

OUR FAITH | HEART OF TEXAS FOUNDATION



COURTESY

A shot of the ministers training program, provided by The Heart of Texas Foundation, shows the men's class being held in the College of Ministry Theological Library, in a new building provided by the Foundation. The men's theological library now has over 25,000 volumes, all maintained by the students and the team of Field Ministers assigned to the College of Ministry.

Ministry trains inmates to preach inside prisons

By **RICK COUSINS**
Correspondent

Last week, we outlined the Heart of Texas Foundation's ministry to turn prisoners into preachers, to create churches inside guarded walls and to extend education and enlightenment to a largely forgotten — and growing — “mission field” of the incarcerated.

“Our field ministers are ‘lif-ers,’ or inmates with extremely long sentences,” Heart of Texas founder Grove C. Norwood said. “They have studied the words and works of Jesus Christ for four years, taught by our PhD faculty.

After graduation, they are transferred in teams to other men's and women's prisons. There are now over 200 such men serving in 41 different prisons.”

The group has constructed two specialized education centers filled with multimedia screens and more than 25,000 books. The closest to Galveston is in Rosharon. The women's version is in Marlin, near Waco.

All this was done since 2009 with support from churches across the denominational spectrum.

See OUR FAITH » B3

OUR FAITH

Continued » B1

When it comes to gospel missions, many have claimed that supporting indigenous missionaries is cheaper and more effective than sending foreigners in. After all, an American envoy serving in Africa might have to learn one or more languages just to converse with those they have come to reach. A local comes equipped with the areas customs, culture and idioms at no extra cost.

In the case of the Lone Star State's criminal justice system, the contrast is even more stark: indigenous preachers are the only ones who can remain on site, speak often to those on Death Row or routinely conduct Sunday services.

"The fact that our ministers are inmates themselves also gives them a credibility that no free-world volunteers could have," Norwood explained. "They have impacted prison staff: wardens, guards and correctional officers as well as the families of inmates. They are able to show the world what a rehabilitated man or woman in prison



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Pictured is the first class of female inmates, now enrolled in The Heart of Texas Foundation College of Ministry for women. Brenna Norwood, PhD, is the director of the women's College of Ministry, located at the Hobby Unit in Marlin. The 34 women were carefully selected from female inmates who applied from all over the Texas prison system.

looks like: they serve their fellow inmates in ways that no volunteers or prison staffers could serve."

Gang violence has long been a scourge inside the walls of many American prisons. Heart's missionaries are trained to quiet disputes between and within gangs.

"They display a new kind of life, a new kind of role model," he added. "All of this and more has only been made possible by the

faithful giving and financial support of a small number of pastors and churches in Texas — Baptist, Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian and non-denominational. We depend totally on private donations from people who recognize that the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only way to truly change a person's heart. And it is the heart-change which truly changes the person. Wardens in Texas now advocate to

have our graduates sent to their prisons."

Want to learn more about this ministry? Three of its graduates have penned a book about it, "Exiles, a Prisoner's Daily Devotional," which is available on Amazon.

Those interested in helping Heart of Texas can find details at heartoftexasfoundation.org or by calling 832-449-8126.

Focus: Clear Creek Community Church has

moved one of its congregations out of a Friendswood school and onto its own dedicated campus on FM 528. We'll have details on this soon.

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