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DECEMBER 2023

MENTORS FOLLOW CHURCH'S CALL TO SERVE



MENTORS HEED THE CHURCH'S CALL TO SERVE FROM THE HEART

CROSSROADS IS AN IDEAL WAY TO QUIETLY DISCIPLE NEW BELIEVERS

Antoinique Bowman and Breilyn Shemar discovered Crossroads separately through the encouragement of an outreach pastor at the church they attend, One Community Church, and they both immediately saw it as an opportunity to support new believers despite their demanding work schedules.

They each were drawn to prison ministry on a personal level because of family members who had faced incarceration. They were also compelled by their Dallas-Fort Worth church's motto: Where No One Walks Alone. The motto provides comfort to members and a challenge to walk alongside others on their faith journey.

"For us to have prison ministries and partner with Crossroads, we are really living up to that motto," Breilyn said. "If you are going to feel alone anywhere, it is probably going to be prison, so if they can know that people on the outside care about them, we are doing our job as a church."

In churches across the United States, the call to minister to those in need and nurture new believers resounds. While many opportunities exist to respond to this call, some find that Crossroads is the ideal outreach ministry for them.

A PASTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Prison ministry is often a lower-profile church outreach program. People often don't think of it because the people served are locked away. In addition, it can demand a significant amount of time to visit correctional facilities, and many people don't feel comfortable going inside a jail or prison. Crossroads provides a compelling alternative.

At Parkside Church in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, fifty-seven members have responded to the call and serve as Crossroads mentors.

"Obviously, the Bible speaks to caring for those in need, and as much as we possibly can, we want to point people to the hope we have in



Christ," said Matt Ross, associate pastor at Parkside. Matt added that Crossroads appeals to people who are quieter by nature.

"It's not immediate and in front of us like our children's and student ministries, but below the surface, it's a great outlet to serve," Matt said. "Knowing how to communicate biblical truths in simplistic ways is often more challenging than we realize. Mentors learn how to meet people where they are, and they are challenged not only to understand Scripture, but they are challenged in their ability to communicate it to those who may have little insight into the Bible. Mentors are growing in their ability to make Scripture accessible and to lead people to grow in their faith."

QUIET BUT MIGHTY DISCIPLES



David

David Shold, a member of Parkside Church, and his wife, Marty, have dedicated more than two decades to mentoring Crossroads students.

"At church the last two

to three years, there has been an emphasis on discipleship, especially in the evening services and small groups," David said. "We talk about how to help people move along on the timeline from little knowledge to spiritual growth and maturity. Mentors see that message as being deeply relevant."

Prior to volunteering with Crossroads, David had never seriously considered prison ministry because he "wasn't too keen" on the thought of going into jails or prisons.

"I'm not too good at public speaking, but I can write a letter," he said. "When we heard about Crossroads, we felt this is something we should be doing. We are called to make disciples, and for someone like me, Crossroads provides a way to be involved in doing that." He and Marty mentor students in all three levels of study offered by Crossroads, and they have developed strong discipleship skills over the years.

"It has enabled me to come up with a two- to three-sentence summary of just what the Gospel is," said David. "That enables me to write a short paragraph to tell students that God has a

"If you are going to feel alone anywhere, it is probably going to be prison, so if they can know that people on the outside care about them, we are doing our job as a church."

– Breilyn, a mentor in Texas



plan for us. Nothing we do can make it right, but God made things right with His Son, who makes eternal life available. I would have a hard time articulating that in a face-to-face conversation, but I can write it to my students."

Fellow Parkside Church member Luci Swearingen agrees that Crossroads suits her and others like her who enjoy one-on-one interactions and study. She sees a close alignment between her church's focus on biblical study and her service as a mentor.

"The core of Parkside is the Word of God and having committed followers of Jesus Christ," Luci said. "Crossroads satisfies both because we want to learn with our students, and we want to share. We can share in our letters that we are on par with our students because we are students of the Word of God, too, and we are sharing together."

Like any good study partner, Luci enjoys researching the questions her students ask.

