

No time for

By John W. Kennedy

Early rejection couldn't deter a softhearted great-grandma from reaching prisoners.



Bonnie Thompson

RETIREMENT

Bonnie Thompson recently celebrated her 70th birthday and she has 28 grandchildren and a great-grandchild to keep her busy. But retirement isn't even a thought for Thompson, who operates one of the most far-reaching church programs to prisoners in the country.

Most of the outreaches are geared to men behind bars. It's amazing that Thompson has compassion for them, considering the repeated rejection and abuse she suffered at the hands of men in her early 30s.

Although Thompson accepted Jesus as her Savior as a child thanks to a born-again grandmother, her atheistic father kept her from going to church much of the time. Subsequently, she didn't have a solid relationship with the Lord and didn't read her Bible regularly.

After marrying at 17, Thompson

converted to her husband's nominal faith, and began working with youth on the streets of Peoria, Ill.

A rapid series of painful experiences began when she attended a racism conference in Chicago the day of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in April 1968. Naïve about the dangers of the big city, she was cornered in a vacant room by another attendee she didn't know. He held her captive and raped her.

Despite the trauma of the attack, Thompson continued to work with troubled youth through a secular government program. During riots that August, a teenage boy high on drugs sexually attacked her. After this second rape, Thompson grew embittered and cried out to God, questioning His existence.

In that era, victims of sexual assault had few resources. For years, Thompson told no one about the inci-

dents. She contemplated suicide, feeling unworthy to care for her family. Looking back, she realizes that God stopped her.

Life grew even more desperate the following year when her husband walked out on her — leaving her at age 33 to raise six children by herself. They lived in abject poverty; creditors repossessed the family's stove, refrigerator, car and finally, home. The seven family members moved into a two-bedroom apartment, the boys sleeping in one bedroom, the girls in the other, and Bonnie on a sofa.

Trying to recover from the abandonment by her husband, Thompson entered an ill-advised relationship with a man, seeking love and acceptance. Subsequently, she bore a seventh child, this time out of wedlock.

Throughout the ordeals, Thompson continued to attend church, but without experiencing a personal relation-

ship with God. When she sought to have the child dedicated at church, leaders declined.

"So many people that I see in prison have not been loved; they've been rejected," Thompson says. "So many people have only part of the truth. They don't believe they can be forgiven. But Jesus loves us no matter what, and He will receive us if we come to Him in repentance."

Somehow Thompson survived financially, emotionally and spiritually. Since 1974 she has been married to John Thompson. She rededicated her life to Christ in 1980 at a four-day women's retreat, finally comprehending that she could be forgiven. The following year, at her husband's suggestion, Thompson began ministering to inmates.

"I was sorry that I couldn't change those on the streets, but God gave me a second chance to bring hope and

encouragement to those behind bars," Thompson says. "Because I have walked through hopelessness and darkness, I have compassion."

Through Thompson's efforts, Riverside Community Church in Peoria, Ill., is heading one of the most ambitious prison programs in the country. Around 100 volunteers participate annually, the vast majority of them from Riverside, an Assemblies of God congregation of nearly 1,800 where Thompson is a member. Riverside also supports the outreaches financially.

"Her heart for prisons has inspired people around this area to become involved," says John King, lead pastor at Riverside, regarding Thompson. "She is a compassionate lady who loves people, especially those who are the most broken or neglected in society. She keeps going against the odds, when many other people would have given in."

Volunteers visit seven institutions on a biweekly, monthly or quarterly basis. Besides the county jail, church members minister to a medium security men's facility in Canton, a Galesburg penitentiary for men serving life sentences, a Warrenville center for teenage girls, a St. Charles center for teenage boys, a medium security institution for boys in Joliet and a Chicago facility for youth.

Generally 16-20 people visit at a time, and the ministry racks up more than 100 volunteer hours per month. None of the prisons is close to Peoria, so ministry volunteers must commit to an entire day. For instance, it takes three hours to drive to the downtown Chicago youth center.

