

Fall 2019



THE JOURNAL

Stories from the missions and ministry of First Baptist Church Amarillo

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Service

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Uganda Church Marks 20th Year

True Love Baptist Church has celebrated its 20th year of ministry in the Apac municipality in Northern Uganda. The church was constructed with the support of First Baptist Church Amarillo in 1999. In July of 2019, the church hosted a one week conference which culminated with an anniversary celebration.

True Love Baptist church has grown over the years, now having 110 members. The church also ministers to 230 children under a Compassion International assisted project. Five of these children are already in a university, with 46 others in colleges and tertiary institutions.

As Pastor Jackson Ecuna has shared, “Our Vision is to make church members and these children to be God fearing, deeply rooted in the Word, and glorifying God.” Many FBC members were able to travel to work alongside this church in its earliest days, and FBC Amarillo remains a significant and celebrated part of the church’s history.

Pastor Ecuna added, “We thank your church for her involvement in the kingdom ministry across the globe. Pass our greetings to all the saints in FBC Amarillo.”



(Left) The front of the main church building.
(Right) The three small buildings to the far left are True Love Child Development Center, the pastor’s house, and the building for New Genesis Primary School.



Perkins Center Celebrates Thirty Years of Service

JON MARK BEILUE

Photography by Jordan Washer

As the clock on the wall inched toward 9 a.m. on a Thursday morning in May, nine women and four men sat around the table. There were a couple of prayer requests and a praise for answered prayer.

Darlene Ash then led the group in prayer, not only for that which was spoken, but for the mission, for the reason they are here two mornings every week.

Outside, eight were already waiting for the door to open, one woman wearing a shirt that says, “I Am Blessed.” They are there for the help they need. They are the homeless, the indigent, the family that has hit a stretch of misfortune.

“We are the invisible hands and feet of Jesus,” Tracy Garvey said.

That may be an apt term sometimes – invisible. Garvey is the director of the Perkins Community Center, which is in the fellowship hall of the former Buchanan Street Baptist Church, a mission church of First Baptist Church.

It is less than a half-mile from First Baptist Church, but, at least in economic terms, it can seem farther than that. But go east on 15th Avenue under the I-27 overpass, keep going a couple more blocks and then turn north on Buchanan Street. There, adjacent to the church, is a mission outreach started 30 years ago by a WMU group at First Baptist that has served quietly and effectively to fill the physical, and often the spiritual needs, of those who enter the doors.

“When I look at them, I see me,” said Runae Price, who does intake interviews with clients and is often the first one they see. “If I were in that situation, I would hope that God would have people to reach out to me.”



“This is like a foot in the door that wants to shut. Not only are we helping them physically, but they often pour their hearts out to me on my desk. Kristy (Kersh) and I will pray for them right then. We don’t see them any differently than us. We try to love them as much as we can.”

Their immediate needs are basic and necessary. Food and clothing – two daily requirements most give no thought to – have brought people from Amarillo to Perkins since 1989.



A short term solution

Much of the food is purchased at a discounted price from the Food Bank, a source of food at Perkins for 30 years. Garvey also orders and picks up food at Dollar Tree. Much of that comes from a budget item within First Baptist. There are freezers with ground beef, rows of canned vegetables and other non-perishable items. Kitchen and grooming supplies are ample.

“They might open up a can of Vienna sausages in the parking lot – they’re that hungry,” Garvey said.

Through an open room and down one hall is the clothing area. There are clothes for women, men, and children, all sorted by size and gender. There are caps, ties, shoes, and some jewelry. Most hang on racks that Garvey purchased from Sears when the retail store closed.



All clothing except for undergarments are donated. Clothing most in demand are larger men's T-shirts and smaller waist-sized jeans, as well as women's pants and socks of all colors. There's also bedding, vases, items to put on walls in the home, some toys and books. There's a room with 20 chairs with a TV and Christian-based DVDs to watch.

Perkins Community Center is open from 9 a.m. until 10:30 a.m., every Tuesday and Thursday. The volunteer list numbers 24, of which 12 or so will staff it from about 8:30 a.m. until 11 a.m., each Tuesday and Thursday. Most volunteers are in double digits for years served, including Ash who started volunteering in 2006 shortly after she retired as a teacher.

"I'm blessed in that I do not need all the things they do," she said. "I can help them, and it gives all of us a good feeling. Financially, I'd not able to do all of that, but working in the mission, I can."

