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MEMPHIS, Tenn. (RNS)—Nineteen-year-old Edacious recently came to New Salem Missionary Baptist Church, to surrender—and not just to Jesus.

There was a warrant for her arrest on marijuana charges, and she had come to church to turn herself in. Hundreds of others with outstanding warrants also showed up.

Frank Ray,
pastor of
New Salem
Missionary
Baptist
church in
Memphis,
recently
allowed
court
officials to
use his
church as a
place where
fugitives
could turn
themselves
in to law
enforcement.
Ray said
many
fugitives feel
the church is
safer than
the sheriff's
office.

Called Fugitive Safe Surrender, the program is coordinated by the U.S. Justice Department and is the brainchild of Pete Elliott, a member of the U.S. Marshals Service.

"People have asked me why a church, and it's simple," Elliott said.

“Churches give hope.”

“I’ve been in law enforcement going on 25 years now,” he said. “I feel the most comfort in my life when I’m at church. I feel the most peace when I’m at church. And I felt that individuals in the community that were wanted were basically no different than me.”

A week before the surrenders, Memphis religious leaders and law enforcement officials announced that for four days, fugitives—people wanted by the law for whatever reason—would be allowed to turn themselves in at a well-known church. The church was staffed with prosecutors, judges and court personnel.

“And most importantly, volunteers from New Salem (were on hand) ... to greet people and to welcome them as they come in, so that they come in to an environment that is nonhostile,” said U.S. Attorney David Kustoff.

Shelby County Sheriff Mark Luttrell said the program would be able to clear up several warrants, “which will make them law-abiding citizens and return them to the community in a productive way and will certainly assist us in law enforcement in clearing up this huge backlog.”

Officials estimate there are 37,000 outstanding warrants in Memphis alone. About 1,500 turned themselves in during the four days of the Memphis event—far more than the sheriff’s department could have rounded up over a similar period.

Fugitive Safe Surrender began in Cleveland two years ago. Memphis is the sixth city to try it, and in each case the program has exceeded expectations. At least five other cities hope to offer the surrender program.

But the program has sparked controversy. A plan to introduce it in New Jersey was blocked because of concerns it would violate church-state separation.

Felony suspects who showed up at New Salem were taken into custody, but most of those turning themselves in were wanted for minor offenses.

A surprising number said that until the event at church, they felt they had no place to surrender. They were wary of the police and sheriff's department and were afraid of going to jail. Many fugitives view the Memphis Justice Building—201 Poplar Street—as a place where people get lost in the criminal justice maze.

"201 Poplar is a threat to most of them," said Frank Ray, pastor of New Salem. "And the reason is that you can go there, and what they did here (at church) in 30 minutes or an hour, two hours, it may take three days. That you can go there and surrender yourself—it may be three days before they'll even hear your case, and you're going to be stuck in prison for that many days and some people have even got lost in the system."

Offenders who turned themselves in had outstanding warrants for traffic offenses or probation violation, and many said they were doing it to start over—"to get my life back," as one person put it. Jobs, food stamps, education often are out of reach for people with outstanding warrants.

New Salem was chosen as the surrender point because its pastor is active in the community and fugitives apparently trust the church more than they trust the police.

"There's been somewhat of a division between the justice system and the community, especially the religious community," Ray said. Of the fugitives who surrendered at the church, many said they came in precisely because it was a church.

After the warrants are verified, those surrendering were fingerprinted and photographed. Most cases were heard on the same day, and the outcomes may be more lenient than they would be at 201 Poplar.

“We try to fashion a settlement that will let these people get this over with today and go home with their cases disposed of,” said Mary Thorsberg, assistant district attorney.

Elliott’s idea for the program sprang from an incident in Cleveland when a police officer, a friend of his, was shot and killed making a routine traffic stop. The officer didn’t know the driver was wanted under a fugitive warrant.

“There’s always the possibility of a violent confrontation, for whatever reason, even on the smallest warrants,” said David Jolley of the U.S. Marshals Service. “It may be that the person just didn’t want to go to jail that day, or they had something in their possession they didn’t want the officer to find.”

Elliot observed, “For every fugitive that peacefully and voluntarily surrenders, that’s one less dangerous confrontation our law enforcement officers have to have on the streets.”

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