

Fear turns to fulfillment for prison ministry volunteer discipleship teacher_12604

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By John Hall

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GATESVILLE-Fear ran through David Barron's body when he first entered a prison in 1978 to help with the data entry systems. Now the clanging of prison gates closing behind him regularly welcomes him to his mission field.

Having overcome the initial fear he experienced when working for IBM in prisons during the late 1970s, Barron, a member of Trinity Baptist Church in Gatesville, started leading inmate Bible studies for two hours a week in the Hughes Unit.

The 73-year-old has led classes since 1995, covering various biblical books and other material such as "Experiencing God."

"It was something at first I didn't want to do, but now I look forward to it," said Barron, a regional director of spiritual development with Texas Baptist Men.

Many of the men who come to the studies are Christians who have lost their way, largely due to alcohol and drug issues, he explained. He seeks to help them get their lives in order by giving them a firm biblical foundation and teaching them to witness.

Barron said he is encouraged to see the men spreading their faith because he and one prison chaplain cannot reach all 3,000 inmates in the unit. Although other religious groups come to the prison, the convicts can have the most powerful impact, he believes.

"I said: 'I'm not going to be here every day. You are,'" Barron said.

Not only are the men ministering to fellow inmates, they have touched Barron's life as well. The group prayed for him and encouraged him after the recent death of his son. Their support helped him bond with the group spiritually and emotionally.

"They're a great bunch of guys, and I know some of them are in there for some pretty bad stuff," he commented.

The most exciting part of Barron's work is seeing the men connect with a local church after they are released, he said. He fondly recalls running into a former member of one of the studies during the 2001 Baptist General Convention of Texas annual session in Dallas. He embraced the man, who now runs a halfway house for recently released convicts.

In the last couple of years, Barron has expanded his ministry as his church enlarged its outreach to the Gatesville prison. Once a week, Barron serves correctional officers hot chocolate and coffee from a trailer that rotates among the parking lots of the different units.

Barron's pastor, Tim Crosby, has noticed an increased openness from correctional officers as a result of the church's ministry inside and outside the prison. Some officers have come to worship, while others have thanked

members for their outreach.

Whether dealing with officers or inmates, Barron prays God alters lifestyles through the congregation's efforts.

"The prison ministry is thrilling to work in," he said. "You do see lives changed."

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