardly.

"I'm a fishing fiend," the 46-year-old Texas native says, drawing out his last word for a convincing emphasis.

Sometimes, after a long week of driving his wrecker truck and managing his West University Towing business in Houston, he might even pitch camp at his favorite spot and excuse himself from a Sunday morning church service. But only after he OKs it with his pastor of the last several years, Doug Stringer of Turning Point Christian Center (TPCC).

"On those days I just go to 'The Church of the Holy Mackerel,'" Ferguson quips, revealing a good-natured laugh.

Being a lone weekend angler is about the best thing this side of heaven to Ferguson. But he says he'd give it all up for the real heaven on earth that comes from being a fisher of men. He loves nothing better than to reel in people who are strung out on drugs or otherwise hopelessly hooked by personal defeats and introduce them to Jesus.

He does that every week through a citywide support group in Houston called Jesus in the Steps, which meets on Tuesdays from 7:30 p.m. till 9 p.m. at TPCC. Jesus in the Steps is primarily for drug addicts and alcoholics in all stages of recovery or addiction, but Ferguson emphasizes that no one is excluded from the group.

"It's good for anybody struggling with any kind of sin—whether it's drugs, alcohol, codependency, pornography, workaholism, homosexuality, sexual stuff. Doesn't matter," he says. "It's even good for the kooks in church who keep running around the same old mountain."

The program he founded six years ago and has held every Tuesday since is based on the 12 steps of recovery used by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)—with one key exception. Ferguson prefers, instead of pointing people to an anonymous "higher power" advocated by AA, to plainly tell participants that only Jesus is capable of giving them a restored life.

"I lift Him up. He said if He was lifted up, He'd draw the people to Him. The Word of God breaks the yoke," he says. "He's a good God, and He desires to set them free."

Ferguson is no purveyor of a hope-so message. His ministry is experience-born, an extension of his own life that joins his love for people with his own freedom from a 10-year addiction to heroin, methadone and alcohol.

In 1987, when he was at the lowest point of his addiction after the death of his father, he injected enough heroin to get two people high. The overdose was intentional, meant to kill him.

He waited in his apartment for the narcotic coma to take control. The drugs knocked him out, but he regained consciousness a day later, sprawled across his bathroom floor. Instead of trying a second time, he went to Narcotics Anonymous.

It took two more years for him to get clean and sober. About that time, two of his friends whom he jokingly calls "nut cases" had become Christians and were attending TPCC. Ferguson witnessed a dramatic change in their lives and accepted their invitation to a Friday night service being taught by Stringer.

"I knew there was truth there, so I just kept going back on Fridays," he says. He kept going—for eight weeks—until Stringer finished his series on the work of the cross with a gritty message about how Jesus suffered for sin.

"It broke my heart when I heard about Jesus being crucified. I went running to the altar, and I have been running after Him ever since."

The running turned into fishing for lives when God spoke to him during a 40-day period of fasting and prayer in 1996 and gave him the idea for a program that joined the 12 steps with the Bible and total dependence on God.

A short time later his Tuesday night meeting was born. His format is quite simple—he teaches one of the 12 steps each week and relies on the Holy Spirit to accomplish everything else.

"I tell them all that it's not about where you've been—it's about where you're going," Ferguson says. "I just follow the Holy Spirit."

He opens every meeting with prayer. Then, using the Serenity New Testament for 12-step recovery, available at Christian bookstores and used by AA, he calls on people to read the verse for the night and comment.

"They can talk about anything they want to talk about for five minutes," he says. "I preach sometimes. If I do, I preach the cross."

He encourages group participation but doesn't require it. He finishes by reading an entry from the classic daily devotional *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers and closes the same way he opens. He says that anyone who wishes "prayer for salvation or to get free from sin" is encouraged to see him after the meeting.

Friends of Ferguson's in other areas of Houston lead three spin-off groups hosted by churches other than TPCC. One is directed by two women he led to Christ who formerly were lesbians and drug addicts. They conduct weekly meetings for residents of a halfway house in an area of the city known for its homeless kids and homosexual community.

The other is led by another friend whom he mentored in the faith. "Five years ago, he was a crack addict—just another guy on the street who, to look at, you would've thought there's no hope for him. Now, he's a main usher in the church, too." A third meeting is held at another local church.

As for his own past, it doesn't tempt him anymore, he says. "Another person from another time" is how he describes himself in his drug-induced days. "I found the love I've always been looking for. I don't need to shoot the dope I used to do."

Being now 46 years old and unmarried is probably his main struggle these days, he adds. But he says he's "98 percent free" of that one, thanks to being mentored by the Christian Men's Network and being accountable to Stringer and other men at TPCC. They keep him focused on God's calling.

Call it irony or God's plan, but in that calling Ferguson the fisherman found the hook that has snagged him for a life of service to Jesus.

"There is nothing like seeing someone pray for the first time to receive Jesus," Ferguson says. "Nothing compares with that. I can't put it into words. If that isn't God's will, I don't know what is."

He still gets excited when he thinks of where he's come from and how churches have embraced his hope for the addicted. His dream is that Jesus in the Steps will grow and more churches will want to host a group.

"Instead of fishing on weekends, I would rather travel around

to start other groups,” he says, and then adds: “I don’t do this for recognition. I was a heroin addict. I was a character. I was mean—real hard. It took Jesus to change me. I wouldn’t be anybody if it hadn’t been for Jesus. I’m just a regular guy who got radically saved.”

Jimmy Stewart *is the former managing editor of Charisma.*

For more information, write Jesus in the Steps, P.O. Box 570007, Houston, Texas 77257-0007. Send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 332795-2248.