

STREAMS

of Life

Volume 13, Summer 2018

Prison Workers' Conference *by Esther Zeiset*

A conference hosted by Support for Prison Ministries on March 3, 2018 at Hinkletown Mennonite Church, near Ephrata, Pennsylvania featured speakers and panel discussions for persons interested in prison and aftercare ministries.

Jim Newsom, a nationally recognized evangelist and Bible teacher who is familiar with both sides of prison bars, spoke at the opening session. From the time he was 14 years old Jim began a lifestyle that eventually led to the murder of another man. Hardened as he was by sin and crime, Jim was nonetheless overwhelmed with guilt and remorse and decided to take his own life by drug overdose. The very night he chose to do so, a girl showed up at a party claiming that God had sent her to speak with Jim. She carried an "industrial sized Bible, a smile that wouldn't quit, and a finger ten feet long," Jim said with characteristic dry humor.

"You don't have to die for the pain to stop," she said. "Someone already died for you."

Astounded that she was perceptive of his plan, Jim broke down and prayed the sinner's prayer. The next morning he surrendered to the authorities, pleaded guilty to second degree murder and was given the maximum sentence of 30 years in prison.

Jim determined that his focus would not be to get out of prison, but on how to get the stuff out of his life that put him there. Ephesians 3:20 proved to be a key verse: "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us." Jim purposed to allow Christ's power to work within him so that God could work for him. After serving eight years of his sentence he was released from prison in 1980 and pursued God's call which led him to prison ministry.

Throughout SFPM's conference Jim employed his warm and engaging speaking style to share more of his testimony and of his prison ministry experiences.

A morning panel discussion, moderated by Del Burkholder, explored the work of a prison chaplain. Panelists Katie Harnish (SFPM), James Smoker (We Care), and Kevin Dobbs (PA DOC) spoke with humor and candor about the difficulties of being manipulated by some inmates and of opposition or skepticism, sometimes from corrections staff, in taking the gospel to men and women deemed unworthy. Counteracting such negativity demands a strong connection with Christ, the chaplains acknowledged, and a firm conviction that Jesus extends hope and a way out of destructive lifestyles. They grew introspective when asked how a chaplain's success is measured, agreeing

that success has more to do with their own lives – demonstrating integrity, developing godly character, and being obedient and faithful to God's call – and less to do with parading inmates' "success stories".

After a lunch break that provided opportunity for informal networking Nelson Zeiset spoke about effective volunteering. He presented three reasons for doing so: 1) because the U.S. prison population grew over 700 percent between 1973 and 2009 and currently more than two million people are incarcerated, 2) because inmates are precious and



L-R: Katie Harnish (SFPM), James Smoker (We Care, AL), and Kevin Dobbs (PA DOC).

valuable people, and 3) because Jesus mandated the Great Commission to all people. As a former prison chaplain who spent 33 years in fulltime prison ministry, Nelson has encountered volunteers who seek personal validation or chase after what they perceive to be an exciting ministry. In fact, he cautioned, the work can be discouraging and ministry is effective only when one has a clear sense of God's call. A good volunteer, he said, needs to know about prison security ("You're not walking into a church setting but into a volatile and potentially violent atmosphere."); about evangelism ("Inmates need to know how much you care before they care

how much you know."); and about prison culture ("Manipulation and deceit are rampant," and "Fear and anger are predominant emotions that skew how an inmate views life.")

The conference's ending session was a panel discussion addressing the challenges of aftercare ministry in which Ryan Newswanger (Jubilee), Quin Pastin, (New Persons), and Lanny Millette (Potter's House) participated. These ministries provide transitional housing, Bible teaching, and practical helps to equip ex-inmates to live Christian lives and become contributing citizens. Each of the panelists readily shared stories of both failures and successes in their aftercare programs. Lanny's story of a resident who took several other men with him on a downward spiral was offset by the report that four of the current staff are former inmates. Ryan pointed to long-term success and genuine transformation in a former heroin addict who, 15 or more years later, is a pastor. Quin said that beyond living independently, the greatest joy is when a person allows the seed of the gospel to grow in their life to the extent that Jesus affects their lifestyle. Jim Newsom, moderating the panel, wrapped up the discussion and the focus of the conference with a fitting statement: "The work of a fool is the miracle of the moment but the manufacturing of a saint is the work of a lifetime."

