

## **GARY WYDER: PROFILE IN SERVICE FOR THE OUTSIDER**

I first met Gary Wyder in September 1992, while he made a tour of the Texas prison system with the late Wes Whitt. Gary wanted to know everything about doing a prison ministry so he could carry those ideas back to Florida. Wes was a great one to show Gary what we were doing.

Immediately, Gary struck me as one with an abundance of energy, a big smile and a booming voice. I saw one who was positive, inspired and committed to helping men and women behind bars.



Gary introduced me to all the chaplains in the Florida prisons by inviting me to do one of our earliest training seminars. It was there that I met Harry K. Singletary, Director of all Florida prisons. Since he was a Christian, it was a temptation to ask him to adopt NLB for all his prisons. But he, Gary, and I knew that he would have negative feedback if that was done. Gary has done a great job by going to each Chaplain, explaining NLB and then recruiting and training volunteers to carry out the program. This is Gary's story of NLB being used in Florida. Gary has been using the NLB materials and teaching method for 28 years. Gary, thank you for sharing your story. I am inspired by your success. I am sure others will also be inspired as they learn more in Gary's own words.

One Wednesday evening in June (1980), George Bible, one of our elders asked, "How would you like to go to prison?" I said, "What are you, nuts?" George had recently begun some Bible studies with inmates at Stone Mountain Correctional, a work camp in an Atlanta, Georgia – a suburb of Stone Mountain.

I had been a Christian for almost three years and was eager to be involved in some ministry. I had shown the Jule Miller filmstrips, done door knocking and been involved in several Gospel campaigns. All were great learning experiences but were also temporary activities. George knew I did not grow up in the church and had been involved in drinking and drugging before becoming a Christian just before my 27<sup>th</sup> birthday.

I went with George for several Tuesday evenings and then he turned the Bible study over to me. The work began through Lowell Vines, an inmate. Lowell had been a Bible teacher in the church and his stepdad was a preacher. Lowell's wife died after an extended, painful bout with cancer, and his business failed. Lowell was angry with God and turned to drinking. He was charged with a DUI and someone was hurt. When he got to prison, Lowell realized that what happened was not God's fault and he repented. He began to teach others the Gospel. They wanted to be baptized, but one inmate was not allowed to baptize another, so he called the nearest congregation of the Lord's church. That was the Stone Mountain congregation that George and I attended.

I was challenged by the questions inmates asked and was excited by their eagerness to learn what the Bible said. It was a ministry well suited to me, for if I had not come to the Lord, I would have either overdosed or been in prison due to my drug and alcohol

abuse. I was thrilled to let these men know there was a better way to live. Today, I urge others to get involved in this ministry and not wait until you get invited.

The ministry grew from one night a week to three. I began working with some men at the work release center in Atlanta. I believed that most of the men I studied with would succeed with some Bible teaching, encouragement, and love. I was very naïve! Their addiction to various substances, bad relationships with women, repressed anger and resentments needed a whole lot more treatment and time than I was able to offer. The Lord loves many that never respond favorably to Him. This occurs daily in this ministry.

Though the results were not what I expected, I learned to be a more effective Bible teacher and planted good seed in men's hearts. I worked as an insurance agent and attended Southeastern Biblical Institute (SBI), a preacher training school and work of the Chestnut Drive congregation in Doraville, Georgia. Upon graduation in the summer of 1982, I had hoped to continue in the insurance business, the prison ministry, and possibly preach for a small congregation farther outside of Atlanta.

But the Lord had other plans. The Lake Butler Church of Christ in Florida had been involved in prison ministry since 1955 at Union Correctional in nearby Raiford (built in 1913). They recently celebrated 100 years of operation (I'm not sure if that is a good or bad thing). Church of Christ services had been held at Raiford since the late 1950's with up to sixty in attendance. They even produced their own bulletin. In 1974, Sam Long was the preacher at Lake Butler and he took a year off from pulpit preaching and to go around the State of Florida to interest others in prison ministry. A few were already involved (notably Frank Parker of Sebring, who remains active in today).

Harry Whitt was hired by the Lake Butler congregation as their first full-time prison minister. Harry never knew a stranger and developed ministries at other area prisons. In 1966, Lake Butler opened the Reception and Medical Center (RMC). Every inmate coming into the State prison system began their incarceration at RMC. It also had the State's prison hospital, which was a fruitful ministry over the years. The church sponsored "Operation Bible," to provide a KJV Bible to every inmate coming into the system. Harry had a huge heart but was not the best organizer. He went back to house painting yet continued as a volunteer in Lake City where I first met him. I learned a lot from Harry and he continued to do prison ministry until his death in Abilene, Texas.

