

Huntsville church engages ex-offenders in prison ministry

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Covenant Fellowship in Huntsville seeks to engage ex-offenders in ministry to the incarcerated population—for the mutual benefit of both.

“Men on the inside are more likely to listen to guys who have worn the same white uniforms and walked in the same state-issued shoes they wear,” said Scotty McKinley, pastor of discipleship and missions at Covenant Fellowship.

Since Covenant Fellowship launched in 2008, the church has ministered to individuals inside Texas Department of Criminal Justice facilities—both inmates and correctional officers—through multiple avenues.

Involving ex-offenders in ministry to currently incarcerated men benefits those who have reentered the free world and those who are preparing to do so, Eddie Harmon said.

‘Not just a Sunday thing’



Eddie Harmon is lead elder at Covenant Fellowship in Huntsville and a certified volunteer chaplain assistant at the Wynne Unit.

Harmon, lead elder at Covenant Fellowship, became involved in prison ministry 14 years ago when he accompanied [Pastor David Valentine](#) inside a correctional unit.

"I had never been inside a prison before," Harmon said, but added he soon realized, "This is where I'm supposed to be."

Within the course of a few weeks, he saw how God was changing inmates' lives in dramatic ways.

"They 'get' Jesus more than those in the outside world do. They understand he can do for them what they can't do for themselves," Harmon said. "It's not just a Sunday thing for them."

Harmon became a certified volunteer chaplain assistant with the TDCJ. He serves at least one day a week—often more—in the John M. Wynne Unit.

'No playing games with them'

He considers preparing inmates for life in the outside world as a key part of his ministry, along with staying in close touch with men after their release.

"I stay in contact with guys all over the state," he said.

For those who live within driving distance of the Wynne Unit, Harmon seeks to involve them in ministry to current inmates. He recognizes they

have an instant rapport and built-in credibility with the men inside prison.

"I'm just an old, retired white man who lived a pretty good life. I don't have much to offer them," Harmon said.

Incarcerated offenders are more likely to listen to the Christian testimony of someone who has been in prison and who successfully transitioned to life in the free world, he said. Some of the ex-offenders served lengthy sentences at the Wynne Unit, and men on the inside knew them—before and after God changed their lives.

"There's no playing games with them. They can't hide anything. They've seen it all," Harmon said. "It helps guys on the inside realize there's life after prison."

Returning to prison as a volunteer also benefits the ex-offenders, he added.

"It helps them stay strong," Harmon said. "They realize it's such a privilege getting out, and now they can do some good, helping people inside."

Celebrate Recovery—inside and out

Recognizing many offenders and ex-offenders have a history of alcohol and drug abuse, Covenant Fellowship seeks to provide recovery groups—both for men inside prison and for anyone in the community.



Scotty McKinley, pastor of discipleship and missions at Covenant Fellowship in Huntsville

McKinley oversees both a Celebrate Recovery 12-step group at his church and a Celebrate Recovery Inside group in the Wynne Unit. He recognizes the value of the program from firsthand experience.

“A decade ago, I realized I had a problem with alcohol I could not fix myself and needed help,” McKinley said. “Celebrate Recovery was life-changing for me.”

Saddleback Church in Southern California launched [Celebrate Recovery](#) in 1991 as a Christ-centered program for people dealing with addictive, compulsive and dysfunctional behaviors.

The [Celebrate Recovery Inside](#) group at the Wynne Unit grew out of McKinley’s encounter with an inmate. Like Harmon, McKinley was accompanying Valentine on visit to the Wynne Unit.

An inmate spotted the Celebrate Recovery logo on McKinley’s shirt and asked if a group was starting at the unit. McKinley asked him to pray about it and agreed to do the same.

The next time McKinley saw the inmate, the man asked how soon a group would start. McKinley said he would need to talk to the chaplain to see if it could be scheduled.

“There’s a slot open on Thursdays,” said the inmate, who worked as a clerk in the chaplain’s office.

Celebrate Recovery Inside began at the Wynne Unit in 2016. Up to 60 inmates can participate at one time. Currently, a group of 20 is working

through the Celebrate Recovery curriculum each Wednesday.

"We try as much as possible to model what a [Celebrate Recovery] group looks like on the outside," McKinley said.

Need for a supportive community

Incarcerated men learn the steps toward recovery, and they discover the value of being part of a supportive small group, he noted.



Ex-offenders work alongside other volunteers from Covenant Fellowship in Huntsville at a One Hope community block party and Celebrate Recovery Serve Day for Kairos and Hospitality House. (Photo courtesy of Scotty McKinley)

The biggest barriers standing between ex-offenders and successful reentry into the free world are the lack of jobs, housing, transportation and community. Celebrate Recovery addresses that latter need, McKinley said.

"When men get out, they not only tend to go back to the same geographical area, but also tend to pick up their old friends," he said. As a result, they

often find themselves getting “back into the same stuff” that led to their previous arrest and imprisonment.

Once inmates have a release date, McKinley seeks to connect them in advance with a “family of believers” who can provide the supportive community they need.

“If they don’t already have a church home, we try to find them a church that has a Celebrate Recovery group” who will welcome them, he said.

As much as possible, McKinley seeks to encourage ex-offenders not only to be ministered to by a supportive church family—or at least a supportive Celebrate Recovery group within a larger congregation—but also to minister to men inside prison.

“Current inmates listen to guys who have been where they are now,” he said. “It’s an encouragement to them to say, ‘If they can do it, so can I.’”