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## Faith & Values

THE SOUTHERN ILLINOISAN • SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2014

# A call to prison ministry

For more than 20 years, these Goreville men have met the needs of the incarcerated.

**BY NICK MARIANO THE SOUTHERN**

A group of men in Goreville were called to prison years ago.

They've been returning since and growing in numbers in the process, beginning about 20 years ago.

"I just felt like it was something that needed to be done. That's what we are called to do," said Bill Hancock, a member of the First Pentecostal Church of Goreville.

"When you reach the men inside these prisons, they are going to take what they learned back into their communities as a witness to God," he added.

Hancock, a survivor of an Aug. 24 car and motorcycle wreck near Pulley's Mill that left him needing several surgeries, is fairly new to the ministry.

He, along with others from the group of seven men, including church Pastor R.G. Null, are former prison employees, who have witnessed both the absence of hope but also its re-emergence as inmates embraced the Lord, Hancock said.

"It has changed their lives, I mean totally changed their lives," said Hancock's brother, David, who has participated in the ministry since its start.

“They have the choice. They don’t have to come to the services, but they do. Once they do, they see it and feel it and they know there is something to it,” he added.

The ministry began around 1988 at Vienna Correctional Center and, after a short break, resumed there four years ago. Services – from readings to rejoicing in music – started at the U.S. Penitentiary in Marion about a year later.

Leon Jones, who retired from the penitentiary in 2008 after working there as a correctional officer for 20 years, said another officer encouraged him to bring the ministry to the Marion facility, saying it was needed. Judging by the popularity of the services, he was right.

“They had a few services over the course of those 20 years, but you could hardly drag an inmate to service. Maybe one or two would come,” Jones said. “We’ve gone from seven at the very first service to, a few weeks later, we were having 50 at a service,” Jones said.

The group used to go to Vienna twice a month. But the chapel of some 200 seats filled quickly and forced Corrections to curtail the offerings to once a month, the men say.

Now the group provides services once a month at the prison, often still to a standing-room-only chapel. They continue to visit the penitentiary twice a month, where within the last few years, 14 inmates have been baptized – in a laundry basket – something never before performed.

Several former inmates are now ministers, themselves, the group says. One time, a fight between inmates broke out during a service. Several other inmates shielded the Goreville men to protect them.

“We have three preachers who are licensed with our organization,” said Null, who also recalled another former inmate who ministers his own church and has been married for 14 years. Null has also married a couple in one of the prisons.

Salvador A. “Tony” Godinez, director of the Illinois Department of Corrections, said he is thankful for the ministries.

“The appreciation the (DOC) has for those working in our prison ministries cannot be overstated,” he said. “Every inmate can decide if there is a place for religion in his or her life, and we admire those who work to meet the needs of those making that choice. The positive impact on offenders is clear, and it is part of the mosaic which helps them have incident-free incarceration in Illinois.”

Others in the Goreville group are Jeff Maze, Tex Perry and Mike Webb.