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Prison Ministry Focuses
Toward Inmate's Families

By Dan Martin

AVON PARK, Fla. (BP)--The couple had been crying when they came into the chapel at Avon Park Correctional Institute.

He looked older than his 55; she than her 53. He was wearing the drab uniform of an inmate; she was dressed in an outfit that had seen better days.

"They had a look of horror on their faces," said Flo Wall. "Their eyes were red...you could tell they had been weeping. They had that look that said, 'This is not real...this can't be happening...'"

The man had been a successful investment broker, active in politics and social life. They had a big, nice home and plenty of money. Then, their empire crumbled. He was convicted of stock fraud and sent to prison. They lost home, car, money, friends and way of life.

"She couldn't even get welfare," Mrs. Wall said. "She was living across town...in a housing project, impoverished."

At that moment--when the couple walked into the chapel--Flo Wall's current ministry began, a ministry to the wives and children of inmates at Avon Park Correctional Institute, a minimum security prison in the lakes region of central Florida.

Life is very hard for the families of inmates. Many have severe economic problems, coupled with disruption and disgrace. Often they have nowhere to turn, not even to the church and Christians.

"It has been very difficult," says the wife of a former policeman serving time in APCI. "People acted like I had done the things he was sent to prison for...children made comments about my husband to my children." In many cases, the wives of prisoners are ostracized.

Rommie Loudd, a former All-America football player serving time in the prison, said: "Mrs. Wall's ministry is very important. When a man comes to prison he is going to be taken care of. He'll get three meals a day...clean clothes and a place to sleep.

"But the family...the women and children. They're the ones hurt the most. Lots of them are thrown out of churches because the man is in prison. People disassociate themselves with them."

Mrs. Wall's husband, Warren, is senior chaplain at APCI, approved by the Chaplain's Commission of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

He notes: "Many times our churches are not very compassionate toward the prison ministry. We have been wanting to get our own people involved, but they seem to have the attitude, 'We don't want to do too much for these people. They asked for it. They are coddled too much as it is.' Often the families are touched by the same stigma."

On that Sunday morning three years ago, Flo Wall's ministry to families of prisoners began. She had been a minister's wife for more than 30 years, but on that day, her heart went out to the distraught woman.

In the past three years, her ministry has spread to touch the lives of many women and children, people whose lives have been shattered. The ministry is built around "fellowship, worship, Bible study, personal counseling, providing a place to stay" and reaching out in love.

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"We are trying to help people understand that if they will commit themselves to God, and give him a chance in their lives, everything will be okay," she says.

"God knows they are here...what has happened. He could have prevented what happened, but he allowed it and is still in control. We want to help those who are not saved to receive Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord, and after that to learn to receive love from him, and strength, and to trust him to make sense out of this awful mess."

Avon Park Correctional Institute, on an Air Force bombing range, is unusual in that families of inmates are allowed to worship in the chapel twice each Sunday. Families may visit each weekend, on Saturday or Sunday.

Until recently, families could visit on both Saturday and Sunday, but that policy has changed. When the Walls' ministry began, they opened their home to feed and house the families over the weekend.

The home, a converted barracks building, is small, but on one recent Saturday night 25 persons slept wherever there was space. Wall set up a tent camper to help house some of the overflow.

With the changing of the policy, the space crunch eased, but many of the families still come on Saturday afternoon--driving long distances to get there--so they can visit Sunday morning. Saturday now is a time of fellowship and food, Bible study, prayer time and ministering.

Recently, the Walls obtained a large home near the prison which has two cottages and "lots of space." They are currently remodeling and refurbishing the "villa" to make it both their home and central place for their ministry.

"The ministry has just grown from putting another chicken in the pot to the Spanish Villa on Lake Letta," Mrs. Wall says. "It has been so beautiful...the Lord has added and provided. It has been the simplest thing; just taking one step at a time with the Lord."

The effect of the ministry is shown in the lives of the wives:

--"It is beautiful," says one. "I find peace and love here. When Mrs. Wall talks about Jesus, she really ministers to us. Sometimes we hate to go home."

--"This has been the greatest year and a half of my life. I have never had such peace and joy."

One of the inmates says he feels he is "in seminary" and another comments he believes he is "sitting at Jesus' feet, learning." Still a third, whose family disclaims him, says he is "part of the biggest and best, God's family."

An important scripture reference to the ministry is Second Corinthians 4:8-10; "We are hedged in on every side--troubled and oppressed in every way; but not cramped or crushed; we suffer embarrassments and are perplexed and unable to find a way out, but not driven to despair; we are pursued, but not deserted--to stand alone; we are struck down to the ground, but never struck out and destroyed; always carrying about in the body the liability and exposure to the same putting to death that the Lord Jesus suffered, so that the resurrection life of Jesus also may be shown forth by and in our bodies." (Amplified version)

"We read that all the time," Mrs. Wall said. "This is not the defeat of their lives. We have to be reduced to the simple belief that he (Jesus) loves us, that he is in charge and has grace for everything in our lives."

Brazilian Pilot Project
Yields Significant Results

Baptist Press
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NITEROI, Brazil (BP)--Six thousand conversions to Christ and significant increases in home and church Bible study enrollment have resulted from a two-year pilot program of urban evangelism in the "twin" coastal cities of Niteroi and Sao Goncalo, population, 1.2 million.

Harold E. Renfrow, Southern Baptist missionary and key promoter for the two-year project, reported the total figures on the pilot project of major city evangelization, which served as a testing ground for this Southern Baptist project in Brazil. Two-year totals for the number of rededications to Christ and attendance are still incomplete.

