

Kairos Prison Ministry

Presented at Bethany Baptist Church October 13, 2019

Good morning. I would like to spend some time talking to you about Kairos. I would like to start off by thanking all of you for your support and use of your facility over the last twenty years. We wouldn't be able to do it without you. This has been a special and unique relationship which all started when Harry Williams met Mike Long at your local McDonalds. I would like to talk about the overall Kairos program and what goes on during a weekend here at the prison in Mountain City. Intertwined in all this is the "miraculous" story of how you became involved in Kairos. All you see is the extensive use of your kitchen and fellowship hall by us twice a year. We also clutter your lower level with 4,200 dozen home baked cookies. I want to tell you what goes on behind the scenes at the prison. As Paul Harvey used to say I want to tell you "The rest of the story"

Kairos is an interdenominational prison ministry that ministers to men and women in medium security prisons. The purpose of Kairos is to establish strong Christian communities among the populations of correctional institutions. Kairos Prison Ministry, Inc. is a not-for-profit corporation chartered in the state of Florida where the first Kairos weekend was held in the Radford Prison over 40 years ago. Kairos ministries include Kairos Inside for incarcerated men and women, Kairos Outside for female family and friends of inmates, and Kairos Torch for youthful offenders.

Kairos is active in 37 states and in ten countries and is in over 500 prisons around the world. In Tennessee, Kairos Inside is active in five men's prisons and three women's prisons. Tennessee also has three Kairos Outside organizations.

Kairos has proven to be one of the most effective programs to bring Christ into the prison, turn people's lives around in prison, and to keep them out of prison after they are released. As a matter of fact, the recidivism rate drops dramatically for inmates that have gone through the Kairos program. The state of Florida defines recidivism as an inmate who has returned to prison within two years after being released. The national recidivism rate is 67%. The recidivism rate in Florida is 80%. Sounds kind of hopeless doesn't it. A ten year study done in Florida, shows that the recidivism rate for inmates that have participated in Kairos is 29%. If they participate in a small group after the weekend called a "Prayer and Share Group" the recidivism rate drops to 9%.

A couple of years ago, the head of the Texas prisons gave the keynote address at the Kairos Annual Conference. Texas has over 80 prisons. Kairos has been so effective in Texas that they have been able to close three prisons in the last few years, primarily due to Kairos. He has requested that Kairos be in every prison in Texas.

Kairos is the Greek word for "God's time". The opposite of Kairos is Kronos which means chronological or linear time. Some watches are called chronometers because of this Greek word. Kairos was found

to be a word of very special significance in the environment of the prison where the word “time” carries so many special connotations.

The prison that our Kairos organization is chartered to work with is the Northeast Correctional Complex, which was opened in 1991 here in Mountain City. The prison has a maximum security rating but also houses medium security as well as minimum security inmates. NECX also includes the Carter County Work Camp which is a minimum security prison located near Roan Mountain. NECX has a total capacity of around 2,000 inmates at the two sites.

How did I ever get involved in prison ministry? It was several years after I went on an Emmaus weekend and I was still trying to find out how I can serve God and give back some of what I have been given. Whenever I thought about how I could serve – prison ministry was at the bottom of the list. It was scary to me to even think about going into a prison. I felt that the inmates all deserved to be there and weren't deserving of my time. I had rationalized that the only reason that Christ was kindly to prisoners was because he was talking about the political and religious prisoners of his time. After a sermon at my church on visiting those in prison and the timely scheduling of the closing program of the first Kairos weekend here in Mountain City – I made my first visit to prison and heard the personal testimonies of the inmates. I thought to myself – with the group support that Kairos provides – I can do this. I served on the second Kairos weekend in 2000 and have been active ever since.

A Kairos weekend is similar to the Walk to Emmaus or Cursillo in that it is a short course in Christianity. Our local Kairos organization was started by Harry Williams who participated in a Kairos weekend at the Brushy Mountain prison and brought the program to the northeast Tennessee area. The first weekend was held in the fall of 1999. Since that time we have held a total of 38 weekends with the 39th weekend going on as I speak. Over 1,300 men have gone through the weekend here at NECX.

