

# Chaplain's Innovative Approach To Bible Spurs Inmates' Interest

Pleased with Steve Walker's success with state prisoners, Alabama now requires chaplains to teach Bible-based programs. A judge's court order in Alabama last year sent county inmates to state prisons causing widespread overcrowding at state correctional facilities. One state prison chaplain, however, saw the dilemma as an opportunity to harvest a larger field of souls with a unique discipleship program that already had seen hundreds come to Christ since 2000.

Alabama currently has 18 prisons and 13 work-release centers, most of which are dealing with overcrowding problems as a result of the state court directive. Chaplain Steve Walker, chaplaincy coordinator for the state of Alabama, understands the implications of this all too well. As chaplain at the Bullock County Correctional Facility in Union Springs, Ala., he and his wife, Esther, a volunteer chaplain, supervise the Protestant Bible Institute College Program, which teaches prisoners biblical principles for everyday life.

The program began in 1990 as a pilot and is considered a great success, so much so that it now has become policy for all Alabama chaplains to have Bible-based programs as part of their religious initiatives.

Enrollment in the program is at an all-time high of 175-200 inmates, and 40 more inmates are on a waiting list. The skills taught in the program range from learning how to live like Christian members of a family to budgeting money, and include

biblical principles that address substance abuse, using a 12-step program that looks to Jesus Christ as the higher power, and helping prisoners learn to deal with sexual problems.

Revival has erupted in the prison as a result of the program's success, Walker said. In October 2000, during a crusade lasting 4-1/2 days, 469 inmates made decisions of faith. Walker estimates there have been at least 1,000 decisions during the last three to four years.

"I believe this is the visitation of God. I believe it's here," Walker said.

The chaplain describes prisons as holding units where the inmates develop a "survival" mentality.

"They've got to survive, so they either run to something else that's wicked, or they get with one of the religious groups, and prison is a marketplace for religions," he said. "We do reach some people with our an hour of Sunday school is not going to be enough to change lives."

Walker said successful rehabilitation is also dependent on aftercare, and local churches and ministries can participate in this critical stage to help released prisoners transition back into society.

"I've had 56 men leave, and only six have come back. We've got a high success rate, and they're all graduates of our school and program," he said.

Walker said corrections has become one of the fastest growing

industries in the country. He attributes the increasing number of prisoners to an epidemic of sin in America. Drugs, pornography and alcoholism are among the problems that he believes send many people to prison.

“You count all of these things, and I think you are using the Christian definition of sin, and sin is the reason people commit crimes,” he said.

Recent estimates suggest that there may be between 5 million and 7 million people in the United States under some type of judicial supervision, whether prison, parole, probation or work release.

“When those people mess up, they come back to prison,” he said.

Because prison overcrowding is a national problem and not isolated to Alabama, Walker believes inmate ministries already in place need to become more intense if they are to be effective.

“We need your prayers out there,” Walker said. “We have got to have the materials, volunteers and intercessory prayer. If we’re going to change people’s lives, this is what we’re going to have to do.”

**J. Gary Walker**