

On Sacred Ground

Ruth Graham at Angola Prison



Angola Prison Welcomes Ruth Graham & Friends

Thoughts of prison do not much occupy most people's minds on a daily basis. But when people do think of prison, they would most likely hesitate to associate the word "hope" with such places of human confinement.

And yet, there's no better word than "hope" to describe the environment for the Ruth Graham & Friends Get Growing Conference at Louisiana's Angola State Prison.

It was hope that drew more than 1,000 inmates to participate in the Angola conference, held Sept. 18-19. Hope for greater understanding of themselves and their lives in relation to the eternal fire of Christ. Hope for many, indeed, that they might be wisely counseled in ways of continuing on their individual paths of faithful discipleship.

Moral Rehabilitation Key To Angola

Warden Burl Cain invited Ruth & Friends to present their Get Growing conference as part of his ongoing effort to foster moral rehabilitation among the inmate population. Cain is on record as stating that he believes moral rehabilitation is the only type of rehabilitation that works among incarcerated



individuals. It's his goal to make Angola a safe and humane place, for the benefit of the inmates, their guardians – and the public at large. Even though the vast majority of men at



Jacque Skog (left) ministering to inmate on Angola's deathrow; men taking in one of the conference talks (upper right); Warden Burl Cain explains an aspect of prison administration to Ruth Graham during a pre-conference prison tour for the Friends.

Angola will never again see freedom, a not-insignificant 15-20% of the inmates do return to free society at some point in their lives.

Angola is the largest maximum security prison in America, housing some 5,100 inmates. Located on 18,000 acres of prime Mississippi Delta farmland some 60 miles northwest of Baton Rouge, Angola was once known as the Bloodiest Prison in America. Inmates lived in constant fear of their safety; violence among the prisoners was a daily occurrence.

But Angola underwent a remarkable transformation for the better in recent years. Gone are the days when bloodshed was a daily occurrence. Much of the credit goes to Warden Cain and his staff, who have worked hard to improve the conditions for inmates and prison employees alike. Key to that effort is the prison's emphasis on making sure inmates are treated humanely and given opportunities to grow and find meaning for their lives.

"They are people too," Cain says of the inmates. "We can't forget them."

Where Sentences Are Long, Many Find Meaning In Faith

These are men who, for the most part, will never leave Angola. The average sentence is 90 years, and only 10-15% of the inmates there are ever freed. Yet, they are avid in both their thirst for spiritual knowledge and in learning new ways to apply that knowledge to their particular situations.

To that end, the prison has gone to such lengths as to allow the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary to establish an on-site branch that offers inmates the ability to obtain



two- and four-year college degrees. Graduates of the four-year program are fully accredited, earning the same type of degree that one would get at a major institution of advanced learning such as Louisiana State University, Cain said.

Interestingly enough, the service of the on-site college are much in demand by the inmates. Since it was established, more than 150 inmates have earned degrees. Those who become accredited through the seminary are put to work at the prison as inmate ministers, serving the prison population at large. Most importantly, they are viewed as the true leaders within the prison population. They are in effect the gang leaders within the prison, but their allegiance is not to a particular gang code such as the Crips or the Bloods but to



On stage in the prison's Main Chapel Friday night, the Friends introduce themselves.

The Conference Took Place In Prison Chapels



God and the Christian Cross. They are the facilitators of peace within the prison.

Not all Angola inmates adhere to the warden's program of moral rehabilitation. Those who don't – in essence, those who refuse to work on reforming the behavioral patterns that resulted in their incarceration in the first place – are held in separate facilities from the inmates who have chosen the moral reform route. They did not have direct access to the RGF conference, although they could listen in on the prison's in-house radio station and also view the plenary sessions via broadcasts on closed circuit TV. On the other hand, those inmates who have demonstrated their desire to change their behav-

ior in positive ways were given the opportunity to attend the RGF conference.

