

VIEW



## Finding God's purpose in jail Assistant chaplain shares story of prison, redemption

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Fort Wayne resident Elisha Harris spends many hours weekly at the Allen County Jail as chaplain's assistant.

While chaplain Dick Sievers speaks to area churches and groups about the work being done at the jail to minister to inmates, Harris spends time with each of the jail's 800 prisoners, talking to them about giving their lives to God.

His perspective on the subject is unique because he knows what it's like to be incarcerated.

Harris, 62, was arrested for the first time at age 12. That arrest for theft was the beginning of several decades of imprisonment for him as he searched for a purpose in his life.

As a young adult, he abused drugs and alcohol, which led to time spent in various incarceration facilities, including Pendleton Correctional Facility, Indiana State Prison in Michigan City and the Federal Correctional Institution at Terre Haute. An arrest in 1989 for burglary resulted in a sentence of 12 years.

By now, Harris was 40 years old and had spent half of his life behind bars. One parole officer tried to talk to him about his relationship with God, but he refused to listen.

"I was a crack addict and a broken man," he said. "I considered suicide because I didn't know what to do."

In 1989, Harris was being held in a three-man cell at the Allen County Jail following another drug arrest. With only two beds in the cell, one man was forced to sleep on a mattress on the floor. He was the designated floor sleeper.

One night, while lying on the floor, he saw a Bible under the bunk bed. He flipped through the pages and read the words, "Come to me all you who are burdened and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

Harris wanted that rest. He prayed, "God, if you are real, come into my life and help me."

Immediately, he felt relieved, lighter. "Everything looked different and new," he recalled. "Even the inmates seemed friendlier."

For the next six years, he read his Bible and asked questions of the jail chaplains about what he had read. After he was transferred to Westville Correctional Facility, he continued attending chapel services. Out of his desire to obey the Bible, Harris married Brenda, the woman with whom he had been living before his incarceration, while he was at Westville.

After his release from prison in 1995, he returned to live in Fort Wayne. When asked by pastors of Fort Wayne area churches to share his story with their congregations, Harris agreed to do it. But when Allen County Jail chaplain Jessie Beasley asked him to go back to the jail to share his story, he refused.

"I just got out of there and don't want to go back!" he told Beasley.

Harris eventually was persuaded to speak at the jail. The experience was so positive that he applied as a volunteer chaplain. He served in that capacity for four years.

In 2000, he was hired as the first assistant jail chaplain, a position he holds today. In addition to counseling the inmates about God, Harris helps jail chaplain Dick Sievers conduct baptisms, Bible studies and jail chapel services, teach classes, perform hospital visits, lead a group of volunteers Christmas caroling to the inmates and help with death notifications.

"I enjoy working with chaplain Sievers," he said. "He's good at handling the administrative work and talking to people about the chaplaincy program. I like talking with the inmates about turning their lives over to God."

Until recently, Harris worked at E&M Tire in Fort Wayne. Now he manages Jubilee House, a transitional nonresidential facility for men who are released from prison and need a place to live. He founded Jubilee House in 2000. Since then, it has housed hundreds of men.

Harris also serves as pastor of Oak Ridge Temple Church and Ministries on Evans Street in Fort Wayne and sits on various boards, including Community Corrections. He and his wife have three daughters and two sons, one of whom was killed in 1993.

Harris' daily workload is full, but he's content using his time to help others.

"I know I have a purpose in life," he said. "The Lord brought me out of a lot. I've come a long way with God, but I still have a ways to go."