On average, the Perkins Center sees about 14 clients each Tuesday and Thursday, and they are shopping for about 35, counting family members, Garvey said.

Estimates are that about 53,000 people have been served in these 30 years.

The Perkins Center must balance having enough items for the needy with not being a daily or even weekly supplier. The mission is meant to be a hand up more so than a handout; a short-term solution, not a long-term enabler. For the homeless, they can return monthly. Those with a residence are limited to one return every three months.

On food and kitchen items, a maximum of 20 items is allowed per person, with an extra five for any adult, and three for each child in the residence. The homeless can also receive a packet that includes lotion, soap, first aid kit, toothbrush and toothpaste, razors, deodorant, hand warmers and sun screen.

"Things that are practical," Garvey said.

With clothing, the general rule is two items per person, though there is some flexibility for those with extra needs.

"The clothing room, I've noticed, is like a sanctuary, a place where they come to get away from the world," Garvey said. "Here, they have so many choices."

Thirty years and counting

In many ways, the Perkins Community Center operates like it did when it opened on July 13, 1989. The opening was two years in the planning.

After holding a children's ministry in the summer of 1987, some women at FBC saw that many lacked suitable clothes and shoes. Helen Roller, Ophelia Humphrey, and Evelyn Perkins, within the WMU, discussed starting a food and clothing ministry.

They met with pastor Dr. Winfred Moore, who approved of the plan and suggested contacting Wendell Taylor, Buchanan Baptist Church pastor, to see if part of the church could be used for ministry. Taylor agreed to donate the fellowship hall and adjoining classrooms.

Roller and others visited social ministries in El Paso and pulled ideas from other similar ministries as preparation began in earnest. A training workshop, attended by more than 60 at FBC, was held in March 1989. That was about the time cleaning and remodeling of the fellowship hall by church members at Buchanan began.

The opening was scheduled for July 5, but was pushed back eight days with Evelyn Perkins the interim director until one could be found.

Estimates are that about 53,000 people have been served in these 30 years. Many have been like Celina,* who was there on this May morning with her two children, a 2-year-old and 18-month-old.



As important as food and clothing are, if we didn't believe spiritual needs are the most important piece, we'd be failing them.

“We’re struggling a little bit right now,” Celina said. “My husband depends on a lot of side jobs, and they’re just not coming through right now. We didn’t know what we could do, and then my brother told me about this church down the street.”

Perkins Community Center is where needs are met. But the unseen needs – the ones that can’t be pulled off the shelf or taken off a clothes rack – are met as well.

On the evaluation form, one of the questions asked is if the client has a personal relationship with Christ. It is rare when a volunteer does not go through the two days a week praying for or with clients, listening to them, sometimes crying with them.

“What I see and hope we do is more than hand them some food and clothes so they can endure their situation for a short time,” Garvey said. “We want to show them there’s hope.

“A food and clothing ministry should distinguish itself by telling clients what we believe and why we’re here. We have men and women who come in here just wanting to talk or pray, and that goes a long way. As important as food and clothing are, if we didn’t believe spiritual needs are the most important piece, we’d be failing them.”



WANT TO SERVE?

Perkins Center volunteers serve by interviewing clients, keeping records, as well as sorting, stocking, or packing food and clothing. It currently operates with about 12-15 volunteers every Tuesday and Thursday morning and continues to need more workers.

If you’d be interested in serving, please contact the church office or trevor@firstamarillo.org.

FBC Amarillo Honored Outstanding Civic Partner

At the end of the 2018-2019 school year, First Baptist Church was recognized with the “Outstanding Civic Partner” award by Amarillo ISD at the Partners in Education banquet. FBC’s contribution centers on its role at Wills Elementary. The award comes as a result of the way our church family supports the teachers, staff, and students through:

- Annual backpacks and school supplies for students in need
- Teacher bags and supplies for every teacher
- Daily meals through KidsCafe
- Meals and treats from our staff each month
- Encouragement through Teacher Appreciation Week
- Hosting their teacher training

As the back-to-school time came around for this year, the story has been the same. This generous congregation was, again, able to collect school supplies, backpacks, and teacher supplies to pack and send to our friends at Wills Elementary.



