

MAGNOLIA MINDS: A Christmas not taken for granted

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The youth group and various volunteers of Wyatte Church packed 1,000 Christmas bags for the incarcerated of Mississippi on Dec. 14. Over 20,000 items were donated from local churches, like toothpaste, deodorant, socks, and candy. These practical gifts are often taken for granted in the free world but are not easily accessible to the incarcerated.

Organizing this packing party began with Jo Ann Hancock. Through social media, she connects with church communities who jump in to serve any need, and she frequently coordinates donation deliveries from churches to prisons.

God called Hancock to prison ministry, despite her traumatic experience in two armed robberies. "The day I first walked into the prison," said Hancock, "my heart was softened toward the incarcerated." Ever since then, she has witnessed incredible transformations in the lives of captives who have been set free from the shackles of sin.

In the Christmas season, Hancock personally delivers these gifts to the incarcerated, which opens doors for her to have conversations about the gift of God's Son.

One inmate Hancock met was an elderly man with intellectual disabilities worsened by childhood abuse. On Christmas one year, she gave him a Lifesaver candy, which he had never tasted. Someone else donated \$20 for him to use in the prison commissary, and he purchased a pair of headphones, another commodity he had never owned before. As Hancock passed his cell one day, she found him dancing to the music. "How often do we take these simple blessings for granted?" she thought.

"I also help sign the men up to get Angel Tree gifts for their children," Hancock explained. "You can't believe how exciting that is to them. We make sure to tell them that a person in the free world buys the gifts and takes them, but we tell the children that their daddies wanted them to have these gifts. I signed all the men up this fall and they've been coming to me to say, 'The caregiver of my kids got a phone call from Angel Tree! They're going to deliver a gift!' And it just makes them so happy."

Hancock delivered another Christmas joy to the prison when she brought an old tree from her house. "It's just a six-foot tall, cheap little tree," she said. "A couple of the men helped me set it up after church. I had some red plastic balls and we put them on the tree, and we put a black and white bow on top. I never have thought that tree is very pretty, but it looked kind of pretty in there. Some of the older men were going, 'Wow! Look at that!' And I couldn't get over how amazed they were by it. They went up to it, touched it, and looked all over it, and some of them said, 'I haven't seen a real Christmas tree in 40 years.'

"And that made me cry. It wasn't a real tree, but to them it was a real tree. In prison, they make their own Christmas trees out of potato chip bags, cardboard, and paper, and theirs are way more beautiful than anything I could ever do."

This Christmas, pray for the incarcerated of Mississippi who have not yet encountered the redemptive power of Jesus our Lord. Pray that they will receive the gift of God's Son, Who frees us from our sins. Pray for our imprisoned brothers and sisters who have accepted Jesus as Savior to evangelize and minister to their fellow prisoners. Pray for Jo Ann Hancock, men and women like her, and our churches who serve in prison ministry to have the boldness to share the Gospel out of love. Pray for you and your own family not to take the blessings of everyday life, freedom in Christ, and this Christmas season for granted.