

Prison ministries transform inmates, volunteers

By Joey Butler

March 6, 2023 | FAIRMONT, W.Va. (UM News)



Anthony (foreground), who is incarcerated at the St. Marys Correctional Center in St. Marys, W.Va., says he tries to serve as a role model for new inmates at the facility after seeing the transformation brought about by the Kairos Prison Ministry. Photo by Mike DuBose, UM News.

Editor's notes: *The Rev. Mike Coleman, who was interviewed for this story, passed away shortly before it published. UM News offers condolences to his family.

*****By request of the West Virginia Division of Corrections & Rehabilitation, only the first names of incarcerated individuals have been used.***

Key points:

- **Kairos Prison Ministry, similar to an Emmaus Walk, brings volunteers into prisons to minister to inmates, while Catalyst Ministries trains the inmates to minister to one another and to the prison administration.**
- **Inmates often say the unconditional love from the Kairos volunteers is the first time they felt like someone cared about them.**
- **The ministries help corrections officials whose goal is for inmates to reenter society as better citizens.**

“I was in prison and you came to visit me.” — Matthew 25:36

When he was 18, Dusty Merrill decided that he wanted to go to prison. Of course, that decision was made a little easier because he could leave whenever he wanted.



Dusty Merrill is part of a team from LIFE United Methodist Church in Fairmont, W.Va., that participates in Kairos Prison Ministry. Photo by Mike DuBose, UM News.

Merrill is part of a team from LIFE United Methodist Church in Fairmont, West Virginia, that participates in [Kairos Prison Ministry](#), an international ecumenical ministry that addresses the spiritual needs of incarcerated men, women, youth and their families.

After that first experience, he went back twice a year for the next 12 years.

“It’s easy once you’re in there to forget that you’re in a prison, then something will happen that reminds you really fast where you are,” said Merrill, a video specialist at LIFE.

Similar to The Upper Room's [Walk to Emmaus](#), Kairos begins with a weekend of structured talks, meditations and individual and group activities led by a volunteer team. That introductory weekend is followed by monthly continuing ministry visits from the team while the inmate participants hold weekly group prayer meetings.

"We try to build the groups inside the prison so they can start sharing prayer without us there. A lot of them know more about the Bible than I'll ever know because they study so much," said David Merrill, Dusty's father.

David Merrill describes the team being blessed by the experience as much if not more than the prisoners, but their presence certainly has an impact on those they come to visit.

"Kairos was special — just to see the love from those guys and to see them every week, every month," said Brent, a resident at [St. Marys Correctional Center and Jail](#) in St. Marys, West Virginia.

Brent said he had a Christian upbringing, but he had "one foot in the church and one foot in the world." He spent the next 17 years in and out of prison and rehab. He recommitted himself to God following a failed suicide attempt — around the same time he was indicted for murder.

He began pursuing a religion degree through [Catalyst Ministries](#), a prison ministry based in West Virginia. In a partnership with Appalachian Bible College, Catalyst was able to establish [Mount Olive Bible College](#), an accredited school inside the Mount Olive Correctional Center.

Upon his graduation in 2020, Brent was transferred to St. Marys, where he serves as part of Catalyst's [peer mentor program](#). The program sends the incarcerated Bible College graduates into the mission field of West Virginia's prisons to tend to the spiritual needs of other inmates and administration members.

"Our peer mentors came in and tried to encourage others, which is exactly what we wanted. We hoped they would come in and change the culture, and they're doing it a person at a time," said the Rev. C.J. Rider, deputy director of reentry & offender activities for the West Virginia Division of Corrections & Rehabilitation.

Peer mentors have privileges to go into any part of the facility, and may be called to minister to anyone, be it inmates or staff, at any time. They also pray over the administration during daily meetings.

“People are dealing with issues inside here, and I’ve seen Brent get up late at night and talk to someone who’s going through something,” said Anthony, a fellow resident at St. Marys.

Though not a certified peer mentor, Anthony tries to serve as a role model for other prisoners and encourage them to attend church. He said he grew up in the church but after losing his father when he was 13, he also lost his faith walk. At 19, he received a 35-year sentence. Things turned around for him after accepting another inmate’s invitation to a worship service.

Now he tries to reach new inmates and let them know that he once was “that angry guy with the tough persona,” but that it got him nothing but trouble.

Anthony said he also benefited from the Kairos weekend experience.

“You hear about how good the food is and it attracts people, but by day two, they want to come not for the food but because they enjoy themselves,” he said. “I’ve seen a few affected to where they started going to church. I’ve seen that transformation.”

Brent said his goal as a peer mentor is to help eliminate recidivism.

“I used to get out with the best intentions and always wound up back here,” he said. “I want these guys to get it before they come back with a life sentence.”