A Place For the Place-less

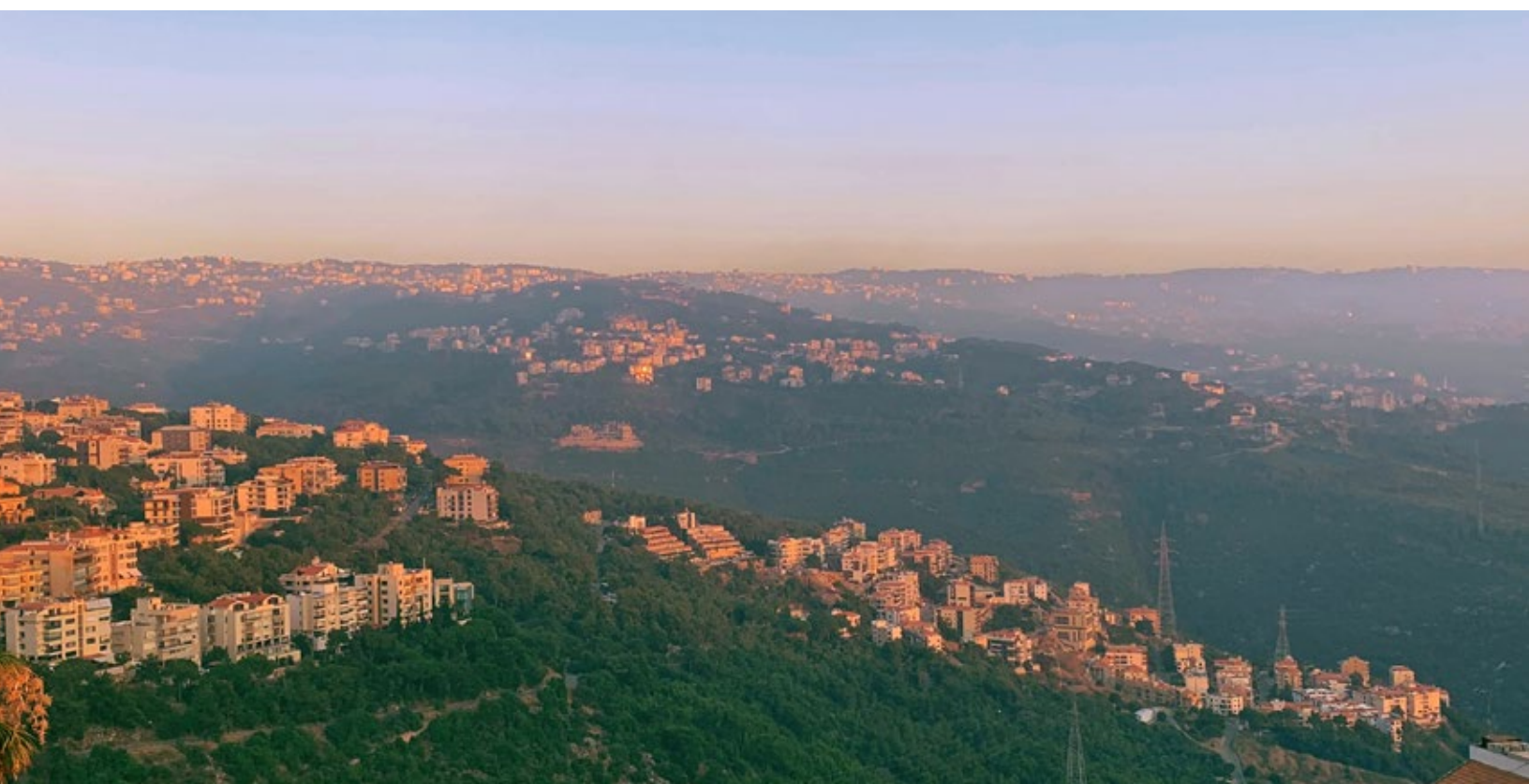
Mission team partners to serve refugee children in Lebanon

TREVOR BROWN

When Sarah Manchee, a high school student, and her dad, Mike Manchee, began feeling called to be a part of an upcoming international mission trip, they weren't sure exactly what to expect. When they began hearing more about the mission trip to Lebanon, it felt like a perfect fit.

"Lebanon was my first mission trip out of the United States," Sarah recalled. "So I went into the trip expecting things to be very different from how they are in Texas. What I wasn't expecting was just how different it was going to be."

From the moment Sarah, Mike, and the team of 11 from First Baptist arrived in Beirut, Lebanon, a meaningful connection was made. So much was familiar, but plenty was a surprise.



Lebanon is a beautiful country with a rich and complicated history, nestled between the eastern shore of the Mediterranean and the Lebanon Mountains to the east. It is among the world's smallest sovereign nations.

