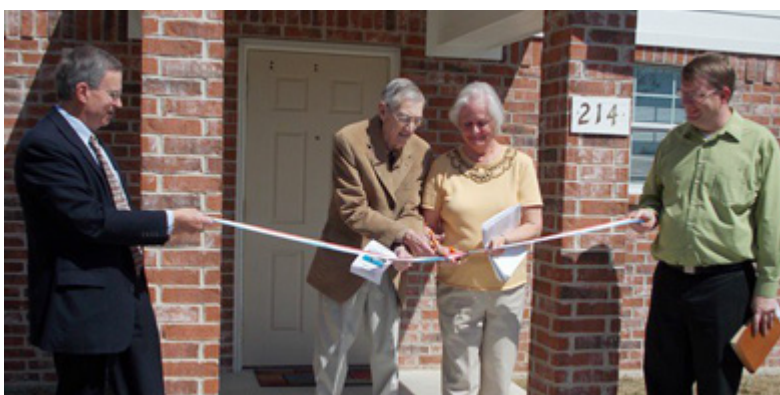


Ministry offers Haven of Hope to inmates' families

April 30, 2013

NEW BOSTON—Ministry to inmates' families took a leap when Haven of Hope, an overnight facility for visitors, opened this year.

The home-style [Haven of Hope](#) replaces Samaritan House, an apartment facility [First Baptist Church in New Boston](#) opened in 2003 to serve visitors to the Barry Telford Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The church established a nonprofit organization, Telford Prison Ministries, to handle its administration.



At the dedication of the Haven of Hope facility April 14th, cutting the ribbon are Edna Walker, hospitality director and Jerry O'Rear, building superintendent. Holding the ribbon are Telford Prison Ministries President Ken Cox (left) and Pastor Rick Ivey of Tapp Methodist Church in New Boston. However, upkeep costs for the aging facility presented a constant problem. Ken Cox, former pastor at First Baptist and current president of Telford Prison Ministries, termed it a "money pit."

Tool for ministry

Hospitality Director Edna Walker had a larger issue with the apartments as

a tool for ministry.

“There wasn’t a lot of opportunity to know (visiting families) and develop a relationship with them. I’ve always wanted a facility where we could develop relationships, do meals and have devotions—just love on them the whole time they’re here instead of saying, ‘Here’s your key, and we’ll see you next time,’” she said.

Walker began serving in prison ministry in 1995 as a volunteer at the [Hospitality House in Huntsville](#) and committed to full-time vocational prison ministry in 1999.

“Everybody told me I was crazy and (said) not to quit my job, because I’d never find a ministry position,” she recalled.

When she called the Hospitality House in Huntsville to announce her decision, she learned the ministry assistant there had news of her own—she just had become engaged to be married. A few months later, Walker assumed her post.

When First Baptist Church in New Boston began its prison ministry in 2003, Cox asked Walker to come back and help run it. She was ready.

“The Hospitality House hosts the families for the executions. I went through 91 executions. I don’t think I could have gone through another one. It takes a tremendous toll on you emotionally to deal with a family whose loved one is perfectly healthy, and then they’re executed,” she said.

“So, when Brother Ken called me, I first said, ‘I’ll be there tomorrow.’ But then we both decided I needed to pray about it.”

Prayer confirmed the move for her, and she returned to New Boston—first to work with Samaritan House, and, more recently, to welcome visiting families to the newly opened Haven of Hope.

Supported by Mary Hill Davis Offering

The ministry receives ongoing support from First Baptist Church and will receive monthly assistance from the [Mary Hill Davis Offering for Texas Missions](#). Individual donors also provide support.

Haven of Hope offers a more communal setting than Samaritan House did, with a group kitchen and sitting area, plus six bedrooms with two queen-size beds each.

Sunday school classes, along with the fifth- and sixth-grade Girls in Action group at First Baptist Church, provided bedroom decorations for three rooms. Tapp United Methodist Church and individuals took care of the remaining rooms.

Part of the charm of having the rooms decorated by the different groups is that they seem more like a home and less like an institution, creating an atmosphere conducive to relationship-building, Walker said.

Walker noted she often saw families minister to one another when she was in Huntsville.

Support group

“It was a support group for them, because they would eat meals together. A lot of the ladies who came by themselves would develop car pools and travel together. They are a lot more willing to talk about their situation to people who are in the same boat as they are. A lot of times these families don’t even talk to the people in their church about their loved one being in prison,” Walker explained.

“I have developed a love for the families and an awareness of what they go through. Nobody really knows what they go through until they have experienced it.”

In 2007, Walker's son went to prison.

"They would tell me, 'We appreciate that you care about us, but you really don't understand.' And they were right, until I went through that trial and heard the things that were said about my son that I will never get over. It will always be right here," she said as she patted her heart.

"You just can't explain what they go through. It's worse than a death, I think. And a lot of the families here at Telford are of young guys who are 18, 19, 20 years old, and they have 99-year sentences. I was fortunate in that my son is already out and doing well. Some of these people say, 'I'm going to be dead before he comes home.' It's just a very difficult situation."

Haven of Hope provides overnight lodging at no cost to visiting families, but they are required to make reservations.

"The people come from such a great distance, they have to be guaranteed they have a spot," she explained.

Supporting families

Most families arrive Friday nights. Haven of Hope volunteers prepare breakfast on Saturday for the families prior to their four-hour visitation times. A devotional is scheduled after the evening meal. Since visitation only is allowed on weekends, most families stay over on Saturday nights so they can visit again on Sunday before returning home.

With the long travel times and the expenses, as well as the trauma of seeing someone dearly loved incarcerated, Haven of Hope is just what its name implies, Cox said.

"For most of these families, this is the only positive they are going to experience during their entire weekend."