Thompson's primary roles are to coordinate visits and to prepare volunteers. Last year, volunteers in the ministry led 1,779 people to salvation in Jesus Christ.

"We're under the authority of God, but also the rules and regulations of prisons," Thompson says. "Training and preparation are important."

For the past seven years she also has implemented biannual two-day seminars that she designed herself focusing on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the love of God, spiritual growth in Christ and prayer.

At a Sunday service in February at the Galesburg prison that featured a gospel choir and band, 92 men (many of them serving life sentences) accepted Jesus as Savior and 189 received the baptism in the Holy Spirit. In January, a ministry team at the St. Charles facility had 110 boys respond to a salvation invitation.

"I regularly see teens and adults who have no hope or vision transformed once they accept Christ," Thompson says. "People can be saved no matter what they have done. I see them walking the walk in prison."

Thompson, now a great-grandmother, has no thought of slowing down, saying she has made a commitment to try to bring the lost in prison to the Lord. "I just have to find the time," she says, citing Philippians 4:13, noting that Christ gives her strength. "I can't keep the hope that the Lord has given to me to myself."

The ministry is proving effective, both in evangelism and discipleship.

"How can I as an old white woman minister to prisoners, most of whom are African-American men?" Thompson asks. "Well, the Lord doesn't look at gender, race, age, nationality or denomination. He looks at the heart. If the Lord can use a donkey [see Numbers 22], He can surely use me."

Six of Thompson's seven children are involved in prison ministry, and the seventh has her own ministry.

As if preparation for prison vis-

its doesn't keep her busy enough, Thompson has just embarked on a new project: helping inmates who are released transition back into society. Men often receive only \$10 when they walk through the gates.

"In the past year I've had so many inmates ask for prayer because they fear getting out," Thompson says. "Many have no support, nowhere to live and no jobs when they get out. They need a transitional home where Christ is the foundation."

Thompson is starting a non-profit ministry, Walking in the Spirit International, for both inmates and their families. The ministry will provide counseling to try to make the adjustment on the outside less stressful. **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

- 1 2 Kings 1-3
- 2 2 Kings 4, 5
- 3 2 Kings 6-8
- 4 2 Kings 9, 10
- 5 2 Kings 11-13
- 6 2 Kings 14-16
- 7 2 Kings 17, 18
- 8 2 Kings 19-21
- 9 2 Kings 22, 23
- 10 2 Kings 24, 25
- 11 1 Chronicles 1-3
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- 14 1 Chronicles 10-12
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- 21 2 Chronicles 5, 6
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- 26 2 Chronicles 21-23
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- 29 2 Chronicles 30, 31
- 30 2 Chronicles 32, 33
- 31 2 Chronicles 34-36



L I V I N G I T

Divine healing

The Assemblies of God believes divine healing of the sick is a privilege available to Christians today and is provided for in Christ's atonement (His sacrificial death on the cross for our sins). Divine healing is an integral part of the gospel.

Isaiah 53:4,5 (NIV) says: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted."

"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."

Matthew 8:16,17 echoes this in the New Testament: "When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he [Jesus] drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.'"

And James 5:14-16 provides a pattern for praying for the sick in the church: "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

God still heals the sick. Believe Him for your need or that of your needy friends or loved ones. Go to your church leaders for prayer and anticipate a healing.

Ken Horn

Based on one of four cardinal doctrines of the Assemblies of God.


BIBLE READING

May

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PRISON CHAPLAINS

REFORMING THE SOUL



There are more than 2 million people incarcerated in the United States—most do not have a personal relationship with Jesus! Many people see prisoners as the worst that society has to offer. **Prison chaplains** see desperate people hungry for peace and forgiveness. The Holy Spirit utilizes chaplains to minister God's grace and transforming power to hurting souls.

HELP EQUIP THEM WITH EXTRAORDINARY COMPASSION THROUGH YOUR PRAYERS AND SUPPORT.



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