Brent is eligible for parole in 2025, and feels called to preach and to continue working with Catalyst. He said he’s been in contact with a local pastor in his Ohio hometown and wants to make good on a promise he made to his father before he passed that he was done with the life he’d been living.

“I want to come back, just not in (a prison uniform). I want to share my experience with the guys still here,” he said.



The St. Marys Correctional Center houses medium-security inmates in St. Marys, W.Va. Photo by Mike DuBose, UM News.

The Rev. Tim Meadows, chaplain at St. Marys, considers peer mentorship to be the discipleship process in action.

“These guys are highly respected. They carry themselves as Godly men, and they’re genuine,” he said. “People can tell the love of Christ, and that is what attracts them.”

Meadows’ assistant, Thomas, said the atmosphere at the prison makes all the difference in the experience for the inmates. After receiving a 53-year sentence for a serious crime he insists he didn’t commit, Thomas said he constantly had a chip on his shoulder.

“I heard what they were doing at St. Marys and knew I had to get down here,” he said. “I see the impact and the trust the mentors have with others here, crying with them and praying with them. Once you’ve been to the bad places and you get to somewhere decent, you can see the difference.”

Meadows said he credits the “genuine Christian heart” of the administration with creating an environment where these ministries are allowed to flourish.

Not all facilities or their administrators have been open to allowing such programs.

The Rev. Mike Coleman was serving as the acting warden at Mount Olive when Kairos events began at the prison. He said the previous warden he'd served under had approved everything but was forced to retire for health reasons before it could come to fruition. Coleman worked with the ministry partners to get the program off the ground.

"The first weekend was such a success that we committed to doing a new one every six months, plus all the reunion stuff in between," said Coleman, who is now director of the Division of Administrative Services for the West Virginia Department of Homeland Security. He retired from also serving as a United Methodist pastor in 2022.

He traveled with a leadership group from the West Virginia Department of Corrections to Louisiana to observe the workings of the prison ministries at the state's maximum-security penitentiary, known as Angola. This led to the formation of the Mount Olive Bible College.

"We were making sure that we were using all the tools that God was giving us," Coleman said. "One of the goals that corrections rehabilitation has is to make you a better citizen, whether you're leaving or not."



The Rev. Mike Coleman helped establish Kairos Prison Ministry in the West Virginia prison system when he served as acting warden at the Mount Olive Correctional Complex in Mount Olive, W.Va. Coleman, now director of the Division of Administrative Services for the West Virginia Department of Homeland Security, retired as a United Methodist pastor in 2022. Photo by Mike DuBose, UM News.

J.D. Sallaz, superintendent of [Lakin Correctional Center and Jail](#) in West Columbia, West Virginia, shares Coleman's sentiment.

"It benefits everybody to send the inmates out a better person than how they came in," he said. "For those serving life without mercy, this is their home and they're not leaving. They want things to go smoothly."

Lakin is the only women's prison in the state, so it has a mix of minimum- and maximum-security inmates, with about 40 members of the population of 540 serving life sentences.

Rebecca is one of those serving a life sentence without mercy (possibility of parole), for murder. She has been incarcerated for 30 years.

When she arrived, she frequently acted out of anger and fought with other residents. After repeatedly being sent to a segregation unit, Rebecca said, “God said to me, ‘I told you to be still and since you won’t listen, I’m making you still.’ Now I understand that I’m doing all this time in segregation because God wanted me to listen and I wouldn’t.”

Now, she serves as one of several peer mentors at Lakin. She cites a Kairos weekend as life-changing, saying that “it’s the first time in my life I ever felt loved, and I was probably 35.”

Michelle, another of the peer mentors, said the “unconditional love” from the Kairos volunteers left an impression on her as well. She’s 12 years into a drug-related sentence, and said that pursuing the peer mentor certification taught her to help herself and others.

“I have an associate’s degree in human services from before I got in trouble, and I like to teach and help,” Michelle said. Now she leads classes on dealing with depression and low self-esteem. She also leads Celebrate Recovery 12-step services and is studying at the Mount Olive Bible College.

A common theme among the inmates United Methodist News interviewed is the inability to forge or maintain healthy relationships. The peer mentors at Lakin had to learn how to have them and now try to teach those lessons to others.

If you speak to anyone who’s been through a Kairos weekend, you will learn about the “forgiveness cookies.” Kairos volunteers bake many dozens of homemade cookies to send with the teams going to the prisons. One dozen is given to each inmate participant to eat themselves, but they are given another dozen and instructed to give that bag to someone for whom they need to either seek or grant forgiveness.

“It’s amazing what God does with a bag of cookies,” said Coleman.

The Rev. Dianna Vinscavich, chaplain at Lakin, said the leadership of the peer mentors helps to create unity at the prison.

“I’m seeing those walls come down and it’s because of the mentors. If they hear of someone with a grievance, they try to help keep the peace,” she said.

