



Elder shares Gospel behind prison bars

Below are excerpts from the Presbyterian Newsletter, *The Layman*

By Jason P. Reagan

A Presbyterian elder in Florida says that helping others find spiritual freedom even while they live behind bars has given him a clear model of the oldest type of Christian ministry.

Kendall Durkee, a real-estate executive in Jacksonville, recently spoke with *The Layman* about his evangelistic experiences with Kairos International, a prison ministry that operates in 361 prisons in 34 U.S. states and in 9 other countries.

The group offers three-day, semiannual Weekends that allow volunteers to introduce at least 42 prisoners at a time to the claims and tenets of Christianity in an inter-denominational setting.

“It’s the closest you’re going to get to the first-century, church-type ministry,” Durkee said. “It’s Spirit-led, not man-led,” he added.

Volunteers begin prison visits by praying for the room within the prison they will be using for a ministry Weekend.

“What we pray is that the Spirit will fill that room – every nook, corner and cranny – with such power and force that the Spirit is actually oozing out the windows and the doors of this building into the [prison] compound,” Durkee said.

He added that such prayer is important because inmates are “coming off of Satan’s playground.”

According to Kairos* officials, the volunteers “share the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, share meals and fellowship with the incarcerated on a one-to-one basis.”

Durkee says the three-day Weekend is structured in such a way to facilitate small groups of prisoners, who sit with “families” of volunteers and develop a sense of teamwork while hearing talks and participating in devotional activities that focus on making choices both for Christ and for the improvement of their daily lives. Later, volunteers participate in follow-up “half-day reunions” each month for a year.

Durkee says Kairos volunteer opportunities are open to any denomination “as long as you believe Jesus as your Savior.”

“You share the Gospel and you allow the Spirit to work, and the things that are created by man, we take out of the meeting,” Durkee said, alluding to denominational differences or practices.

Durkee's first experience with prison ministry began in Russia a couple of decades ago with an evangelistic trip. Among the several options, Durkee and a friend were chosen to visit prisons outside of Moscow.

Durkee said he saw the amazing, infecting power of prison evangelism a few years later when he returned to the same prison.

Because Russian prison officials had seen such a dramatic change in newly converted Christian prisoners, they urged Durkee's group to teach the prison's most notorious inmates. A prison official told Durkee that, upon release, only about 20 percent of Christian inmates ended up back in the prison while the rate hovered at around 70 percent for non-Christians. The official added that only the Christian inmates would willingly work on the prison farm, which was vital to providing food for the population.

Durkee said that, while the opportunity proved miraculous, it also presented a challenge in that prison officials would not allow prisoners to talk or interact with mission workers due to their dangerous nature – they could only listen as Durkee and others as they shared the Gospel.

“The only way we knew God was touching these people was if they would tear up,” he said. “There was no way they could have heard the Gospel unless someone spoke it to them,” he added since the prisoners had no access to any outside media.

When Durkee returned stateside, he found his niche in ministry with Kairos and began to work with Union Correctional Facility in nearby Raiford.

He has worked with Kairos in 16 three-day Weekends over the past eight years and served as a Leader on one Weekend.

“As they begin to hear the Gospel; as they begin to sense the power of the Spirit; as they begin to feel the love we have for these men ... they begin to come to Christ,” he said.

“What God taught me is, all I had to do was to show up,” he added. “He'll take care of the rest.”

Writing in a Kairos newsletter, a former prison inmate said of the ministry's effect on him, “I became a human who wanted to love and be loved. I wanted to find out what God loved in me.”

A lifelong Presbyterian, Durkee earned a degree at Presbyterian College, served in the U.S. Navy and as a teacher. He grew up at First Presbyterian Church of Jacksonville and currently serves as a ruling elder there. He said he recommitted his life to Christ in 1988.

Drawing around 25,000 volunteers, Kairos began in Raiford, FL 36 years ago. Volunteers have donated more than 3 million volunteer hours to prison ministry. The ministry's website can be found at www.kairosprisonministry.org.

**In the New Testament, kairos means “the appointed time in the purpose of God,” the time when God acts.*

The entire story can be found at www.layman.org