"I am so blessed to have Bible commentaries on my shelf that I can use to help my brothers and sisters in prison. I can go online and find twenty Bible translations to find a translation that makes a passage a little clearer to the student. I have these resources, and they need to be used in the Kingdom of God," Luci said. "They are hungry for spiritual answers to the most important questions you can ask in your lifetime on the most important journey anyone can make, and I want to be there with them."

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STUDENT JOURNEYS FROM SUICIDE WATCH TO ADVANCED THEOLOGY DEGREE

Matthew slumped in his cell. He was on suicide watch, feeling the weight of everything his crime had cost him: family, possessions, career. He couldn't fathom how he had reached this low point. Suddenly, he heard God speaking to him: "Do I have your attention now?"

"And He did," Matthew said.

Matthew's journey to this place began with a difficult childhood. His family's public persona was vastly different from the reality of their private life.

"On the outside, we were a happy family with nothing wrong," he remembered. "Yet, behind closed doors, I had a workaholic, anger-driven, closet-drinking father, a mother who was bipolar, schizophrenic, depressed, and suicidal, and a sister who was a control freak, demanding, straight-A student. As for me, I was the pin cushion everyone poked at."

Matthew struggled in school and felt like he consistently failed his father. Their relationship was rocky and included physical and verbal abuse. Church was the rare safe place for Matthew. At church, "no one spoke of our problems or emotions and instead acted as if everything was amazing," he recalled.

A string of abuses and traumatic events throughout his adolescence spurred depression and addictions. At twenty, he enlisted in the Marines, keeping



his addictions secret for several years. His secrets were unveiled upon the discovery of his crime, and he was asked to report to the Naval Criminal Investigative Service.

"Instead of going, I began walking with all intentions of going to what is known as the Suicide Cliffs in Okinawa," Matthew said. "The next thing I know, I am in a cell on suicide watch with one pair of drawers and a suicide blanket, and the guard hands me a Bible."

After detoxing, Matthew decided to begin reading the Bible.

"I had been running for so long," he said. "Yet, as the psalmist writes, 'Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?' (Psalm 139:7). In that cell, when I read those words, I began to see how God had been trying to get my attention."

That day, Matthew gave his life to Christ and dedicated his time to ministering to others.

"This new journey . . . is nothing like I expected, and He is using me in some unique ways," Matthew said. "Six months after I arrived [at this facility], I found myself appointed as the music director, and for five years, I have filled this position. It has been a true blessing."

Matthew is working toward a master's degree in theological studies. In 2017, he became a Crossroads student.

"Crossroads allows me the opportunity to reflect on the foundation of what it means to be a believer," he said. "If a new believer were to ask for a way to grow, then I want to point them to something trustworthy. This is something I have found within Crossroads. It is relational. It isn't just about your answers. It is about your thoughts, opinions, convictions, and heart. [Crossroads] gives hope to those who need it the most."

Story by Amy Cain / Illustration by Jose Garza

CHRISTMAS CARDS TOUCH STUDENTS' HEARTS

People who have never experienced incarceration can easily take Christmas cards for granted. For those living behind bars, Christmas cards take on much greater significance. The cards reassure them that someone on the outside remembers them.

Many Crossroads students don't receive letters or phone calls from family or friends. Students write to us frequently to tell us that Crossroads mentors are the only people who send them letters. They often tell us that the only Christmas card they receive is the one from Crossroads.

"I can't thank you enough for the Christmas card. It was the first and only one I got, and I cried happy tears because being in prison, we are not allowed to physically receive anything unless it comes from a church," Tricia S. wrote to us from a prison in Florida. "For you all to think about people in prison, thank you so very much. I have it hanging on my bed and will cherish it always."

Mail restrictions in some states prohibit cards, so we can't send them to every student. Still, thanks to your support, our cards reached more than 16,000 students this month. Thank you for delivering cheer to those who often feel abandoned.



