

Sometimes Love Comes in Boxes

From a converted Circuit City store in Florida, Ray Hall, a retired Air Force veteran, sends Christian books and Bibles to inmates nationwide.

At first glance, you wouldn't think that Ray Hall's little office could be making that much of an impact.

Then you see the map.

Hanging on a wall in his office is a large map of the United States that's covered with a sea of red pins. Each pin identifies a location that receives materials from Prison Book Project (PBP).

"It shows that we're not playing around," Hall says.

Indeed they are not. Currently, PBP ships Christian books and other materials to more than 1,200 jails and prisons in all 50 states. The nonprofit organization takes thousands of books donated from publishers and sends them to chaplains in correctional facilities. And every book shipped out goes through Hall's hands.

The 68-year-old retired Air Force veteran from Titusville, Florida, has been sending books into jails for nine years. Working with his wife, Kazuko, he's written thousands of letters to publishers, read thousands of letters from inmates and shipped tons of freight, all to make sure prisoners around the country who want to learn more about Jesus have the resources to do so.

To understand the significance of Hall's ministry, all you need to do is read one of the boxes of letters that PBP receives from prisoners.

For example: "My name is Charles Michael. I wanted to let you know I've found two of your books here at the chapel library. I liked the two very much that I cried over the second book, Piercing the Darkness. Another reason that I liked them was there were no cussin' in them!"

Hall started the ministry after having a dramatic encounter with God in July 1994—one he will not discuss in detail. The experience so affected him that in August 1994, when God told him to start providing good reading materials for prisoners, he was too afraid to say no.

"I set a goal of 1,000 books to go to the Brevard County [Florida] Jail within a two-year period," Hall told Charisma. "The Lord just kind of impressed on me after about three years to 'keep your eye on the count-giver, not the count.' So I just drew a line in my book and stopped counting. The count after three years was 39,886 books."

He says in the two days after he stopped counting, he received 25,000 books, and that "it hasn't stopped."

"I've seen miracle after miracle after miracle. So when you're in obedience to the Boss, the Boss does stuff for you. And I don't know whether He does it for you just to bless you or just to keep showing you He's the boss or to help you do what He told you to do."

Hall still does not keep numbers on the amount of books he

ships per year, but walking into PBP's warehouse—a converted Circuit City store—gives you an idea of how many books go through his ministry. Walls of boxes piled to the ceiling cover the floor. Hall says the fewest number of books he'll ever have in the warehouse at one time is approximately 300,000.

He estimates that a new book will survive 30 readings before it falls apart. Each box contains 45 books, meaning that one box of materials will be read 1,350 times.

"If you do some more math, there's eight hours average reading time per book, and that's 10,800 hours of ministry time [per box]," Hall says.

To get the books for those 10,800 hours of ministry time, PBP relies on donations from publishers. Currently, about 30 publishing companies donate books, including Tyndale House, which agreed to a recent partnership with PBP.

"It's a rare thing. Ray doesn't get seen, and his name doesn't appear in neon lights anywhere. But there's a lot of death row inmates in heaven tonight because of Ray Hall, I can tell you that," Jerry Furst, of Christian publisher Bethany House, recently told Florida Today, a daily newspaper based in Melbourne, Florida.

"This is not Ray Hall, this is a team," Halls says. "The publishers who send this stuff in—tons of it, millions of dollars worth—those are people that God has spoken to. He's signed them up on the team, too!"

To determine where to send the books, Hall relies on the

inmates themselves. Every correctional facility PBP ships to has or had a prisoner who originally sent a letter to Hall asking him to send books. Hall then contacted the chaplain of that facility and put it on his list.

But a lack of manpower and money has forced the ministry to stop accepting new facilities. At the same time, there are thousands of unanswered letters from prisoners and chaplains asking for books that sit in the corner of Hall's office.

"We're trying to stop the number of places that we send to because we can't take care of what we have," Hall says.

Often PBP can't even ship to the prisons already on its list because it can't afford to, even though the cost is a moderate \$12 a box. When asked where most of the money comes from, Hall is quiet for a second. Instead his pastor, Paul Maze, answers the question.

"He probably would not say this, but I'll say it. Ray underwrites a lot of this from his own Social Security check," Maze, the pastor of Evangel Christian Center, says. "There's been a real struggle to get churches to support this as missions because most churches want an immediate return on their money to some degree. But what we've realized is that these people in prison will be our neighbors; they'll be the people that we'll meet at the ATM or Wal-Mart or at the grocery store one day.

"We need to invest in the need. There seems to be a great spiritual awakening in the prison system across the United States, and we're trying to facilitate that move of God through shipping the materials that they need to study and

learn,” Maze adds.

“There’s a lot of depressing-type things, but I don’t stay down long. God will provide something,” Hall says.

Chris Glazier is a sophomore studying journalism at the University of Florida. He served as a magazine intern at Charisma last summer.

For more information about Prison Book Project, call 321-269-4100. Send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Unsung Heroes, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.