

# Sharing hope behind walls of Huntsville prison

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HUNTSVILLE—Gilbert Herrera, who served two prison terms in the Huntsville Unit in the 1970s, returned there recently. But this time, he brought a Christian message of hope to about 250 men who packed a brick chapel in the middle of the prison compound.

“I came here because I didn’t want to forget those I left behind,” he said. “I don’t want to get so wrapped up in my freedom that I forget those here.”

Evangelist Gilbert Herrera testifies about how Christ saved him from a life of drugs and crime after serving two prison sentences in the 1970s

Herrera, a Lubbock-based evangelist, preached at the chapel service as part of [City Reach](#), a series of evangelistic efforts to share the gospel with people in the greater-Houston area. CityReach precedes the Baptist General Convention of Texas annual meeting, Nov. 16-17 in Houston.

Following a time of worship led by a 22-member choir and six-person band composed of inmates, Herrera passionately testified about Christ saving him more than 30 years ago from his drug abuse and leadership in the Brown Berets. He told the men Christ could radically change the direction of their lives.

“There is no reason why God can’t change these men into a good men, good fathers and good sons,” Herrera said.

Herrera believes Christ redeemed his life so he can show others who are in his former situation that they, too, can be changed by God’s grace.

“If I can get a son back home with his mother and child, then it is worth everything,” he said. “They think that nothing will ever happen in their lives. They come looking for hope and see an ex-convict who’s been out for 30 years and who didn’t come back with a sentence but with a Bible.”

At the end of the service, 24 men knelt at the front of the chapel, seeking prayer from leaders and accepting the hope Christ offers.



Chaplain Larry Hart prays for a man during an altar call at a Huntsville Unit chapel service.

Chaplain Larry Hart, who has directed the chaplaincy program at the Huntsville Unit six years, said prison services like the one led by Herrera offer a place for the offenders to leave their past behind.

“There is an abandonment that happens in a prison service,” Hart said. “Christ brings hope, and the prison is no different in the sense that if Christ is present, it brings hope and love.”

Each month, about 50 volunteers visit the Huntsville Unit to help with the chaplaincy program and minister to the 2,000 offenders housed there. Nearly 20,000 offenders are housed in five prisons in the Huntsville area.

“Volunteers are the greatest natural resource a chaplaincy program has,” Hart said. “The program couldn’t run near as well without volunteers. They are essential.”

As volunteers participate in the program and minister to the offenders, they too will walk away changed by what God has done, Hart said.

“You will leave with ‘Wow!’ on your heart, mind and lips because God is in

this prison,” Hart said. “And the more Christian people who get involved, the more people will be changed.”

The men who accepted Christ during the event or while they are in prison will have an opportunity to grow in their faith as the chaplaincy program offers Bible study classes, weekly chapel services and discussion programs like Authentic Manhood that teaches men how to live as godly leaders.

Both Hart and Herrera believe prison ministry is at the heart of the biblical mandate to share Christ’s love with everyone—including offenders.

“Prison ministry is important because the Lord died for everybody,” said Herrera. “The last thing the Lord did before dying on the cross was to save a criminal. We have thousands and thousands of inmates and prisoners in our cities, and the Lord is the only solution.”

To this point, City Reach Houston has resulted in 108 professions of faith in Christ and 104 renewed commitments to follow Christ. The gospel also has been shared with many more people in the area.

For more information on City Reach and to learn about future prison ministry endeavors, visit [www.cityreachhouston.org](http://www.cityreachhouston.org).