

**BELIEF**

SEMINARY

# Transforming prison culture from inside out

By Ken Chitwood

Plenty of seminaries train pastors for ministry in prisons, but few train prisoners for ministry behind bars.

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (SWBTS) is doing just that, with 77 inmate/students serving life sentences at the high-security Darrington Unit penitentiary in Brazoria County.

While there are other prison seminary programs that train students for ministry once they are released from detention, this program works with those who will never get out.

"The idea is to train these guys to be missionary pastors in the prisons," said the Rev. Benjamin Phillips, who directs the program, "they will be change agents in the prison culture to transform guys, staying in and getting out, with the Gospel."

Modeled after a similar program at Angola prison in Louisiana, the SWBTS strategy started in spring 2011, funded by the Heart of Texas Foundation. While the program is new, it is highly popular. The first round of applicants totaled 150, with only 40 being accepted into the program.

Pursuing a bachelor's degree in Biblical Studies, students take courses in English, government, history, science and math and add on divinity studies, studying Old Testament, New Testament, theology, practical ministry and ministry electives. Courses are taught by the fully accredited faculty at SWBTS.

In its second year, the program is making



Marrison Hooper, center, and his seminary classmates pray before breaking for lunch at the Darrington Unit in Rosharon. Hooper, who's serving five life sentences, says the class is "our way of helping guys in here."



Raymond Ramirez, prays during a seminary class offered by Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.



Rev. Ben Phillips, of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and his seminary class discuss some of the goals of the program.

an impact in the lives of "lifers," prisoners who are sentenced to life behind bars.

"These guys are in because they committed serious crimes," said Phillips, "with a guy

like that, inside a prison culture, they get a lot of respect, a lot of credibility."

He added, "When somebody like that transforms from a selfish criminal to a selfless

minister who meets fellow prisoners' needs with the word of God, that kind of character becomes contagious."

Prison authorities reported that prisoner-on-prisoner violence has gone down since the program began. The warden told Phillips that he attributes this to the seminarians who are sharing their faith and encouraging and counseling fellow inmates.

The Rev. David Schultz, host of ELM Houston's "Engaging Truth" radio program on KKHT 100.7 FM, has featured the SWBTS program on his show and expressed that most pastors and secular observers will want statistics to back up such claims.

Some critics say that the program is not the most efficient use of a prisoner's time. Phillips said, "People say, 'These guys did what they did to

get there, so what's the big deal about helping them? They deserve this.'"

Baylor University is conducting a study to measure the impact of this type of program on the culture of Darrington and whether it improves the prospects of prisoners touched by it. The first round of preliminary data will be available in three years.

The Rev. John Cain, pastor of Gethsemane Lutheran Church in Houston, visited the "lifer" seminarians at Angola and Darrington. He said he saw firsthand how the program transformed lives and how that could eventually reshape the prison as a whole.

"If you think about a prison as a basically closed system, and each year you graduate 50 to 100 morally strengthened inmate missionaries into that system, it is only a matter of time before

the 'good guys' exert a positive culture change in their community inside the prison walls," he said.

Cain said that he found himself alone in a room with some of the seminarians and felt their newfound spiritual life had given them "new reason for living."

For now, Phillips and other supporters says they already see a positive change taking place and are dedicated to seeing the program succeed, regardless of setbacks or opposition.

"Whatever it takes to transform these men for the better is worth it," he said, "if we can see change happen in men's lives in prison, then when they come out we know they will be able to contribute to society."

Read more of Ken Chitwood blog, *Sacred Duty*, at [houstonbelief.com](http://houstonbelief.com). Write to him at [ken.chitwood@hotmail.com](mailto:ken.chitwood@hotmail.com)

## Programs emphasize group support and prayer

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and incorporated the fast from the Daniel Plan into its program. (Its 2013 program kicks off Sunday.) Moncada decided to try the program even though she felt hopeless about her weight.

She had struggled with weight her entire life, mainly because she grew up eating delicious but fatty foods at the family table, she said. She continued those habits into adulthood and not long ago had a wake-up call: Her 38-year-old cousin had a heart attack. She knew her own life would be cut short if she didn't change.

"One night out of desperation, I prayed for my life and the longevity of all our lives, my husband and my kids," she says. "When this Health and Fitness Challenge came about, I wanted it so bad but still had doubts that it would

**Resources**

**First Place 4 Health:** [www.firstplace4health.com/](http://www.firstplace4health.com/)  
**Lakewood's Health and Fitness Challenge:** Kickoff at 6 p.m. Sunday in Lakewood's third-floor chapel  
**Daniel Plan:** [danielplan.com](http://danielplan.com)

work for me."

It did. Moncada lost more than 70 pounds in 2012, and her life, and that of her whole family, is transformed. "My husband, my children and I are eating more veggies and fruits than ever, and we are so much more active, purposefully active," she says. "We have watched a miracle with God lifting me from a lifelong struggle. We are now believing for greater things in all areas of our lives."

Carole Lewis is not surprised to hear stories like Moncada's. Lewis is the director of the First Place 4 Health program that began in 1981 as a ministry program at Houston's First Baptist Church. She was in

the first group of 12 men and women in the program, and has been the program's director since 1987. The program now has more than half a million members after forming groups in 12,000-plus churches nationwide.

First Place 4 Health runs on similar principles as the Daniel Plan and Lakewood's program. All emphasize healthful eating and regular exercise, like nearly all such plans. The distinguishing feature of faith-based plans, however, is the emphasis on group support, prayer and scripture. Two of the plan's guiding principles focus on connecting with others and relying on God's power for success

in the plan and in life. So, for example, at Warren's church, the program includes a walk and worship activity in which participants meet before services to walk together on the paths surrounding the church campus and then pray together after the exercise.

Lewis says the group support and scripture memorization are key strengths of the First Place 4 Health program. "Lots of scripture verses are helpful in the areas of food temptation and taking care of our bodies," she says. The program makes available scripture memory CDs that put scripture verses to music at a tempo perfect for walking or running.

"We can be transformed by the renewing of our minds," she says. "We must replace the lies with the truth of the word of God. These Bible studies and scriptures are bite-sized

parts of a successful life."

Lakewood is starting a new health and fitness challenge for 2013, and Lewis' First Place 4 Health program is ongoing. Moncada plans to continue her participation and encourages others to implement the program into their lives. "My advice to others is to awaken those hopes and dreams inside you — hopes to be healthy, dreams to do something you live for the rest of your life."

Indeed, hope is the key. "The only thing we can give anyone is hope," Lewis says. "So many people come totally hopeless that they can lose weight. We never guilt or shame people. They come in having enough of that. Our task is to give them hope and a plan."

Jill Carroll is a freelance writer in Pearland.