

Transitional Home Offers 'Refuge' to Downtrodden in Central Florida

Mother Ann Smith's House of Refuge has given former drug addicts, prostitutes and prisoners a second chance at life

When Tiffany Henderson was released from prison after serving a nine-year sentence, she struggled to find employment and make ends meet. Then she met "Mother Ann," a Pentecostal missionary who specializes in helping people in transition. Before long, 29-year-old Henderson had landed a job at a restaurant and was an active church member.

Ann Smith—known as Mother Ann Smith within her denomination, the Church of God in Christ—is credited with helping hundreds of people turn their lives around through a string of transitional homes called the House of Refuge.

The faith-based residential facilities in Orlando, Fla., reach drug addicts, prostitutes, ex-prisoners and others. Some residents are HIV-positive. Others struggle with mental illness. "We help anybody who wants our help," said Smith, stressing that the individual must want help.

Henderson, who lived at The Refuge, as the homes are known, while saving money for an apartment, was 19 when she was convicted of second-degree murder for stabbing and killing a woman in the heat of an argument. After rededicating her life to Christ while completing a reduced sentence at the New Jersey Correctional Facility, Henderson took the advice of a pastor and moved to The Refuge after her release.

"I am sorry for my past actions," Henderson said, "but I am grateful for another chance."

Mother Ann, 72, isn't deterred by her residents' sordid pasts. That's because the former jail chaplain spent 30 years as a licensed practical nurse in Orlando-area correctional facilities, providing medical care for murderers, rapists, white-collar criminals and a host of others. "I don't judge these people," Smith said. "I just try to help them do better in life."

According to the Florida Department of Corrections, roughly 40 out of 100 inmates released from prison in 2001 were convicted of a new crime within three years and approximately 26 of 100 returned to jail.

The House of Refuge helps residents avoid re-incarceration by offering a low program fee that includes housing and meals. Participants receive job training or work toward a high school diploma or GED. Some enroll in drug-prevention classes, and others go to work.

But all who live at The Refuge have an opportunity to get to know Jesus Christ through daily prayer and Bible study, which Smith and other local pastors and missionaries lead.

Brenda Straub, 54, knows the benefits of living at The Refuge. Straub was a substance abuser for years before she accepted Christ. With His help, she says, she managed to get off drugs and in 1998 worked as a volunteer on Homer Hartage's campaign for county commissioner.

When the commissioner learned Straub had no place to live, he

sent her to the House of Refuge and gave the ministry a donation to pay for her first month's fees.

"All churches should collaborate with centers such as The Refuge and support them," Hartage said. "We all have family members who have drug, alcohol and other problems to contend with."

Today Straub is a licensed minister and on The Refuge's board of directors. In 2003 she earned a real estate license from the state of Florida.

"I am extremely thankful for what God has done in my life," Straub said. "Now I want to help others get their lives together at The Refuge."

Mother Ann operated six transitional facilities before she sold five of her state-certified homes in 2003 to purchase a 20-bed home for men on three acres of land. A five-bed facility for women is located three miles away.

Mother Ann's efforts have not gone unnoticed. Last year, the local NBC affiliate named Smith "Town Hero." And Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer declared March 25 Ann Smith Day during a banquet that honored her for outstanding community service.

"Over 30 years ago, God called me to this area of ministry," Smith said. "And when people ask me how I do it, I tell them, Whom God commissions He also conditions to do the work."

Valerie G. Lowe in Orlando, Fla.