It was to this audience of men, comprising almost one-fifth the total inmate population at Angola, that Ruth Graham & Friends addressed themselves during their weekend sojourn at the prison.

Programs such as the Ruth Graham & Friends conference, with its emphasis on helping individuals deal with significant life-controlling issues such as depression, anger, abuse, addiction, pornography and control, are seen by Cain and the prison administration as key to accomplishing the goal of lasting, positive behavioral change among the inmates.

'The best conference we've ever had' - Warden Burl Cain

Inmates filled the 800-seat Main Chapel at Angola on Friday night to hear Graham introduce her friends and deliver her own personal life testimony. It was a telling moment. How would this group of prison-hardened men react to the words of a woman making reference to the Biblical story of the Prodigal Son as her means of revealing God's encompassing love and compassion for broken people? Would they dis-



count her experience as not being of relevance to their own? Would they make room in their hearts and minds for Ruth and her story? Would they see the hope for themselves to be found in the images of brokenness and its importance to the holy tapestry?

RGF musicians Huntley Brown, Jason Catron and Greg Cooley warmed the audience up with some special musical moments. Brown's gospel-flavored classical piano work contrasted perfectly with Catron's majestic singing voice – backed by the always tight artistry of his accompanist, piano player Cooley. After the musicians performed, it was no contest – this was going to be a special night, and weekend, that would be long-remembered by the people at Angola and by the RGF crew as well.

***Keeping The Faith,
Warden Okay Lights-
Off In Main Chapel***

Adding to the drama of the evening was the fact that the chapel was shrouded in darkness as Graham spoke. In most



places, the absence of light during a speaker's talk would not have drawn comment. But this was Angola prison, where the watchful eyes of authority need to keep close tabs on inmates whenever they gather in groups. An inmate had dimmed the lights as a way of focusing attention on Ruth and her message. It was a mistake. The lights are *never* turned off in such situa-

tions. But it was a mistake that the prison – and in particular Warden Cain, who had assumed a seat in the midst of the inmates himself – was willing to live with for this event.

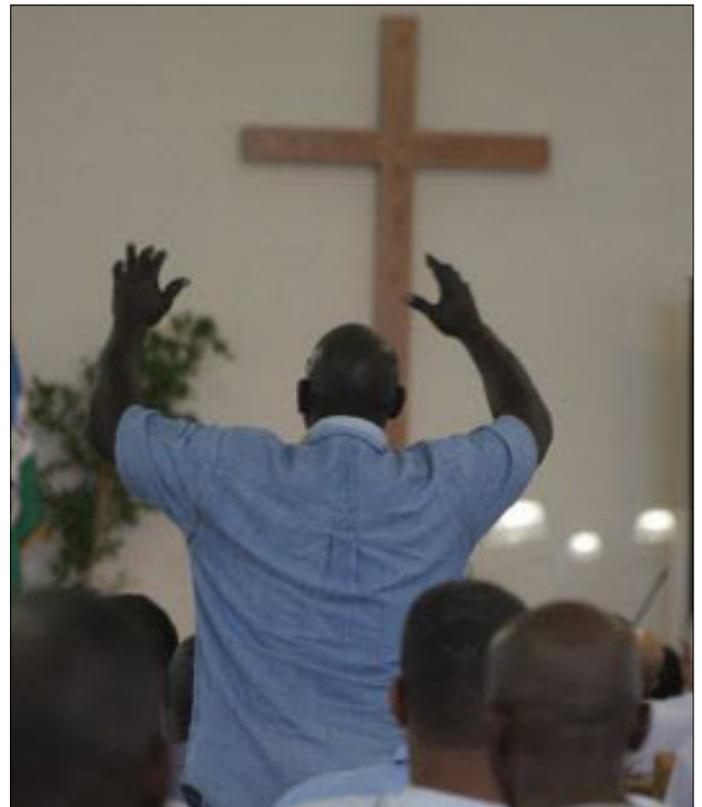
The inmates themselves allayed any concerns that the prison had about operating in low light conditions, and/or whether female speakers such as Graham would be well-received. Inmates paid respectful and what appeared to be avid attention to Graham and her message and applauded loudly and warmly at the end. As for the lighting situation, if it caused any anxiety, it was certainly not noticeable to the outside observer.

