

Robber-Turned-Reverend Reaches Inmates, Ex-Offenders for Christ

Ohio minister Mark Olds uses his testimony to share God's love and redemption with ex-offenders

I'm a Christian and I'm not going to let you die."

Those words were spoken to Mark Olds in 1979 by a state trooper who with four other law enforcement officers had him trapped at a roadblock on a North Carolina highway. Instead of attempting to escape, which he believes would have likely cost him his life, Olds surrendered, marking the beginning of his journey from robber to reverend. Today the ordained minister hopes to help others turn from lives of crime through his Cleveland-based The Righteous Men Ministries.

Olds has reached out to hundreds of men and women, helping them find jobs and clothes, and organizing support groups for their families. He also has the distinction of being the first person ever to be ordained a minister while incarcerated. He even led a congregation of inmates behind bars.

"He is another affirmation that human redemption is not only possible but miraculous," said the Rev. Harold A. Carter Sr., the pastor of New Shiloh Baptist Church in Baltimore who ordained Olds in 1984. "In God's world it can happen whenever faith is alive."

Olds still finds it ironic that his faith came alive while he was serving a 61-year sentence for a string of bank robberies

and a prison escape. He thanks God for the caring Christian policeman who interrupted his aggressive path toward self-destruction.

"To this day I believe God used that man to save my life," Olds recounts in his biography *Not Without Scars*.

His decision for Christ at the age of 30 marked the end of more than a decade of drug dealing, gambling, bank robbing and even committing murder.

"I thank God He called me when I was still foolish, or else I may have thought I did this myself," Olds told *Charisma*. "[God] knew what He was getting when He got me, and He knows who you are, but He still chose you and loves you."

Today Olds is co-pastor of Eagle Rock Covenant Assembly in Cleveland, but he continues to reach out to inmates through his *Seven Phases of Change* seminars, which help inmates develop the discipline to avoid returning to lives of crime after they are released.

The curriculum is drawn from Olds' own experience. While in prison, he had earned the respect of inmates, wardens and chaplains alike. He studied the Bible along with black history books and the works of Martin Luther King Jr.

He came to believe that the way to get people to behave properly was to get them born again. He said that although many Christians stress this view regarding sexual immorality and drug abuse, he also applied it to social issues such as racism, criminal justice and economic inequality.

He honed his unique brand of liberation theology—which taught that through Christ a person could find not only spiritual liberty, but also social and economic freedom—by writing articles while in prison, most of which were published on the outside. He also published a short booklet, *Words of Liberation From Prison*.

When he was later baptized in the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues, he said the experience “opened up a whole new realm to my faith.” Emboldened to preach, he anticipated a great life of ministry outside of prison. But upon his release in 1989, he found that creating a new life on the outside would take time.

He was 40 years old, and the only job he could find was as a mechanics assistant. Slowly, opportunities to get better-paying jobs and ministry positions began to open, thanks to help from Christians he met upon his release.

In 1991, Olds became associate pastor of The Full Gospel Evangelistic Center in Cleveland. He later became an associate pastor at Olivet Institutional Baptist Church before starting The Righteous Men Ministries (TRMM) in 2002.

He hopes to see TRMM spread across the country. “There has to be practical mentorship, but it is too much for one church to handle,” Olds told *Charisma*. “Churches in a community must come together and be willing to work to help these people come back in to society ... because without Christ there is no point.”

Olds’ resolve stems from the miracles he has experienced. He has not only reconciled with his adult daughter, who was in

grade school when he went to prison, but he has also married and has three more daughters and a granddaughter.

In a documentary about Olds' life, released last year, one inmate said, "What allows [inmates] to feel like a human again is no matter what we've done, Christ still loves us."

That's a message Olds hopes will spread. "Everyone is incarcerated," Olds said, "some physically, some have other strongholds. My story shows people you can start again. ... God can use you."

Tiffany Colter in Cleveland