Niteroi's Rocha Baptist Church, with 180 members, began 73 home Bible study groups as the project got under way. In 18 months, the church's membership increased to 445. Another 100-member church, which started 30 Bible studies, added 200 members in 18 months. Some 3,000 people accepted Christ during the 18-month period in local church services.

Major city evangelization campaigns, designed to saturate major urban areas with the gospel, run for either two or three years. Local Baptists play prominent roles, with auxiliary help coming primarily from the U.S. Other projects are under way in Hong Kong and Korea, with plans being completed for Argentina and Mexico. The Brazil project is the first one completed.

After all results are tabulated and the project is evaluated, the Niteroi-Sao Goncalo pilot program for major city evangelization will be put into action in other Brazilian cities as a part of a program to double the number of Baptists by 1982, the Baptist Centennial celebration.

Because 78 percent of Brazil's population is under age 25, Baptists aimed one emphasis at Brazilian youth, said Renfrow. Baptist young people distributed a quarter million tracts and invitations to each area school, college and university.

Seventy-one lay persons and pastors from the U.S. took active parts in the Niteroi campaign. Their participation involved music, testimonies and pamphlet distribution everywhere from public parks to landing docks, said Joseph B. Underwood, the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board's evangelism and church development consultant.

"A North American was witnessing to a Brazilian," related Underwood. "Another Brazilian came along and asked, 'What about me? Can I also trust the Lord?' They prayed. In a surprise move, the second young man tore up the pornographic magazine he was carrying and stamped on his cigarettes."

Dozens of other encounters between Brazilians and North Americans occurred during the campaign. As George Cox of Bethany Place Baptist Church, Richmond, Va., witnessed to a young man, he was uncertain if the youth fully understood the implications. "Yes," the youth said. "I do trust the Lord and if you'll let me go, I'll get my mother and bring her to church."

A two-week evangelistic effort in the cities wrapped up the two-year project. Co-sponsored by Baptists from both cities and the Foreign Mission Board, the effort involved 43 pastors and laypersons from Illinois, Alabama, Tennessee, New Mexico and Florida and 29 others from Texas.

During the first week, the featured evangelist was Nilson do Amaral Fanini, president of the Brazilian Baptist Convention. The second week, visiting North Americans divided into teams and participated in simultaneous meetings in the cities' 48 Baptist churches, said William H. Ichter, Southern Baptist missionary press representative there.

Attendance during the two-week effort totaled more than 130,000, with close to 3,000 conversions and about 5,200 rededications.

"Nothing of equal importance has happened in this area in its entire history," reflected Renfrow. "We found a receptiveness among all classes of people like nowhere else in the world." He attributed this to prayer and other preparation in the two years prior to the pilot campaign.

During the preparation, each church surveyed its area and developed a program for its future. Extensive evaluation also was made of the church's growth or lack of it.

Witness Involvement Now (WIN) schools trained lay persons and a visitation program was developed. The Brazilian Woman's Missionary Union had a significant part in the spiritual preparation as well as in development of a sense of community responsibility, said Renfrow. WMU members organized Bible study groups and led out in counseling.

Renfrow said a school of evangelism enrolled more than 150 and awarded 132 diplomas. He also credited the use of local media as an aid in the success.

Expressing gratitude to God for what was accomplished, Renfrow added, "We're now in the most important part--follow-up. We feel this will determine the success or failure of all this effort."

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(BP) Photo to be mailed to state Baptist newspapers.

Extensive Food Service
Planned In SBC Center

Baptist Press
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ATLANTA (BP)--Hungry Baptists won't have to go far to eat during next month's annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in Atlanta.

More than 4,000 of them will be able to grab light or heavy lunches, American style or international cuisine, right in the Georgia World Congress Center, where the SBC meets June 13-15.

Tim Hedquist, SBC financial planning secretary and general chairman of annual meeting arrangements, said "It will be one of the finest food service arrangements we have ever had for an annual SBC meeting."

Hedquist said about 2,000 persons per hour can be fed a "good buffet lunch" on the same floor level as the SBC meeting hall.

There is also a cafeteria on the third level, refreshment stands on the second level, portable booths on all three levels and a festive picnic-table-with-umbrellas food plaza outside the World Congress Center where international dishes will be available.

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Special Areas Reserved
For Church Buses At SBC

Baptist Press
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ATLANTA (BP)--Church buses, expected to "convoy" to Atlanta by the dozens, will have special parking areas reserved during Southern Baptist Convention sessions, June 13-15.

SBC transportation officials in Atlanta have reserved an entire street, Mangum Street, for church buses only. Mangum Street can accommodate 80 buses. Techwood Drive will be used if needed for additional parking.

Mangum Street is south of the Georgia World Congress Center, just a short walk from the main entrance to the SBC hall. Techwood Drive is just around the corner.

Tom Duvall of Atlanta, chairman of the SBC transportation committee, said church buses should enter the World Congress Center on International Boulevard, near the Marietta Street intersection. Signs and police will direct church bus drivers to their reserved parking area.

Duvall stressed that passengers must stay on their church buses until the buses are parked. They will walk back to their buses when leaving the SBC.

"This is the only way bus riders will be able to know how to get back to their own bus," he emphasized. "We will enforce this requirement rigidly. We know bus drivers and passengers will cooperate."

Duvall said church buses are also welcome to park in the Atlanta Civic Center parking lot and let passengers ride the shuttle bus from there to the World Congress Center.

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