The art for the 2023 student Christmas card was submitted by Bobby T., a student in Texas

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NO ONE WALKS ALONE



Antoinique

Breilyn and Antoinique, two of the eleven mentors at One Community Church, said the most unexpected part of mentoring has been the spiritual gifts that mentoring has given them. Breilyn, for instance, has learned to extend encouragement to those he encounters daily, mirroring the generous encouragement he imparts to his students. And he has grown from the things his students write in their lessons.

"Some of them really know their Bible, and they

helped me learn," Breilyn said. "They helped me see we are no different. Just because they are incarcerated doesn't mean they don't deserve our love and support, and I have to make sure they know that with every lesson."

Antoinique acknowledged that her students have also enriched her faith in unexpected ways.

"I love to write, so God knew exactly what I needed at that time when I heard about Crossroads," she said. "What I didn't expect was that God would use them to speak to me. God uses everything, and sometimes He uses students to tell us things we need to hear if we just stop to listen."

Story by Anne Hamming / Illustrations and page design by Jose Garza

“DAMASCUS” MOMENT LED TO A NEW LIFE

Juan Carlos Yahua grew up with an alcoholic, abusive father. He harbored resentment and unforgiveness toward his father after watching him beat Juan Carlos’s mom for many years.

After his mother was killed when he was twelve years old, Juan Carlos sank into depression and turned to drugs. At eighteen, he became involved in criminal activity, which led to an eighty-month prison sentence for robbery a year later.

Juan Carlos resented God and doubted He was real. In prison, Juan Carlos continued to steal and fight, frequently ending up in solitary confinement. In 2000, during one of many lonely nights in his cell, Juan Carlos was ready to give up on life. But at that very moment, his cell filled with what he now knows was the presence of God. The presence was so profound that he fell to his knees in repentance and asked God for forgiveness.

Around midnight, with tears pouring down his face, he began knocking on his door until a guard appeared at the small window. Juan Carlos shared his strange experience with the guard, who sent a nurse to him. The nurse gave him some anxiety medication and began telling him the story of Saul on the way to Damascus. The nurse explained to Juan Carlos that he had experienced the same thing.

Juan Carlos was moved to a cell with a Brazilian man. This man had tried to share the Gospel with him before, but Juan Carlos had dismissed him as a hypocrite. That night, they did not sleep as Juan Carlos again listened to the man proclaim the Gospel. This time, Juan Carlos had ears to hear. He knew it was time to commit to following Jesus.

With a significant portion of his sentence left,



Juan Carlos, director of Crossroads Peru, speaks at a youth detention facility more than twenty years after his incarceration.

Juan Carlos began to look for ways to serve the Lord inside the prison. But eight months later, in January 2001, he received the shocking news that he had been granted a presidential pardon.

“From that moment, I have not stopped being able to share what God did in my life,” said Juan Carlos. “And from that moment to today, I dedicate myself to sharing the Word in many places. . . . I go especially to prisons, where people need it.”

He continued, “[Twenty-three] years have passed, and today, I continue to preach the Word.”

Crossroads Peru began its ministry in early 2019, under the leadership of Juan Carlos Yahua, with fifty students at a local juvenile facility and a women’s facility. Nearing the end of their fifth year of ministry, Juan Carlos and his team of more than sixty mentors envision being able to enter more adult facilities in the future and dream of expanding to other parts of the country.

Story by Paige Deur



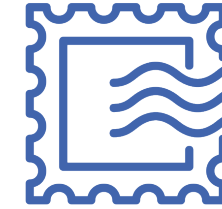
“From that moment, I have not stopped being able to share what God did in my life. . . . I go especially to prisons, where people need it.”

– Juan Carlos, director of Crossroads Peru

POSTAGE-PAID ENVELOPES BUILD BRIDGES OF HOPE

Five years ago, we committed to offering our program to students for free by providing postage-paid enrollment cards and postage-paid envelopes for students to return their lessons to us. This initiative alleviated a financial burden on our students and opened opportunities to offer hope and encouragement to more people behind bars.

The Crossroads program offers the power of human connection through letters. Our mentors have touched the lives of thousands of incarcerated individuals, providing a sense of care and understanding that is often lacking in prisons.