That first weekend had a rocky start but helped infuse in us that we were really doing the right thing. It took Harry two years to convince the warden at NECX to allow Kairos to have a weekend in their facility. Harry made arrangements with the armory in Mountain City to stage the first weekend in their facility. The team had planned to use the armory to cook the meals for the inmates and use it as a place to sleep at night. About one week before the weekend, Harry visited the armory to check out the facilities and was informed that there was a scheduling conflict. The armory would be in use by the local National Guard during the weekend and we would be unable to use it.

Harry returned the next day and searched all over Mountain City trying to find a facility to use that weekend. On his way home to Johnson City after finding nothing, Harry passed by a billboard at a local church that said “You need a miracle today”. Harry thought to himself – “yes I do” and turned around and went back towards Mountain City. He stopped for gas and was explaining his plight to

the gas station attendant and the attendant said - you need to talk to Mike Long. Mike is active in prison ministry and might be able to help.

I would like to share an interesting side story on Mike Long, which many of you probably already know. He was dead set against the prison being built in Mountain City. He was a local businessman and for years had farmed the very land on which the prison was to be built. Mike even wrote a letter to the governor and stated that nothing good could ever come of building a prison in this beautiful part of the state. Along the way, God changed Mike's heart and he started making weekly visits to solitary confinement and ministered to the men by sitting on a stool outside the cell and talking to them through the food tray slot in the cell door.

Back to Harry Williams – Harry went from place to place in Mountain City looking for Mike and finally caught up with him at the local McDonalds. Harry and Mike had never met, but when Harry explained his problem, Mike reached into his pocket and pulled out the keys to his church which, as you know, was Bethany Baptist Church and handed them to Harry and said – I'll give you the keys now since I am going on vacation and won't be there this weekend. I admire the trust Mike had in Harry in committing your church to a total stranger. On his way out of town, Harry looked at the church sign that said "You need a miracle today" and realized that the name of the church on the sign was Bethany Baptist Church. We partnered with you that weekend and every weekend since.

Now I would like to talk about a typical Kairos weekend here at NECX. The team for each weekend is comprised of 42 people that have gone through eight training sessions in preparation for the weekend. We started training for this weekend in early August. The volunteers come from many different denominations and independent Christian churches throughout the northeast Tennessee area.

During the training sessions, every volunteer is responsible for raising \$150 to sponsor an inmate. This allows each weekend to be self funded. Each weekend costs around \$8,000 and we try to cover our costs with donations from the volunteers and their churches. The team members are also responsible for providing 100 dozen home baked cookies. By having the team members work through their churches allows the work load to be shared and it gives greater visibility to the program. We distribute one dozen home baked cookies for each inmate at the prison. We plan on 4,200 dozen cookies for each weekend. If you do the math, that is over 50,000 cookies.

Each team member also hand writes a letter to each of the 42 inmates who will be participating. These 42 men are selected by the chaplain from a list of inmates who have volunteered to participate. Among these 42 people, we ask the chaplain to pick five of the “worst of the worst’ and extend a special invitation to them. We don’t just try to find the easy converts, we want to make a change in the culture within the prison. We lure the men into the weekend with good food

and as I mentioned before, we use cookies as our calling card. We hope that they leave with a full stomach and with the love of Christ in their heart. During the weekend a volunteer staff prepares four home cooked meals at your church that are served in the prison. They also feed the team breakfast every morning.

I have given you an overview of the weekend – now I would like to give you some more detail on the weekend itself and the follow-on programs that we provide.

First – a few guidelines that we observe while interfacing with the inmates. We are there to listen and give them some attention. Our motto is “Listen, Listen, Love, Love”. We never condone what they have done but we try to listen much more than we talk. As a matter of fact, one of the training sessions we go through is an active listening exercise. We also never ask the following two questions:

- 1) What are you here for?
- 2) When are you getting out?

One reason we never discuss their crimes is most of us are not clergy and if they divulge any new information to us we are bound by law to notify the prison officials.