Angola Chaplain Robert Toney and Warden Burl Cain introduced the prison to the evening's events. This was indeed a prison-wide performance, as the evening events were carried live on Closed Circuit TV and by in-house radio station KLSP. Inmate musicians kicked the evening off with a heart-rending burst of song and piano virtuosity.

RGF Executive Director Tex Reardon took over from Chaplain Toney, stating that he felt that the inmates at Angola were "secure in your eternity here."

Reardon drew strong approval from the inmates when he said that the reason he joined the RGF ministry was because he was so impressed with Ruth's vision to make the church a safe place – and by her commitment to "meet people where they are" rather than try to force them to conform to an artificial image of Christian perfection.

Sense Of Hope At Angola Almost Palpable



“I don’t know how to adequately express how I have felt today,” said Graham at the open, referring in large measure to her mid-day tour of the prison with the entire RGF group. “What I sense about Angola is that this



is a place of hope, not despair. I sense it more here than on the outside.”

“We are all sinners, saved by grace and doing the best we can,” Graham said near the end of her remarks. That drew an

appreciative response from the audience. More than a few heads nodded in understanding when she recounted how she had felt at the time of her first husband’s admission of marital betrayal. She was the forgotten victim, she said, when everyone seemed to embrace her husband after he openly repented for his sins. That bred resentment in her, she admitted, and resentment, she learned, is a poison that inflicts grievous harm on its bearer. Better,



she said, to forgive – to take to heart the story of the Prodigal Son and its image of the Loving Father who forgives all transgressions among his children.

Friday’s activities set the stage for Saturday’s full-scale blitz of RGF workshops. All four of the prison’s



chapels hosted speaker/workshop events throughout the day, beginning at 7:30 a.m. Meanwhile a contingent of RGF speakers including Graham, Kim Ketola, and Jacquie Skog traveled 75

miles southeast to the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women in St. Gabriel to present a parallel Get Growing conference for female inmates.

Tal Prince: Gospel, Not Porn, True Balm For The Soul

“Adulterers, murderers, thieves, I am one of you.” In speaking those words – a paraphrase of words used by Jesus himself in the Bible -- to a group of inmates assembled for

“America’s true pastime is porn.”

his Angola workshop on pornography, Tal Prince established a visceral connection with the men that served him and his subject well. Ladling out a thick, potent blend of gospel, sound practical advice and self-confession, Prince worked the room with the fervor of the evangelist.

“Hot dogs, apple pie and porn. Porn is the national pastime,” said Prince. “I was incarcerated in my personal prison of porn for 24 years.”

Expecting some push-back from the men – they are locked away from women, most for the rest of their lives – Prince still

stuck to his guns and called on them to eschew porn and its momentary pleasures.

“There is no safe amount of porn, just like there is no safe amount of crystal meth,” Prince said.

“FBI studies have shown that the one thing all serial killers have in common is porn,” Prince said.

Steering clear of his usual emphasis on the Internet-based explosion in pornography – inmates are isolated from the Internet, of course – Prince scored significant points with the men when he spoke about the harm done when fathers are distant and unloving toward their young children. It was a moment of truth, it seemed, with many in

the audience nodding in agreement. “Guys did come up to me and talk about how their dads never loved,” Prince said later.

Porn is a balm for those who feel shamed and rejected, he said. But it is an illusionary fix – shame is at the heart of all addiction, he said. And sex, he said, is not a need – it is a want.

“What you need to have is the healing balm of the Gospel,” he said.

Some of the men asked him about making amends to the women in his life that he had hurt. Prince said he made amends by

seeking them out and truthfully apologizing to them. Writing letters of sincere apology to those they had hurt could be one way for inmates to seek to make amends to former wives and girlfriends, he said.

