

A background image showing vertical prison bars, with a person's silhouette visible behind them on the left side.

JAILHOUSE RELIGION

By Keith Vinson | Director of Information Systems

My expectations were low. I had not known what to expect and had some trepidation about going. I grew up five miles from Holman Prison in south Alabama (think death row, electric chair, and maximum security) and we had a very negative view of “convicts.”

When I was 12 years old, one of them had escaped from prison, headed south through our community on the way to the railroad, and murdered and car-jacked our neighbors. One was less than a mile from my home. After that, whenever an escape did happen, it was “lock and load” for every household, which meant to shoot first and ask questions later. I never visited the prison nor wanted to go near it. After I went away to college, my mom started tutoring some of the inmates in English for the GED, which surprised me. I had not known that she had a tender spot for the inmates. So, when Dawson’s Sanctuary Choir was making plans to minister at the Donaldson Correctional Facility outside of Bessemer, Alabama, it would actually be my first visit to a maximum security prison.

We had been prepared to do whatever needed to be done to get into the prison and then out safely. But little can prepare you for the first time you enter those gates, surrender your ID, pull off your belt and shoes, and undergo a total body pat-down. You get a feeling of total helplessness, claustrophobia, and of submission to unfriendly authority. You imagine what it would be like to spend your entire life inside those walls with a fence of razor wire and high voltage. Walking through that last set of bars that separates the inmates from the guards felt like a kind of finality.

On the other side of those bars, I had expected to hear cat-calls and whistles from the prisoners, but the only sound I heard walking through the buildings was the nervous chatter of the ladies in the choir. A head-count was taken at each stop. Several of us examined the “Wall of Shame” in the lobby, where pictures were posted of visitors who had attempted to circumvent the rules and smuggle contraband into the prison. Down the hallway that constituted the boundary between “outside” and “truly inside,” there were framed posters on the wall with sayings about good character traits. I wondered if they were meant for the inmates or for the guards or for all who passed by them.

The chapel was about the size of the little church in which I grew up. There were some inmates already waiting when we arrived, but before we grabbed our music folders and moved to get into place on the risers, we were told that it would be good for some of the men to meet and mingle with the inmates, so some of us did for just a minute. The men were reserved at first, and so were we.

As we took our places the first group of inmates came in. I was surprised to see that our choir outnumbered the ones seated, but it was a pretty large group, around 40 or so. The chaplain welcomed us and we started our program. As we began to sing, the men began to raise their hands, and shout praises which really got us into more of a mood of praise rather than of fear. By the time we finished, they were clapping and shouting “Hallelujah!” and all had big smiles on their faces. Some of us shook their hands as they left.

After lunch, I came back for the afternoon session knowing what to expect, but something had changed. A new head guard was now in charge. He seemed to run a tighter ship than the morning shift, and the mood of the other guards had become more reserved and distant. I saw lots of frowns among the guards and got the impression that we may have been more of a nuisance than a blessing. The metal detectors and pat-down took longer, and I actually felt a little less “welcome” than before.

Thankfully, when we got into the chapel, we saw smiling faces. About a dozen of the guys from the morning session were serving as “ushers” and stood waiting along the back wall. We were earlier than expected, so several of us went to visit with them. I met three inmates during this time.

Roosevelt was a member of the praise team for their chapel worship, and he proudly showed me the back of his prison uniform. I asked him about his role on the praise team, and he said he was a singer. He wanted to know about our group, how long we had been together, what church we represented, and what denomination. He wore a large wooden cross around his neck and carried his Bible proudly. His smile was contagious, and he thanked me several times for coming to lead in worship. He said that he wished their praise team could harmonize like us, and that he enjoyed hearing tight harmonies. He was looking forward to his release this year.

An older inmate named Finest came over and told me that he appreciated me reciting Jeremiah 29: 11-13 as part of the morning service, and that he had

come back to receive another blessing. He told me how the Lord had cured him of cancer, and he really believed in that particular Scripture verse.

About that time a stern guard came in and told the inmates to find a seat. The room became tense and silent. That is when I met Chris. I asked Chris what was going on, and he assured me that it was just a routine head count that took place every day. Chris was a young guy, and he began telling me his story about how he had grown up in the church and that his own father had been a pastor. He said he had always loved music and grew up singing solos as a boy until middle school when he became more interested in sports than church. He said he regretted that he never learned to read music or sing with a choir group like ours. He mentioned that he had served in the military, and I asked him to tell me more about his past. He hinted that it took prison to get him back on the right track. He proudly showed me one of his tattoos with the name of his daughter and a picture of a child dancing in a stream of bubbles. His daughter is 18 now, but he remembers a visit with her when she was small and she had brought her bubble jar to play with that day. Chris, too, had a contagious smile and a gentle spirit. He also told me that Roosevelt was one of his best friends. I said I would pray for both of them now that I knew their names. Then it was time to sing and I had to go.

After the second worship service, we mingled with the men as they were leaving, and I had a chance to talk with one more inmate. He was an older man, with grizzled hair, covered in tattoos, and one remaining tooth in front when he smiled. He wanted me to know his story. He said he was in prison for murder, life without parole. He had been at Donaldson for 28 years and had never seen or heard a group like our choir before. He said that right after he was incarcerated, his son and daughter-in-law had been murdered in a home invasion. Then, a year later his wife was diagnosed with cancer and died after nine months. Needless to say, he had been an angry, bitter man. But someone witnessed to him at the prison, and after a while, he accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior. Occasionally, his mother and sister would visit him, and after he became a Christian he would try to tell them about Jesus. They were very resistant, chiding him about his “jailhouse religion,” not believing him or his salvation, and wanting nothing to do with Christ. He began to pray and ask God to give him the right

words to say. When they came for the next visit, he wasn't quite sure what he had even said, but suddenly his mother began crying and exclaimed, "I want to know Jesus as my Savior." His sister started crying and said she did, too. He knelt with them on the spot and they prayed to receive Christ as their Lord and Savior. They were all hugging each other when a woman who had been standing nearby walked over, and with tears in her eyes, said, "I want to accept Christ as my Savior, too!" While he prayed with that lady, another lady who had been standing a long way off came over and asked what was going on. By the time he finished explaining about God's saving grace, she said she also wanted to accept Christ as her Savior!

After telling me this story he looked me in the eye and said, "I know God has a plan for me, because if I had never gone to prison, I would not have become a Christian, and my mother and sister may very well have never become Christians either. I found out some time after my wife's death that she had been ministered to by a church and that she had made a profession of faith before she died. Because of this, if I had to spend 10,000 years in prison, it would still be worth it. I know this life is short and is nothing compared to eternity!"

All the inmates left and we packed up to go home.

"I know God has a plan for me, because if I had never gone to prison, I would not have become a Christian, and my mother and sister may very well have never become Christians either."

Heading out of the main gate, we collected our driver's licenses, and walked out to where we were really free again. I could not believe how much the whole experience had blessed me and renewed my faith in God's power. We had prayed before we went into the prison and some of the words from that prayer time still remain with me: "God has been here long before we got here, and will be here long after we leave. Thank you, God, for letting us participate in a small way in the work you are doing here." Truly, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. John 8:36



KEITH VINSON has been a member of Dawson since 1989, and a staff member since 2000. He is responsible for the computers, telephone system, and internal computer network at Dawson. He and his wife Miriam have two married daughters and one granddaughter.



4,000 
Candlelight Attendees

 900+
Songs & Hymns Sung

7,303 
DMA Music Lessons

 258
Sanctuary Choir Members

 
Collide Choir Kids 206

184 
Members in Student Choirs

  127 Bowties