Dozens of students write to thank us each year. One such letter was sent by Billy C. from Texas, who wrote, “I am so happy to see an organization that is so dedicated to reaching out in such an extensive and personal way with these courses, the mentor interaction, the amount of courses, the postage-already-paid return envelopes, the helpful change-of-address form, the sign-up forms that are sent that I can give to others, and more.”

Postage for our students comes with a financial commitment that grows every year. In the year ahead, we project we will spend \$450,000 on postage for our students. In our eyes, the cost is well worth it if it helps us reach more people with God’s love and meaningful interaction with caring mentors. With your support, we can ensure that the cost of a postage stamp never stands in the way of someone receiving the hope of the Gospel.



SUPPORT MAIL-CALL MIRACLES WITH A GIFT BY DEC. 31

Imagine you are alone behind bars, feeling forgotten by the world. Then, imagine your heart jumping when you hear your name spoken at mail call. Someone sent you a letter! At Crossroads, we call that jolt of excitement a **mail-call miracle**. Crossroads ignites hope in the hearts of men and women thousands of times each year when they hear their names called. Someone on the outside took the time to remember them and write a letter.

“Honestly, the best part of this Bible study course is the interaction with mentors who care to take the time to both read and respond to my answers and thoughts,” said Joseph G., a student in Missouri. “This alone is why I enjoy this Bible study! Other Bible studies are great and studious but lack human interaction. It is also really cool that this study is free. I apply no postage to my return envelopes!”

Help us continue to make sure that our students can hear their names called at mail time. Support mail-call miracles today with a gift in the enclosed remittance envelope.

IN STORE FOR 2024

Throughout 2024, Crossroads will commemorate forty years of serving men and women behind bars. Crossroads began humbly as a kitchen-table ministry in one family’s home. Through God’s grace, this ministry has grown into a global operation that involves thousands of students, volunteers, and donors.

Our guiding Scripture for the year is Psalm 100:4–5: “Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.”

We will share stories that commemorate our history, celebrate our current work, and look to our future. Watch for announcements of ways to share your Crossroads story!



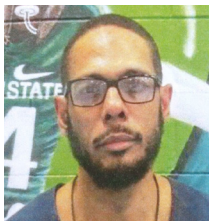
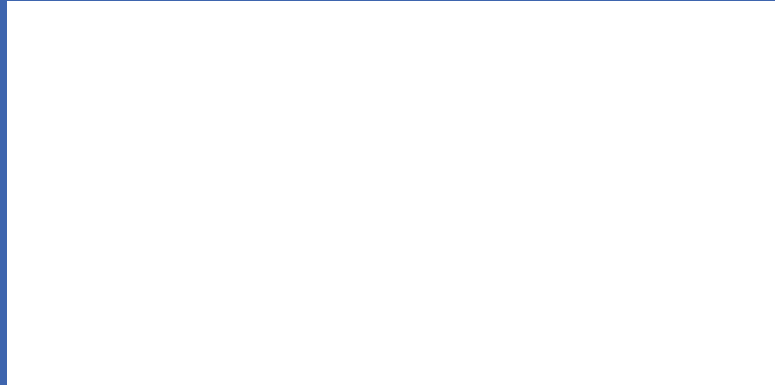
CROSSROADS
PRISON MINISTRIES

Crossroads connects people in prisons with mentors from churches to develop Christ-centered relationships as they study God's Word together.

PO Box 900 | Grand Rapids, MI 49509-0900
800.668.2450 | cpministries.org

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Stories of Hope
and Transformation



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My mentors were very helpful with their kind words, encouragement, and deep knowledge of the life of Jesus. If I can say anything to the supporters of this ministry, it would be to continue your support with whatever means. As St. Paul stated, we are all endowed with different gifts. Your help is what truly furthers the cause and strengthens the Church and calls others to do the same. That cause is to make believers of all peoples throughout the world. The Great Commission to make believers of all peoples is our godly work that Jesus left us to do with the help of the Holy Spirit.”

– *Bernard A., a Crossroads student in California*