Aleta Nichols: God Has Need Of Each Of You

Aleta Nichols also threw away most of



her usual script about addictions for her Angola visit. “What you’re going to hear from me is that God loves you. Because you are breathing, God loves you,” she said.

“I came here hoping to connect with you as human beings,” she said. “I don’t really care what you’ve done. I want to see you for what you are, not what you’ve done.”

Drugs and addiction were a key factor in the lives of many of the workshop attendees, she said. When she asked how many had been involved in drugs and addiction prior to their incarceration, virtually all indicated that they had used them. That didn’t surprise her.

“The way I look at it, drugs and alcohol make you go out of your mind,” she explained.

Addictions are what people hide from themselves and others, she told the men. “It’s the secret in your life that sets in motion the life-controlling issue,” she said. “If you have secrets, you’d better find someone to tell them to – find someone in your life who can see the word of God in you.”

Even inside Angola, there is important work that God expects from the men, she said. “I want you to go out of here and say, ‘God, what can I do for you,’” she said. “Each one of you can influence somebody.”



After one of her workshops, an inmate approached her and asked her why she came to Angola. He said to me, “This is the end of the earth here. This is the bottom. Why would you come here?”

Her response? “I said I really believed we were asked to come by God,” she remembered.

Another inmate said to her, “Never apologize for bringing the Gospel and saying what you say.”

“It was the best conference I have ever attended with Ruth Graham & Friends,” said Nichols. “This is my kind of ministry. Raw and real.”

Dr. Jimmy Ray Lee: The Usefulness Of Brokenness

For Jimmy Ray Lee, the conference was a personal blessing: “I was deeply touched by the atmosphere of God at the prison,” he said. “They – the inmates – probably blessed me more than I blessed them.”

His topic, The Ministry of Rags, proved to be an eye-opener for some of the men, he thought. The Ministry of Rags teaches that “God can take our broken pieces and make a masterpiece from them.” “I could tell that some of them had never thought of that before,” he said.

“It’s what God accomplished for us on the Cross that is what matters,” he told the men. “We are forgiven, thank God.

“We don’t give up,” he added, “because God is not through with us yet. He is still working on us.”

Speaking afterwards, Lee said that “what impressed me so much was the inmate ministers and how knowledgeable they were.”

He was also impressed with the obvious progress Warden Burl Cain and his administration have made in providing the inmates with a humane and positive environment in which to live. “The prison obviously places a value on the dignity of men,” he said. “Hope seemed to be a big word there. Even those men who were lifers, they seemed to have God in their lives.”

Asked to pray during the group’s visit to the execution chamber within the Death Row building, Lee had simply “asked God to help us prevent people from entering this room.”

Reflecting alone afterwards on his experiences at the prison, Lee said he was reminded of the passage in Psalm 79:11: “May the groans of the prisoners arise before you. By the strength of Your hand preserve those who are condemned to die.”

Jacque Skog: How Do You Heal?

Abusive behavior can take place in or out of prison, Jacque Skog told the attendees at her workshop for the inmates at Angola. Controlling rage is an issue with some of the inmates – some of them asked her specifically how to do it. She gave them a three-step process:



- Stop.
- Move away
- Try to listen to what you are saying to yourself

Enraged people are out of control. Rage is a chemical process in the brain, Skog explained. It takes place in the limbic section of the brain. But it takes just three sec-



onds to transfer control of the process from the limbic system to the neo-cortex system of the brain, which is where the rational processes can take control again.

Those three seconds can make all the difference in a person’s life. As one inmate said, it takes just a second to make a mistake.

And then you may have to pay for the mistake for the rest of your life.

Gender differences were never an issue in her workshops, Skog felt (she also presented workshops at the women's correctional institute during the day). "I felt engaged by the inmates all the time," she said.

Her script for the prison was totally new. "I created a whole new Powerpoint presentation for the prison," she said. She wanted to answer the question, How do you heal?