Dee, one of the peer mentors, said that two years ago, the prison’s segregation unit stayed full all the time, but “since the mentorship program

started and we can counsel and pray with them before they get to that point, segregation stays almost empty.

“God is really using individuals in here to grow a church instead of a prison.”

Since coming to Lakin, she’s earned associate’s degrees in both Christian leadership and Christian ministry, became an ordained minister and is working on a bachelor’s degree in communication. “My passion is preaching,” she said.

A former nurse, Dee has served almost 20 years on drug charges that took everything from her. She lost her house and because of the length of her sentence, she gave her young children up for adoption so they could have a more stable family environment. She said she felt the anger that many prisoners do, and now she tries to help those she sees struggling with the same issues.

Dee is eligible for release in about six years. For now, she said, “My goal is to help change Lakin from the inside out, so I want to get to the ones coming in and start that change in them.”



Dee, Michelle and Rebecca discuss the impact that Kairos Prison Ministry has had on their lives and that of other inmates at the Lakin Correctional Center in West Columbia, W. Va. Photo by Mike DuBose, UM News.

Amber, a peer mentor serving a life sentence without mercy, said she was one of those who arrived with anger and resentment.

“The more I bucked, the worse life got and that led me here,” she said.

Amber is another for whom Kairos was life-changing. “It was great to know people outside our families cared,” she said.

After her weekend, she got more involved in church at the prison, and that’s how she found out about peer mentorship.

“It’s been rewarding to mentor to ladies who come to you for advice because they see the walk you’re on,” she said. “I’ve had girls come to me and ask how I could be so happy, knowing the sentence that I have, and I say, ‘Why not? I’ve got God.’ Just because I’m spending the rest of my life here doesn’t mean that I can’t live a rich and fulfilling life doing God’s work.”

Rebecca sees her life sentence as a sort of mission field.

“God gives us a cross to bear, and because we’re gonna be here a long time, Amber and I can reach 500 girls a year,” she said. “Just think how many people we see in five years. You can work through God that way.”

After a two-year hiatus due to COVID-19, volunteers have begun to return to prisons.

David Merrill said a fellow Kairos group recently visited a federal penitentiary elsewhere in the state and his group hopes to go back to the prison in Huttonsville in March. He said he’s looking forward to it: “This has been my ministry for 15 years and I’ve missed going in and sharing.”

He acknowledged that the Kairos model prepared inmates to continue their ministry in the absence of visits from volunteers.

“They support themselves. They still hold prayer groups and we’re available to answer questions they may have,” he said, “but there are some ways they don’t get to participate because we’re not there.”

Vinscavich said that when COVID-19 prevented volunteer visits, the peer mentors were able to lead church themselves.

“They’re essential parts of our church services. They preach, lead singing, share devotionals — they do it all,” she said.

“When we didn’t have opportunity to have church on the inside, we were out in the rec yard having prayer circles,” Dee said.

Vinscavich sees parallels between the peer mentors and Christ’s life.

“Jesus died for something he didn’t do and he embraced it. These girls who’ve had their lives transformed are having to serve a sentence for something done by the person they used to be,” she said.

Not everyone shares this grace-filled view of rehabilitation. There is certainly a segment of society that adheres to the belief that a convicted person is in prison to be punished, not rehabilitated.

Cheryl Chandler, director of offender services for the West Virginia Division of Corrections, understands this view. In her role, she works both with inmates and with crime victims and their families. She’s heard complaints about some of the opportunities available to inmates, such as culinary classes and yoga, that may not be readily available to the general public.

“Sometimes the public will get frustrated that there are all these programs,” she said, “but I have to ask whether they want to live next to a lady who gets out of Lakin who’s angry and been mistreated and kicked down, or one who’s gotten to train in yoga and knows how to control her temper.”

As a pastor, Coleman said he initially got pushback when he encouraged his congregation to become involved in Kairos.

“They were like, ‘You want us to do *what* with those prisoners? Why would I want to bake cookies and give it to a bunch of murderers?’” he said.

However, Coleman said, they bought in once they saw the impact they were having. It even became a competition between churches to see who could bake the most cookies.

Dusty Merrill said he still struggles to speak about Kairos to his congregation, because he doesn’t know who in the pews may have been harmed in some way by a criminal act.

“It’s a really sensitive thing if you’re not the person who’s experienced this wrongdoing or hurt,” he said, “but if you’re helping people who need to be helped, they’ve probably hurt someone along the way.”

He does try to remind people to consider the life circumstances that may have led someone to commit a crime or surrender to substance use.

“I’m blessed that I had all the opportunities to make the right choices. Some of those guys didn’t get that opportunity.”

Butler is a multimedia producer/editor for United Methodist News. Contact him at (615) 742-5470 or newsdesk@umcom.org. To read more United Methodist news, [subscribe to the free Daily or Weekly Digests](#).