Greg Smith, the preacher at Lake Butler, grew up with David Anguish a fellow student of mine at SBI. Lake Butler was looking for a replacement for Harry and David told Greg of my involvement in prisons. It was March 1982. Florida was hosting their Annual Prison Workshop that year in Lake Placid. Greg invited me to the workshop to consider the fulltime prison ministry job at Lake Butler. I was excited to go to a prison workshop to learn what others were doing and hopefully hone my skills. I could not imagine moving from Atlanta to Lake Butler, where all of Union County had one traffic light!

The workshop was terrific. While Atlanta had five county jails, two State prisons and one Federal prison, I knew of no one else involved in the ministry. Greg introduced me to

area Chaplains. Chaplain Eldon Cornett made a great impression on me. He told of the great need for volunteers and how the prisons were very receptive. In Atlanta, even with all the prisons, there were many denominations waiting in line to get inside. After prayer and another visit with my wife, Pat, we made the decision to accept the work and moved to Lake Butler in July of 1982. I made a five-year commitment. *“Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin”* (Zechariah 4:10 NLT).

It was easy to expand the work. At one time, I went to seven prisons a week. I had hoped that if the doors were open, it would be easy to find volunteers to help and ultimately take over the work at some prisons. Volunteers came, but not as many nor as quickly as expected. Expectations can be a dangerous thing! I mostly worked with *lifers* at Union Correctional and Florida State Prison where “Sparky” (the electric chair) was housed. I went to Death Row weekly and continued the ministry at RMC.

There was a network of jail-prison volunteers from the church all over Florida. Annual workshops held in different cities. We referred inmates to each other as they transferred or were released. Three congregations in Gainesville (twenty miles from Lake Butler) were involved. Most notable was University City who began in 1974 at the Gainesville Road Prison and Work Release Center. There were scores of volunteers this one congregation over the years. Many were students at University of Florida who continued prison ministry as they graduated and moved on.

In 1983, the Road Prison was looking for a part time Chaplain. Greg Smith was now the minister at University City and asked if I was interested. It was a very different work than with “lifers.” I met with Warden Hinson and went along with the volunteers, deciding to accept the position. These men were near release and I was able to work with them and their families who generally lived nearby. While there were only 100 men there, we held services or Bible studies four times a week and every other Saturday. We baptized 50 men a year. As the prison grew, they wanted a full time Chaplain. I was unwilling to leave the work at RMC in Lake Butler and Union in Raiford, so I resigned. It was a great learning experience, and it became clear that re-entry was going to play a vital role in the success of these men.

We often hear inmates speak about the Bible and their faith and we assume by their words, that they are spiritually mature. Knowing the Bible and living it are vastly different. That is why the New Life Behavior curriculum is a blessing to this ministry. It helps students change from the inside out. In September of 1992 I spent a week with Wes Whitt of Christ’s Prison Fellowship in Texas. We did a whirlwind tour of area prisons and met Emmett Solomon, the Director of Chaplains. My introduction to NLB was in a class Chaplain Bill Brewer facilitated at the Michael Unit. The participants had been studying NLB for some time. The men were brutally honest and open with each other – a rare trait in prison classes. They held each other accountable. I quickly saw what NLB could accomplish and that we needed it in Florida. I also met H.M. Motsinger. While HM was the teacher, he came with a servant attitude and asked open ended questions. His method was ideal for gaining maximum participation from the men.

I took NLB back to Florida. Some workers were excited about it, others were happy with what they had. It seemed the women workers saw the greatest need and made the most use of the courses. Dr. Mary Green of Cortez worked with many abused women and put NLB right to work. Shortly after that, HM came to make a presentation of NLB to Florida Chaplains. At that time brother Harry K. Singletary, Jr. was the Secretary of Florida's prison system. Harry was always willing to speak at workshops, train others and help in every way possible. Harry passed away unexpectedly in February of 2010. The Chaplains loved the NLB material, and it opened a door for many workers around Florida. The State considered purchasing the material for all prisons, but ultimately decided it was too "religious" for state funding. This was a blessing in disguise since the state would dictate how it would be used and likely have employees forced to teach it who were not enthused about it.

Working with prisoners is easy. We go to a facility at a specified time, teach class, conduct a service, or have Spiritual Advisor visits. It is scheduled and limited in scope. The prison takes care of the basic needs of inmates. Working with those released from prison is extremely challenging. Their needs are much greater, their problems are magnified and often the need is immediate. In 1995, I became a board member of House of Hope in Gainesville, Florida. Initially, we only received men but 10 years later, a separate female facility opened. Working with those released hones our teaching skills with those still incarcerated. We see roots of behavior that are not so impactful while still incarcerated but turn into major character flaws and lead to relapse upon release. I remained on the board until 2010 when I left to join the board of Off The Chain Ministry in the Jacksonville area (a re-entry program for members of the church). I still see and fellowship with many of the graduates of House of Hope.