Whatever Happened to Paul?



Del Burkholder

As I write this I understand two Christian movies are in the top ten grossing movies of the week and one is about the life of the Apostle Paul. It is good to hear this important Bible writer is getting some needed attention. Many Christians want to teach the Gospels but dislike the writings of Paul. In the early days after I rededicated my life to Christ a mentor told me how he grew up in a denomination that never taught from the epistles of Paul but only

from the Gospels. He said they disregarded the writings of Paul because they deemed him too stringent for the way they wanted to live their lives. I am all for studying the Gospels and the life of Jesus but I believe we also need to study the teachings and writings of Paul even though he may write some things that prick us a bit with discomfort. In fact, we use the problems and situations Paul encountered with the early church to shape our Church doctrine today.

The Lack of Respect for Biblical Authority

We live in a day where Christianity is at a crossroad when it comes to biblical authority. We have a hodgepodge of opinions of what Christianity is or should be. I see much of man's opinions but few want to deal with the holiness of God. A fancy word used in Bible college and seminary is hermeneutics and it basically means "a method of proper interpretation of the Bible", or in my terms, "how the Bible flows together." This includes, among other doctrines in the Bible, the place of Israel in the Old Testament, sin, sacrifice and the Blood, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and an expected life of holiness (sanctification). Christians today have left these tenets of faith in the

unopened parts of the Bible to exalt another or a false Jesus who is not the Christ of the Bible. (Galatians 1:8,9)

Whatever Happened to Sin?

We live in a world where there is not much talk of sin. Romans 3:10 says, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." This points to the fact that we are all sinners - no exceptions. Sin comes from the Greek Word hamartia and means simply "to miss the mark" or "to miss the target". Our target is to do the righteous will of God all the time. So none can say they have not sinned. In my coming book "Essentials of Biblical Christianity" I tell of how a preacher illustrated every person sinning in this way. The preacher would tell another person that the two of them were to pick up a stone and throw it to the nearest city. The city might be twenty miles away and the other person could possibly throw it farther than the preacher, but neither would be able to hit the city twenty miles away. No man could throw a stone that far. Some would get closer than others, but all would fall short of the target. So it is with sin. Some can live better lives than others, but none can come close to being perfect in the sight of God outside of accepting Jesus Christ.

My concern in writing this is that Christianity today is offering a false form of grace that does not acknowledge sin and it is possibly leading people on the road to hell. If anyone preaches a form of cheap grace in this manner, we need to be like the Bereans in Acts 17:11 who searched the scriptures to see whether it was truth. We know as 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." We can be thankful that as Christians we no longer practice sin constantly as 1 John 3:8 describes but neither can we ignore that Satan still desires to trap us in sin. So, as instructed in 1 Peter 5:8, be alert!

Onward and Upward in Christ,
Del Burkholder

GUEST CHAPLAIN

Tyrone & Vernell Hightower

Tyrone and Vernell are two very special chaplains for us at Lancaster County Prison who do an excellent job. I have asked them to share about their overall prison work with us in this newsletter. - Del Burkholder

Greetings!

Our names are Tyrone and Vernell Hightower, founders of Transforming Power Ministry. We are also chaplains at Lancaster County Prison and have been doing prison ministry for a total of 20 years between three prisons: Baltimore City Prison, Towson County Prison, and currently at Lancaster County Prison. We also minister at the Water Street Mission and Potter's House in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

We have been called by God to minister hope, deliverance, and healing to the lost through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We minister to those who are bound by drug addictions and those who are incarcerated behind prison walls.

