

Honoring God's Command in the New Year

God commanded us to visit those in prison and yet most of us will never set foot inside of a prison. We are comfortable with the idea that criminals should be locked away and stripped of their rights for the crimes that they have committed. Some of these men will serve their time and be reintroduced into society. Others will never again know life outside of the prison walls, but should we see them as disposable souls that we should just discard? Aren't we obligated as Christians to try and win these souls for God?

I began correspondence with an inmate in the Virginia Department of Corrections in 2018, believing I could serve as a good Christian example and be a source of strength and support for this young man. Through a long chain of events, I also began correspondence with two other men that had each already served over twenty years and had that much or more time left to serve.

God certainly does work in mysterious ways, for it was them that inspired me and strengthened my faith as no one else could. I learned that there is hope beyond the bars and men hungry to share it. They want others to be filled with the hope of redemption and the security of everlasting life and together, *Hope Beyond the Bars* was born.

Hope Beyond the Bars is a prison ministry designed to introduce inmates to the glory of God through the gift of their own artistic talents.

This program invites us on the outside to look beyond the bars that we want to believe can so simply define the good from the bad. To look beyond those bars, beyond the sin to seek the sinner; not to ensure condemnation but to help assure redemption.

Helping inmates realize the value of their God given talents can be the first step in seeing themselves as worthy. Worthy of God's gifts, love, grace, forgiveness and ultimately redemption.

This program encourages men to use their time constructively to design unique pieces of black & white art, poetry or decorative writing along with appropriate scripture passages to create one of a kind, Christian, greeting cards.

These cards will be given as thank you gifts to donors in order to share the program with all that receive a note from that donor. In turn, each artist will be sponsored through a percentage of donations to their commissary account to encourage continued participation in the program.

Helping to facilitate the use of their talents into a marketable skill will provide inmates with a sense of fulfillment and purpose where few opportunities currently exist. The cards will not only become a source of funds for these men, but in the creation of the cards, they will serve as a conduit into the word of God.

Each man in the program will be provided with a book of scripture that is divided into categories with which they will choose passages to include with their cards. Designing cards for *illness, condolences, support, birthday, all occasion*, etc. will enlighten the men to the love and grace of God available to each of us through all circumstances of our lives.

Scripture tells us, *"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ."* ~ 1 Peter 4:10. Please help us give inmates the ability to respond to God's command.

Hope Beyond the Bars has been awarded the Virginia United Methodist Special Program Grant for 2020. We are very grateful for this incredible gift, but we still need your support. The only way each artist will receive funds as a direct result of his or her artwork is through donors who request their cards at the time of their donation. Please visit our website and support our artists. Hopebeyondthebars.org

We currently only have the two founding artists, but through the Special Program Grant, we hope to add an additional ten artists by the end of the year. I would like to share a few words from those founding artists:

Joe is our founding visual artist. He says, "I prayed and asked God if I was truly worthy, to give me a sign or someone to help me. Then, Abigail came along. She nurtured and reinstated my faith. God has taken the blindfold off my eyes and illuminated my spirit by remarkably renewing my faith in Jesus. Jesus is changing me from the inside out regardless of my 60-year sentence. We all fall short of the glory of God, no matter who we are or where we come from."

Andy is our founding literary artist. He says, "The power of evil can be compelling and mustering up the strength to combat it is exhausting. I've been incarcerated for 24 years and I'm grateful to have this program that doesn't use my past as a measuring stick to judge my character now. Searching the scriptures with thoughts of uplifting others is extremely powerful. The long-term benefits are immeasurable. I am so motivated and strengthened by this program. I'm thankful for this opportunity. It is a real privilege to be a part of."

I am so grateful for the unlikely friends that God brought into my life. I read that one of the highest callings of a Christian is to invest in another man's soul. I am so grateful that I have. Will you join me?

I pray that you will help in our mission to share the life giving, redemptive power of our Lord Jesus Christ with these men seeking and sharing Hope Beyond the Bars.

Please visit our website: Hopebeyondthebars.org

For it is written:

God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ~ Romans 8:8

I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you. ~ Isaiah 44:22

Written by Abigail Grace

Hope Beyond the Bars is a mission of Scottsville United Methodist Church | 158 E. Main St. | PO Box 280 | Scottsville VA 24590.