Also, I would like to say a few words about the logistics for the weekend. We separate the 42 inmates into seven tables of six inmates each. We call each table a family and give it a name. The

six inmates stay in the same family for the entire weekend. This is to encourage them to form new friendships and carry the family into a Prayer and Share group following the weekend. Also, each table or family has three Kairos team members. Each family has a clergy at the table as well as a leader and assistant leader to guide the discussions.

We enter the prison on Thursday afternoon and set up for the weekend. We have a get acquainted session with the inmates on Thursday evening at which time the team members and inmates introduce themselves. A short overview of the program is given. The main purpose of Thursday evening is to help the inmates get over any fear of the program and to convince them to participate in the rest of the weekend.

On Friday, we have several talks, discussions and posters with the theme of - understand yourself and think about your standing with God. We also serve them lunch and dinner. At the end of the day we give them an extra dozen cookies to give to the person that they dislike the most.

The format for Saturday is similar to Friday. The theme is to meet Jesus and have them realize that they can be members in Christ's church. We distribute the hand written letters to them. The day ends with a forgiveness ceremony where they have the opportunity to ask God for forgiveness for themselves and what they have done to others. We never condone or even ask what they have done – we

want them to release the hate that they harbor for themselves and others. We also feed them two more home cooked meals during the day. At the end of the day the Kairos team members visit all the units and personally deliver one dozen cookies to every inmate in the prison.

On Sunday, there are a few more talks and discussions. We begin the process of helping them to grow in faith and in community with each other. We serve them lunch and then we have a crossing ceremony where they are given a cross, a bible, and a certificate for participating in the weekend. We end the weekend with a closing program that is held in the gym and is open to the public – if you sign up in advance. At the closing, each small group elects one person to speak for the group on what Kairos meant to them and how are they going to put what they learned into practice. After that, any inmate that was on the weekend can come up and share his personal experience.

Our ministry doesn't end here. On the first Wednesday of every month, we have a Reunion in the Visitors Gallery and all the inmates that have been through Kairos are invited as well as guests that they would like to bring. We have singing, announcements, bible readings, and a talk by one of the inmates on how they have moved forward following their Kairos weekend. We then break up into small Prayer and Share groups for the remainder of the evening.

We also meet on the second, third, and fourth Tuesday for Prayer and Share sessions. This is similar to the monthly reunion but with a heavier concentration on the small groups. We have music, a short talk and then divide up into small Prayer and Share groups to discuss the talk and how their week is going in relationship to their Christian journey.

I would like to close with a success story. I am going to talk about an inmate called "Big Head" who became a friend of mine. Kairos cannot take full credit for the change that has come over him in prison, but we will accept partial credit. I got to know him over the years because he and I were big baseball fans. When we saw each other we usually end up talking baseball.

Big Head arrived in the Tennessee prison system in 1983. At that time, he was classified as the number one person who was likely to cause trouble in the Tennessee prison system. I got to know him during Kairos weekend # 2 in the spring of 2000. I was sitting next to him at my table throughout the weekend. Sometime during that weekend, he leaned over to me and said "you know - I didn't use to be a very nice guy". For years he was the informal inmate leader of the prison. He has undergone a conversion to Christianity and has maintained the leadership of the inmates after his conversion. He also started a church within the prison, which is still thriving today, and he became an ordained minister. He became the warden's right hand man and handled all the inmate grievances. When he was up for his first parole hearing, he should have been eligible to move to

the annex which has less restrictive rules. The warden has asked him to remain in the medium security part of the prison because of the leadership he provided to the inmates. He didn't make parole the first time. When I first saw him after being refused parole, he was upbeat and said 'I guess God has more work for me to do here before I am released'. He did make parole the second time and was released.

In conclusion, I would like to say that Kairos is working at the Mountain City prison. Even though we stretch security to the maximum during the Kairos weekend, the staff still appreciate the fact that we are at the prison. I had a staff member walk up to me totally unsolicited and thank me for being here. The security officer then commented that she could tell the difference in the inmate behavior because of Kairos.

Thank you.

Are there any questions?