

# Waco women offer Light in the Gap to female ex-offenders

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WACO—Every weekday, a van from Gatesville arrives at the Waco bus station to deliver women released from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.



Every weekday, a van from Gatesville arrives at the Waco bus station to deliver women released from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. (Photo / Ken Camp)

And every weekday, women from Waco-area churches greet the ex-offenders, offering them a warm welcome, homemade cookies, handcrafted tote bags filled with helpful items and a prayer of blessing.

“These are their first moments of freedom,” said Donna Burney from [First Woodway Baptist Church](#) in Waco. “We want to be the light of Christ, standing in the gap between the time of their release and that point when they begin life outside of prison.”

# Protection from predators

After women in the state's correctional system are processed in Gatesville for re-entry back into society, the state transports them to Waco, where they catch a bus to another destination. The women who arrive at the station need help making connections with family—and avoiding connections with the wrong kind of people.

Since the Light in the Gap ministry began two years ago, Burney noted, operators of the Waco bus station have seen a marked decrease in the number of drug dealers, pimps and other predators waiting to take advantage of the female ex-offenders.

Word also has spread inside the prisons, both among correctional officers and inmates awaiting release.

“Some of the guards tell the women, ‘When you get to the bus station, don’t talk to anybody but the church ladies,’” said Burney, co-director of Light in the Gap with Brenda Lewis.



Donna Burney, co-director of Light in the Gap, unloads tote bags filled with snacks and “goodies” for recently released female ex-

offenders. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Since Light in the Gap launched, the “church ladies” have served more than 4,000 women, praying with released ex-offenders at the bus station and giving them a decorative tote bag filled with snacks, toiletries, helpful information for re-entry into society and a copy of the Gospel of John.

Some of the women immediately begin removing their belongings from prison-issued orange mesh bags—the kind grocers use for onions and citrus—and that mark them as ex-offenders. With relief, they transfer their personal items into their new shoulder bags.

Nearly all of the women welcome the opportunity to talk to the volunteers—called “connectors”—and pray with them.

“It’s not small talk,” Burney said. “They are worried about family. They are concerned for sobriety. They are scared about what is coming next.”

When the ex-offenders arrive at the bus station, some appear confused. Others adopt a swagger, trying to mask their fear. Their expressions change when they see the Light in the Gap connectors.

“The looks on their faces are priceless when they realize somebody cares for them,” said Nelda Emmert, a volunteer from First Woodway Baptist Church. “They are overwhelmed there’s somebody who cares enough to have a bag of goodies for them.”

## **Response to a growing need**



Light in the Gap provides tote bags filled with snacks, toiletries and “goodies”—as well as fresh-baked homemade cookies—to recently released female ex-offenders. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Light in the Gap responds to a growing need. From 1980 to 2016, the number of incarcerated women in the TDCJ increased 908 percent, compared to a 396 percent increase in the male prison population, according to a Texas Criminal Justice Coalition [report](#).

In addition to the connectors who serve at the bus station, other Light in the Gap volunteers work on a variety of related teams.

- A baking team makes cookies, senior adults write Scripture verses on cards, and additional volunteers fill plastic bags with cookies and affix the cards to them.
- A sewing team makes tote bags. Acteens—the missions organization for teenaged girls—at First Woodway Baptist Church also have painted canvas bags.
- A prayer team receives the requests gathered by connectors at the bus station and prays for those concerns and the women who expressed them.

- A communications team makes phone calls and sends emails to ensure everyone involved in the ministry stays informed.

## Advocating for change

Volunteers also become advocates. Until recently, women in the TDCJ typically received men's clothes to replace their prison uniforms immediately prior to release. The ill-fitting clothes and prison-issued shoes offered one more telltale sign marking the women as ex-offenders.

"It was degrading," Burney said. "It gave the women the idea that they didn't matter."

Burney contacted the Texas Baptist [Christian Life Commission](#), asking what steps could be taken in Austin to correct the problem.

Kathryn Freeman, CLC public policy director, prayed with Burney. Then she set up an appointment for them to meet with a state legislator who serves on the committee that provides oversight for the appropriate agency.

The day they went to visit the lawmaker, he had just been in a meeting with officials from that agency. After Burney described the problem, he called the officials back into his office and asked her to tell them the same thing. They assured her they would take immediate action.

The next time Burney went to the Waco bus station, the women who arrived from Gatesville were wearing women's clothing.

Freeman told the story to Texas Baptists who attended a recent [Advocacy Day](#) event in Austin. She encouraged them to let elected officials know about issues they discover as they minister in their communities that could be affected positively through changes in public policy.

“Not every problem is solved that quickly,” she said. “But never underestimate the power of prayer.”

## **‘The Lord doesn’t need observers**

Pam Poole, special projects coordinator for Woman’s Missionary Union of Texas, learned about Light in the Gap from Becky Ellison, the Waco-based state strategist for Christian Women’s Job Corps, a WMU ministry.



Pam Poole (left), special projects coordinator for Woman’s Missionary Union of Texas, waits with Donna Burney (center) and Nelda Emmert, volunteers from First Woodway Baptist Church, for a van from TDCJ to arrive at the Waco bus station. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Poole, a member of First Baptist Church in Midlothian, traveled to the Waco bus station one Monday morning to learn more.

“I came to observe,” she said.

However, an unusually large group of women arrived, and she was pressed into service as a coordinator.

One of the women she encountered—who was about the age of Poole's daughter—was taking a bus from Waco to Fort Worth, and then she was supposed to catch another bus to Amarillo.

When the young woman learned she could anticipate an eight-hour wait at the Fort Worth station before the connecting bus to Amarillo arrived, she looked panic-stricken, Poole said.

“She asked, ‘Who’s going to be with me?’” Poole recalled. “That’s when God told me, ‘I don’t need observers.’ Somebody has to be there at the next stop for these women.”

Poole volunteers every Monday in Waco with Light in the Gap, driving about 100 miles roundtrip from her home.

Through Texas WMU, she also is in the early stages of developing a network of connectors around the state to meet recently released female ex-offenders at local bus stations, after they leave Central Texas. A pilot project will launch soon in Fort Worth before expanding to other sites.

“The Lord doesn’t need observers,” Poole said. “God needs people who are willing to step up and be his light in the gap.”