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Kairos Prison Ministry History

ORLANDO, Fla. – When Tom Johnson, an attorney and Catholic Cursillista from Miami, FL, decided to attend an ecumenical Cursillo gathering in Atlanta, GA in 1975, he had no idea how much that weekend would change his life or the profound impact that event would eventually have on thousands of people.

The Atlanta Cursillo (a Spanish word for “little course”) brought together delegates from many denominations. It was there that Johnson learned through his friend, Pastor Gene Hermeier, that some of his fellow delegates were planning a prison weekend in Iowa. Johnson, who was intrigued by the possibilities of a Cursillo program in prison, attended that Iowa weekend and was excited about the experience. He returned to Miami and set to work planning a prison Cursillo experience in his home state.

In the fall of 1976 at Union Correctional Institution in Raiford, FL, Johnson’s hard work became reality when he and fellow Cursillista presented a three-day spiritual renewal retreat for inmates. From there, the program grew and within the next two years ministry volunteers led by Johnson were conducting Cursillo short courses in prisons in more than a half dozen states. By 1979, after realizing the need for more structure and organization to continue growth, the Kairos name was adopted and the ministry became an independent, non-profit, ecumenical, Christian organization.

In April of 1990, the ministry expanded to serve wives and loved ones of the incarcerated. The first Kairos Outside Ministry was held in Northern California and today the Kairos Outside program serves twenty-six states, Australia, Canada, Costa Rica, South Africa and the United Kingdom. The Kairos Outside program of weekend retreats is designed to support those loved ones who “do time” along with their spouses or family members.

The third Kairos ministry to be added was the Torch program for juvenile offenders. The Torch program begins with a weekend retreat inside the prison and continues with a mentoring process for six months. Currently, the Kairos Torch program serves in 13 states as well as Australia and South Africa.

Kairos Prison Ministry is active in 31 states: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington and West Virginia. Kairos is also active outside the U.S. in Australia, Canada, Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, South Africa and the United Kingdom.

A full-time staff of ten operates from the Kairos International Office in Winter Park, FL, led by Executive Director John A. Thompson, Jr. For more information, please call (407) 629-4948 or visit the Kairos website at <http://www.kairosprisonministry.org>.

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