

Billy Graham's My Hope Impacting Inmates for Christ

Inmates in one Minnesota jail are finding Christ behind bars. Dozens are turning their lives around from the inside out, starting with a short Gospel video produced by BGEA for a nationwide outreach to non-Christians.

"This video touched me," an inmate named Gary said. "I want to change my life, asking forgiveness for my sin and pray that I will never come to jail again. ... I surrender my life to Jesus Christ."

Gary is one of hundreds of men who have come through Dakota County Jail, just outside St. Paul, Minn. He is also one of dozens who turned his life over to Christ after watching a powerful Gospel presentation called "Defining Moments," featuring testimonies from people just like him whose lives were turned upside down.

"Defining Moments" is a half-hour program created for My Hope with Billy Graham, a grassroots effort across the country to share the Gospel with friends, family, neighbors, co-workers—and inmates. Thousands of Christians nationwide have been praying for those close to them who don't have Christ in their lives and will invite them into their homes to share a similar video in November.

But Jim Bzoskie isn't waiting until then. Bzoskie has been pastor of Cornerstone Bible Church in Hastings, Minn., for about 38 years. He has served as prison chaplain for nearly as long and is no stranger at Dakota County Jail. Eight other churches partner with Cornerstone to minister to one of the largest jail populations in the metro area. The jail holds about 280 men, Bzoskie said, then there's the Juvenile Services Center.

Everyone who is arrested in the area goes to the jail first, so Bzoskie has seen all kinds of people come through the doors. They might be booked for drugs, driving while impaired or domestic abuse. They are all ages and come from all walks of life.

But their brokenness also makes many of them open to the gospel—to a message of forgiveness, hope and transformation. The longtime chaplain recently got involved in My Hope and has seen inmates' lives transformed with the help of captivating My Hope videos like "Defining Moments" that clearly present the Gospel. The chaplain showed "Defining Moments" in June.

"Over 100 inmates saw the video in one sitting," Bzoskie said. At the end, "dozens of guys came forward to give their lives to Christ. ... They're hurting. They're crying. ... The emotions are really raw and really tender toward the things they've done."

The chaplain showed it again during a Bible study on Sept. 28. Ninety men attended and 20 decided to surrender their lives to Christ.

"It was powerful to see others that have lived through trials and tribulations ... and chose God," an inmate named Nicholas said. "They chose Jesus rather than going further down the wrong path."

"Defining Moments" tells how a singer, an illusionist and a NFL player all hit rock bottom, then experienced Christ's redeeming love and got a second chance at life.

The story of NFL player David Tyree in particular resonated with many of the inmates. One inmate, Kenneth, said, "I related to the football player a lot."

Tyree's testimony isn't the only one that affected them, though.

Many inmates are in their 40s and 50s, and as singer Lacey Sturm told her story in the video—how she contemplated suicide as a teenager—it “pulled on their ‘dad heartstrings,’” the chaplain said. The story of illusionist Jim Munroe also spoke to some of the viewers as he talked about a near-death experience and how one person saved his life.

Each story struck a chord with inmates who have also faced hopelessness.

In a jail setting, Bzoskie said, “how easy is it to talk about how we’ve failed?”

He shares with inmates that everyone sins – even people outside the jail walls – and said as the Holy Spirit convicts inmates of the seriousness of their sin, and the consequences, he can explain how Jesus bridges the gap between us and God. He has seen inmates ask Christ into their lives and change from the inside out.

“You can see the hope in their lives,” he said. “You can feel the change. The staff and the officers see it. They comment on it.”

The inmates might come to the jail as criminals, he said, but he has seen many of them leave Bible study as free men. He sees Christ shining through their lives even as they are behind bars. He has watched them restore relationships with their wives and reunite with their families.

Bzoskie remembers making the same commitment nearly 40 years ago. It was April 20, 1974, when he and his wife decided to follow Christ. The next day, they attended a Billy Graham event at Iowa State University and went forward at the end to declare their salvation. Bzoskie still has his decision card, marking his spiritual rebirth. He calls it his birth certificate.

Ever since then, Bzoskie has been involved in BGEA—whether

participating in Minneapolis Crusades or using BGEA materials in his prison work.

“They’re solid,” he said. “They’re easy to use. ... They get them into the Word of God right away.”

He says the same thing about My Hope materials. Plus, they’re affordable.

“I deal with hundreds of prisoners,” he said. “For me to go buy any kind of Bible studies in quantity, it becomes a financial nightmare.”

But with My Hope, all the materials he needs are free and even available online. Most importantly, they present the person of Jesus Christ.

One inmate, Derick, said “Defining Moments” made him realize “how special Jesus Christ is, motivated me to be a better person, showed me I really am loved.”

Fellow inmate Darius said he “found Him in the worst place (jail) and made Him my Savior.”

Besides “Defining Moments,” Bzoskie showed another My Hope program called “Lose to Gain.” That program tells how a comedian, a pro skateboarder and a young professional had everything they wanted, but it wasn’t enough. Only Christ could fulfill their lives.

Of course, it isn’t all about the videos. The chaplains also offer weekly church services and Bible studies twice a week.

“Our goal is to get them moving and growing in their relationship with Jesus Christ,” Bzoskie said.

The chaplains plan to train new believers who want to share their faith with other inmates in their units. Outside the jail, My Hope refers to these people as Matthews – Christians who, like Matthew in the Bible, share their faith with others

in their own homes. Some inmates never come to Bible studies or church services, but by chaplains training new believers around them, those inmates can still be exposed to the gospel.

The Dakota County Juvenile Services Center doesn't have the same electronic capabilities the jail does, so youth there have not yet seen a My Hope video. But Bzoskie is working on it.

Other states are also taking My Hope into jails and prisons. If you're interested in receiving My Hope materials to use with inmates, call .