Vernell and I count it an honor and a privilege to be able to speak the Word of God into the lives of men and women. We are both a witness to the transforming power of God. We do one-on-one visits with the men and women to encourage them to hold onto God and to submit their hearts to the lordship of Jesus Christ. We are honored to be "seed planters" in the vineyard of our Lord! Our message is, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he

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Tyrone & Vernell Hightowner

Throw-away Trophies



Esther Zeiset

With the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, French diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps became a celebrity. His ability to oversee the huge project was not so much in engineering but in masterminding the political and financial backing and in providing the technical support necessary for joining the Mediterranean and Red Seas. Ten years later, flush with internationally acclaimed success, de Lesseps attempted the construction of the Panama Canal. Like the Suez Canal, the project was to be constructed at sea level, avoiding locks. But the terrain was different. Panama had the Culebra Mountains and the raging Chagres River. It had tropical rains that created recurrent landslides and dangerous working conditions. But Ferdinand de Lesseps, the man who set out to make the Panama Canal the crown of his career, refused the advice of engineers who spoke of the necessity of lakes, dams, and locks. He scoffed at the dire prediction that there would not be enough trees in the jungles to make crosses for his worker's graves. After eight years of construction, an estimated 22,000 workers had died as a result of accidents, malaria, and yellow fever and almost 235 million dollars had been spent. But de Lesseps had little to show for it. His bankrupt company collapsed in scandal and his arrogant ride on the coattails of earlier success ended when a French court found him guilty of mismanagement.

Our culture defines success in terms of wealth and power. An acquaintance tells me that his son "has done well for himself", describing how he retired early from a lucrative career, lives in a spacious house in an elite neighborhood, drives luxury cars, and travels the globe. But his family relationships are mangled. He has no time for church, and little regard for spirituality.

At our daughter's graduation from Bible college several years ago, Wess Stafford, former CEO of Compassion International, cautioned students against building a fancy foundation beneath a pup tent. "For the Christian," he said, "failure is being successful at those things that don't really matter." Ouch. That statement requires some sorting out. It demands that I contemplate the nature of success, as well as that of failure.

Jesus addressed success this way: "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matt.6:20-21)

I heard of a man who went out jogging one morning, suffered a heart attack, and died on the sidewalk a few blocks from his home. When the police went by his house to tell his wife of the tragedy she said, "Oh...this is the day that my husband planned for all his life!" The man had an eternal perspective in view and weighed all of life through that lens.

And so must I.

I need to consider those things that will matter 100 years from now.

In high school, our daughters were on a Bible quiz team that walked away from the final tournament with a shiny trophy. Friends and family crowded around them to high-five and snap photos. The team, each of their faces beaming with pride in their hard-won victory, could scarcely contain their happiness. For a few weeks, the trophy circulated among the team members. And then came the day that they began to ask what to do with it. Each turned imploring eyes on the other. Who would polish it and treat it with the reverence it demanded? Who had an empty shelf on which to display it?

I suppose that's how trophies end up at yard sales, a 25-cent sticker affixed to its tarnished base. But who wants to buy a trophy? So, the life cycle of a trophy is a pathetic existence. One day it is the cat's meow. The next, it's but kitty litter.

The Bible quizzers soon realized what they'd already been told - that the real trophy was the scriptures they'd committed to memory. That other trophy just got in the way and lost its luster even before dust piled on it.

Prison and aftercare workers at SFPM's March conference were asked how they define success on their jobs (see the feature article on page 1). Their answer was summed up in one word. Faithfulness. And so it should be for all Christ followers. Faithfulness to plant and water. Faithfulness in using our resources - our time, our finances, our abilities - for that which will matter 100 years from now.

Anything less than that is failure.

- Esther Zeiset

Tyrone & Vernell Hightower *continued from page 2*

hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn." (Isaiah 61:1-2).

Also, our message is God is love and God has not forsaken you; God is about restoring and rebuilding lives. "The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." (John 10:10). "And ye shall know the truth; and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32). "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." (John 8:36).

To God be all of the glory! Amen.

In Christ,

Tyrone & Vernell Hightower

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Support For Prison Ministries (DBA Streams of Life) is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization. SFPM receives no county, state, or federal funding. It relies totally on the gifts of churches, individuals and businesses for its support. All funds received are used for the expenses of the ministry operations.

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Due to prison policy, we are not allowed to send to anyone else but the requesting inmate.

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