

Ballpark preacher for the Fort Worth Cats_92203

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FORT WORTH—Some might say life threw Jim Hollars a curve ball when he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. But the church starter-turned-baseball chaplain just saw it as a change-up and adjusted his swing.

The West Texas native served 30 years as a minister of music and youth before he was called on to fill in temporarily as pastor of a storefront church in Ohio. "I started preaching and never looked back," he said.



Chaplain Jim Hollars talks with catcher Brian Moon prior to a Fort Worth Cats game at LaGrave Field. (David Clanton/Standard Photo)

In 1994, Hollars started a church in Toledo and before long also started working part-time as a chaplain with a minor league baseball team, the Mudhens. But after a couple of years, he was diagnosed with Parkinson's.

Eventually, the degenerative neurological ailment left his voice weak and raspy, and he no longer was physically able to stand for a half-hour at a time in the pulpit preaching.

Hollars and his wife, Shirley, retired and moved to Fort Worth to be near their grandchildren. But they were convinced God still had a place of ministry for them.

Today, they serve as Mission Service Corps volunteers and ministers of missions at Point of Hope Church, a mission of Lamar Baptist Church of Arlington. And Hollars expands his ministry beyond Point of Hope Church by working as a chaplain with the Fort Worth Cats, a minor league team in the independent Central Baseball League.

"I don't belong with these professional athletes. I'm too old and too crippled," Hollars said. "I tremble and can't speak plainly sometimes. But God uses my weaknesses."

The Baptist General Convention of Texas recognizes Point of Hope as a

missional “key church,” meaning it intentionally seeks to allow missions to permeate every aspect of church life. Texas Baptists provide support for the key church and Mission Service Corps programs through their gifts to the Mary Hill Davis Offering for Texas missions.

Until Point of Hope Church moved its worship services from Sunday morning to Saturday night, Hollars sometimes had to leave church early to head to LaGrave Field for pre-game chapel services. But he slipped out of the services with Pastor Darren Whitehead's blessings.

“At Point of Hope, it's all about building God's kingdom, not building our own kingdom,” Hollars said. “Serving with Baseball Chapel really is an extension of my ministry at the church. The congregation prays for us, and they're very supportive.”

During the 96-game regular minor league season, Hollars typically holds three chapel services before each home game—one for the Cats, one for their opponents and one for the umpires.

Jim and Shirley Hollars hold a lunchtime Bible study for the Cats each week at their home in Southwest Fort Worth. A typical Bible study begins not only with prayer requests like health for ill family members and hope for spiritually lost friends, but also healing for injured players and jobs for the off-season.

In part, the players are drawn to the Bible study by the desire for Christian fellowship and a hunger to learn more about Scripture. But Hollars acknowledges they're also drawn by hunger for his wife's cooking.

“The home-cooked meal is a big attraction,” he said. “These guys eat at McDonald's a lot.”



Hollars leads a home Bible study attended by Fort Worth Cats players Brian Moon, Jim Essian and Chris Cumberland.

Baseball Chapel is an international ministry recognized by Major League Baseball and the various minor league systems.

"A lot of guys on the teams will tell you they got saved in Baseball Chapel," Hollars said.

Brian Moon, catcher with the Fort Worth Cats, came to faith in Christ through the ministry of Baseball Chapel in 1999 when he was playing in Wisconsin.

"Every Sunday, he'd come into the locker room for chapel, so one day I went out to lunch with the chapel guy," Moon recalled. "I got saved that afternoon."

Jim Essian Jr., center fielder for the Cats and a regular participant in Hollars' Bible studies, has a strong family connection to Baseball Chapel. "My dad got saved in Baseball Chapel back in 1978, when he was with the Oakland A's."

Almost without exception, players express appreciation for the presence of a chaplain, Hollars said. But that doesn't mean every player attends services.

“A lot of guys are scared to try it. They know they’re missing something, but they’re afraid they would have to change their lifestyles. It’s definitely not easy to walk the walk,” said Chris Cumberland, closing pitcher for the Cats, who has played baseball professionally 11 years.

Cumberland understands the baseball lifestyle, having grown up around the game. His father, John Cumberland, was in the major leagues from 1968 to 1974, pitching for the New York Yankees, San Francisco Giants and California Angels, and now is pitching coach for the Kansas City Royals.

“The baseball life is not like anything else,” he said. “You’re constantly going from city to city. You’re out late at night. It makes you grow up fast.”

Ministering in that kind of environment has provided a sense of missionary fulfillment for Hollars, and it has given him the opportunity to minister not only to players and officials, but also groundskeepers, ushers and vendors.

“I’ve been amazed at how well-received Baseball Chapel is and how we’re able to go into a totally secular environment and talk about Jesus so openly,” Hollars said. “It’s an opportunity to practice being the presence of Christ in a secular environment, every time I enter the ballpark.”

Chaplain Jim Hollars talks with catcher Brian Moon prior to a Fort Worth Cats game at LaGrave Field. Below, Hollars leads a home Bible study attended by Fort Worth Cats players Brian Moon, Jim Essian and Chris Cumberland.

David Clanton/Standard

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