

Woman released from life sentence part of prison church

August 15, 2018

ALICEVILLE, Ala. (BP)—Sometimes help comes from unexpected places. Gary Farley can attest to that.

Six years ago, Farley knew he needed somebody to lend a hand in planting a church at Federal Correctional Institution, the new women's prison in Aliceville, Ala., but he didn't know exactly who.

He had thought he might recruit some volunteers from Pickens Baptist Association, where he served as director of missions at the time. He found a pianist, a worship leader and some other folks willing to go in and hold a regular church service.

‘Folks on the inside ... do church really well’

But as the first women began arriving at the prison camp in late 2012, the warden told Farley another plan might be more effective.

“He told me that church works better if you use people from the prison rather than carrying church in from the outside,” Farley said. “He told me there would be folks on the inside who can do church really well.”

So Farley decided to take his advice—a move that would change his life and his ministry.

“I began to try to get the women involved in planning the services,” he said. “They were able to provide quality music, and we drew on their talents to

start the church.”



Alice Marie Johnson

One of the musicians said she had some friends who were being transferred in from Tallahassee who could help out, too. One was Alice Marie Johnson, a grandmother who had served more than 20 years of a life sentence for a first-time, nonviolent drug offense.

“Alice was really good at putting together dramas,” Farley said. “I found her to be just a charming lady and a very committed Christian. She wrote and directed a passion play and put it on several times. It was just amazing.”

Johnson had a knack for pulling together the different cultures and gifts inside the prison camp, Farley said. She gathered some Hispanic women to sing “Via Dolorosa,” and she put together a variety of music and even included humor, he said.

Over the years, with Johnson and the other women working alongside Farley and other chaplains and volunteers, the congregations that met within the walls of the prison became the biggest church in the county. More than 500 or 600 inmates gather for worship each week, some in the camp, some in the main prison and some in a Spanish-language service.

Witness to miracles

That's a miracle, Farley said. And they've seen more miracles happen. One of them was Johnson's recent release.

In 2016, Johnson published a piece on her plight. Her family and job life had been good for years, but in 1989 she and her husband divorced, and not too long after, her youngest son was killed in a motorcycle accident.

Under the weight of that burden, Johnson made some poor decisions, she wrote.

"I want this part to be clear: I acknowledge that I have done wrong. I made the biggest mistake of my life to make ends meet and got involved with people selling drugs," she confessed.

During that time, Johnson was a telephone mule, passing messages between the distributors and sellers.

"I am only one of thousands of first-time, nonviolent offenders given mandatory and lengthy prison terms after committing crimes under financial distress," she wrote. "In 1996, I was given a death sentence without sitting on death row. I was convicted as a first-time, nonviolent drug offender to life behind bars in federal prison."

Since she was convicted, the laws governing her crime have changed, and if she were convicted today, her life might look very different, she wrote.

In 2016, President Barack Obama granted clemency to 231 people—many of them in jail on drug-related charges—but Johnson wasn't among them.

‘Hard to keep the hope of freedom alive’

It was hard to stay hopeful, she wrote.

“For 20 years, I have been incarcerated, and I won’t lie—it’s hard to keep the hope of freedom alive for that long. But my faith in God has carried me this far.”

Farley and Johnson prayed often over the past few years for her release and were disappointed when it didn’t happen in 2016.

“But she felt like God’s timing was perfect and that things would come out all right,” Farley said.

Then in 2017, Johnson’s case caught the attention of reality TV star Kim Kardashian West, who secured an attorney on Johnson’s behalf. She pleaded Johnson’s case in a meeting with President Trump, and he commuted her sentence. In early June, Johnson got a call from West, who told her she could go home.

“God is always on time,” Farley said. “If she had been released earlier, she might not have the platform she has now. She understands that, and that God’s plans are always smarter than ours.”

It’s possible more people came to faith because of Johnson’s continued presence at the correctional facility, Farley said.

“One of the neat things that Alice did, she involved non-Christians in some of the passion plays she put on, and some of them were saved,” Farley said.