To do that, she talked about her own story in full – for the first time at a Ruth Graham conference. She explained how abuse had affected her own life, both as one abused when she was young, and as an abusive person herself. It was that transparency about her personal experience that likely broke down any psychological barriers between her and the inmates (all of the Ruth Graham & Friends speakers demonstrated this openness).

One inmate in a workshop spontaneously stood up and interrupted her talk to say, "I wanted to say to the men...I apologize to anyone I've hurt and been violent with." He then returned to his seat.

Reflecting on her experience at the prison, Skog said, "I can't identify with the environment, but I can identify with abuse, having been abused and abused myself."

People who are abused early in life learn that they have to be their own authority, she said, because the authority figures in their lives have let them down. When they get older, that mindset can lead to problems – including the kind that lead to incarceration, she said.

"Dysfunction in early life can lead to prison," she said.

Dr. Don Miles: Men, Depression & Anger, A Volatile Mix

Men and women differ significantly in how they experience depression,

said Dr. Don Miles, who led the workshops on Depression.

"Male depression produces a lot of anger. That's not typically true in women," he said.



Since his usual workshops address both male and female depression, he found himself making major recalibrations to his subject matter for the Angola audiences.

"Depression chronically plagues men in prison," he said. "It's hard to know how much of their depression is from being in prison, and how much is clinical."

It was important for them to seek the Lord's love for them, and replace some of their negativity in their self-concepts, "which is how depression becomes so powerful," he said.

He found that the inmates put a lot of their focus on how hard prison life was. That was especially true if they had a wife outside. "The long-term guys tell them (if they're new to prison), that they were going to lose her within four to five years. That seemed to be generally true. And they didn't know how they would survive it."

His response was to put trust in the Lord so that she – the wife – might stay faithful, and to encourage her to keep her vows. That was a tough dilemma, Miles admitted, since the woman also faces her own set of challenges living in the outside world.



Depression could well have been a contributing factor to the actions that put some of the men behind bars, Miles said. He recalled saying that “some of you hear that because you had depression, and you weren’t in Christ, you didn’t have the resources and the anger got the best of you.” He got some hard looks from some of the guys when he said that, he recalled.

Overall, it felt like quite a different dynamic from the usual RGF conference, Miles added. “The quality of their – the men’s – Christianity was very good and strong in general,” he said. “I experienced more commitment and fervor for the Lord in the prison than in most churches.”

A lot of the men acknowledged that they could recognize themselves in what Miles was saying about male depression. Some asked specifically if and when the Living Free Depression small group would be starting – an indication of how serious they were about addressing their issues.

“This is a battle to overcome life-controlling issues,” Miles noted. He told the inmates “you can still apply the same truth of God, but know that it is a battle.”

Never give up, Miles also counseled. “God knew when he made you that you would be in prison one day, and he needs you here for now. You have a future not just in the next life, but here today.”

Steve Wiese: Clear Evidence Of A Desire To Grow In Faith

Doing double-duty as usual was Steve Wiese, who presented workshops on both An-



ger and The Illusion of Control. In both cases, he changed his approach for the prison. “I purposely set myself up not as an expert but



as someone who could share ideas with the inmates,” he said.

“It was an overwhelming, sobering experience,” he said. He was impressed with the sincerity of the inmates in taking in what he and the entire Ruth Graham & Friends team had to say. “The inmates have no particular motivation to be involved,” he said. Yet I saw the evidence that they are worshipping, listening, wanting to grow in faith.”

As always, Ruth Graham herself closed out the conference with her talk on the need for forgiveness. Once again, the 800-seat main chapel was filled to overflowing as Graham spoke of the blessing that is forgiveness. She emphasized that sometimes, it is important that people forgive themselves – and even God Himself – in order to move forward in life.

“In truth,” she said, “you and I have an audience of One.”

For those men at Angola who have chosen to lead a faith-based existence, those words may indeed be the most hopeful of all.