"Off the Chain" was founded by Daryl Townsend. Daryl was the pulpit preacher of the Middleburg congregation. He volunteered at Clay County Jail. "Nick" was a promising student of his who came to RMC. Daryl wanted to follow up with Nick. He heard about our work, called me, made some visits and soon became involved as a volunteer. Like many preachers, he was excited about the "field white unto harvest." Several years later he left pulpit ministry to begin full time prison ministry. In 2004, Daryl and the brethren from Middleburg became the largest group of volunteers at the first *faith-based* prison in the U.S. at Lawtey Correctional. NLB has always been part of the curriculum the church offered. Soon after, Denny Freeman got involved on a full-time basis. Later, Carlton McPeak became involved (going to Suwannee Correctional five days a week and uses NLB) as well as Greg Whipple who had been a missionary in Belize for eleven years.

One of the men Daryl worked with was getting out. He was a sex offender. Where could he go? Sex offenders are the lepers of today's society. Daryl and his wife (Missy) bought a mobile home in Middleburg that housed three men. The need grew quickly, and another property (housing six men) was purchased. This work has enjoyed great success as the men are well screened and held to a high standard of accountability upon release. I taught Bible class there on Tuesdays. We have done many addiction classes there (including NLB's *Christians Against Substance Abuse*) along with

*Managing My Anger*. They have been the most requested courses we teach in and out of prison.

For those interested in developing an aftercare program, I would suggest the following. First, it requires a large number of dedicated volunteers. Secondly, start small (two or three clients). Third, screen the applicants well. We look for those who are broken, humble, and willing to submit to authority and godly counsel. Those are necessary traits. But most importantly, they must demonstrate these traits while still incarcerated. If you have these traits in those you work with, it remains a very challenging ministry. If these traits are lacking, it is an *impossible* ministry.

In 2000, one of the sisters at church asked me to visit her pregnant daughter who was in jail on drug charges. I visited several times, but quickly realized this was a work for a woman. Lynn Paden of University City started visiting her. Lynn saw this as a great mission opportunity, spoke with the Chaplain, and received a weekly time to conduct Bible studies with the women at the Alachua County Jail in Gainesville. Lynn recruited other women including my wife, Pat. Eight sisters go twice a week for Bible study. In 2016, the sisters explored opportunities at our Women's facility in Lowell. Now, Oretha Walker, Becky Barclift, and Lottie Colton go twice weekly to teach NLB's *Managing My Anger* and *A Sense of Self*. Both the Chaplains and the inmates love the program and other classes are being planned.

Addiction and prison go hand-in-hand. Prison is known as "the poor's drug treatment program." At several of the National Jail/Prison Workshops, I heard about 12 step classes congregations conducted. They were a natural for those coming out of jail and prison and were a great outreach to the community. Of course, many faithful Christians also struggle with various kind of addictions.

On March 12, 2007 we started a weekly B-12 (Bible based 12 step) meeting at University City congregation in Gainesville where I attend. We continue to meet weekly. There have been several baptisms out of this group and a number are faithful and still active in B-12. University City took a BIG step forward in 2009 and hired a fulltime Recovery Minister. Elder Laurie Philpot got the idea from the North Atlanta congregation where Bill Hale served as Recovery Minister. Bruce Simer, who was very active in 12 step programs was our first Minister. Bruce died in 2016 and Ron McQuinn currently serves in this position. Ron is a certified counselor which helps. Laurie Philpot stepped down as Director of the Program due to health reasons and they asked me to assume the role. which I did. This is a great outreach for re-entry programs, drug treatment facilities and those we have worked with while incarcerated.

There is much more to say and many more names to mention. One of my key mentors was Sam Hill, who with his wife (Myra), volunteered at the Women's prison for 15 years. Bob Dreiling, retired minister, worked with us fulltime for 2 years. Jim Edris, fulltime worker for 10 years, introduced HM to Felix Garlitos of Manila. Bob Burkert, who while the preacher at Lake Butler, came faithfully to the prisons for 10 years. Tom Dugan

("Mr. Organizer") retired from the Air Force and did prison ministry fulltime in the Florida Panhandle until his death.

Most importantly, thousands have been baptized in Florida. I hear daily from men that are out, staying clean and sober, faithful in church attendance, and have been reunited with family members, raising their children in the Lord, etc. Several are now prison volunteers. I urge you to heed the Great Commission. Get involved!

Gary, thank you so very much. You are a true servant for our Lord and those who have strayed. (HM Motsinger)