

Vision clinics open ministry doors to 1,300 inmates in Mississippi

Timothy M. Powell

Sharing the gospel recently at two Mississippi prisons, Missouri Baptists also provided vision clinics and eyeglasses.

A joint effort of two Missouri-based nonprofits, Vision 3:16 and Focus On Missions – both with roots in local Baptist churches – the ministries often collaborate.

Steve Smith, founder of Focus On Missions and a member of First Church Arnold, said his goal is to use vision ministry as a platform for sharing the gospel. Clinics have gotten his teams behind locked doors and into lost communities more than 30 times in 2023.

While in the Mississippi prisons, Smith said volunteers not only provided eye exams and glasses, but freely shared essential resources for spiritual health.

“If they did not have a Bible, they had the opportunity to receive one,” he said. “They were prayed with and they were shared with. The gospel was clearly presented to every single prisoner that came through.”

The team, comprised of members from several Missouri Baptist Convention churches, spent a week ministering to inmates at Mississippi State Penitentiary (Parchman) and Delta Correctional Facility (Greenwood). During four days at Parchman and three at Greenwood, the team encountered some 1,350 inmates.

Smith noted the trip was unique because the team partnered with Christian inmates.

"Most of the volunteers that worked with the prisoners – the majority of them – were other prisoners," Smith explained. "They were all part of the Bible college there. They were all part of the ministry."

"But you know what? Almost every one of them will never walk out of that prison because of their sentencing."

'New mindset'

Though these prisoners were guilty of violent crimes – some serving multiple life sentences – the team was amazed and encouraged to see how their lives had been touched and transformed by Christ. Many had received formal Christian education through New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary's prison extension program.

"The people that were on the team – their hearts were really softened," Smith reflected. "And they had a whole new mindset of prison ministry."

Sheila Hendrickson, a member of First Church Arnold, had volunteered with Focus On Missions before, but never for prison ministry. She said she was hesitant when she first heard about the opportunity, repeatedly asking herself, "Do you really want to go to a prison?"

Hendrickson said that, as she worked alongside the Christian inmates, she was surprised by their joy and boldness.

"Those men were great," she recalled. "What really impressed me was that they were not afraid to share Christ. They were happy people in prison. It was not what I expected."

Smith plans to lead teams to do vision clinics in more prisons as doors open. The greatest obstacle to prison ministry, he noted, is a lack of volunteers willing enough to enter prisons and serve inmates.

As for Smith, he'll take every opportunity he can get.

“When the doors open, the opportunity is given, and red-carpet treatment is given to us to go – let me tell you, I don’t want to be guilty of not going because of my lack of faith.”

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