"I wasn't expecting to see young children roaming through cars in traffic, tapping on windows trying to sell water to anyone who would acknowledge them," Sarah shared. "I wasn't expecting to see lavish hotels followed by miles of apartments that were almost in shambles. Most of all, though, I didn't expect the magnitude of Syrian refugees or the conditions they lived in."

The team spent their week in Lebanon working alongside ministries of Kids Alive Lebanon (KAL), providing summer programming for around 65 children, many of whom live on campus in the ministry's residential program, Dar El Awlad ("The Children's Home" in Arabic). Alongside this residential program, the Dar El Awlad School serves residential children, students from within Beirut, and a significant number of refugees.



For Sarah, one of the most meaningful experiences came in visiting the home of a potential student for the school, a refugee family who recently fled war-torn Syria. Lacking proper papers, refugee children are unable to attend public schools in the region. KAL is working to meet as many of their needs as possible.

"Walking into the home I was presented with stories and experiences like I could never imagine. The mother recalled running through gunfire and spending hours walking through mountains of Lebanon where she had to keep herself and kids hidden because they had no documentation and could be sent back to Syria if they were caught. Her 8 year old daughter even hid in the bathroom for our entire visit because she had been taught to do so when visitors came, in case they were there to take her back."

Their story is not entirely unique. In fact, many of the students from the team's week of ministry had endured this much, or worse.



The Displaced and the Place-less

The plight of refugees around the world is not a foreign story for Amarillo, TX. It's certainly not a new reality for First Baptist Church, which has been committed to serving the needs of displaced people for decades. As early as the 1960s, Amarillo was a noteworthy recipient of immigration and refugee placements in Texas. Organizations like Catholic Charities and Refugee Services of Texas facilitated the settlement of Cubans, as well as the eventual arrival of refugees affected by the Vietnam War, from countries like Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Today, people groups from Southeast Asia and Central Africa represent other large, resettled groups in the city: Burmese, Bhutanese, Somalian, Burundi, Iraqi, and Congolese to name a few. No city in Texas received more refugees per capita than Amarillo, and only the state's largest cities received more in total. For many at First Baptist, the plight of displaced people has been a call to action. It has shaped the church's efforts to house new congregations and support worship services in various languages, provide significant ESL classes, community outreach, summer camps, feeding programs, school supplies, and more.



Perhaps more than any other, the country of Lebanon knows the problem of place-less-ness and the challenges of the global refugee crisis. Today's estimates are that well over 1.5 million Syrian refugees are in Lebanon, a country with a population of around 6 million. Amarillo may have received the highest per capita in Texas, but Lebanon has more refugees per capita than any other country in the world.

Ministries like Kids Alive Lebanon are responding to exactly that. Born to meet the needs of displaced Palestinian boys in the late 1940s, the children's home continues to provide for the place-less. Beyond the residential program, these Christians are working through their Oasis program to provide literacy training so that students are prepared to enter school.

A refugee ceiling of 30,000 in 2019 meant the U.S. saw record lows in the history of the current refugee resettlement program. Reports show that just one Syrian refugee was placed in Texas in fiscal year 2018. This is in contrast to 455 the year before and a high of 912 in 2016.







From Amarillo to Beirut

For Mike Manchee, Sarah's dad, the connection between Beirut and Amarillo, from Texas to Lebanon, became more than just a trip. A normal day of ministry for the team included songs, Bible stories, crafts, games, and other Bible school rotations. Near the end of the week, Mike was tasked with leading one particular activity station. Each student in the Lebanon camp was to receive a bracelet that had been made for them by kids at Merge, an annual camp for FBC's 3rd-6th graders. Each bracelet was accompanied with a short, hand-written note of encouragement in a bag.

"As I was handing out the bracelets," Mike recalled, "I pulled out one that said 'Jesus saved us from our sins.'" The note was signed "from Timothy." Timothy is Mike's 9-year-old son.

"I handed the note to Amir*, who is a 14-year-old Syrian, Muslim refugee. He took it, and smiled, and started to write his note to Timothy, his new friend. After I finished, I went over to him and said, 'Hey, I just want you to know that one's from my son.'"

"Oh, that's great!" Amir responded. With a huge smile on his face, Amir asked, "Can I see a picture?"

"I showed him a picture of my adopted son," Mike shared, "and after the confusion and shock I saw on his face, I told him 'We may not look the same. We brought him into our family, just like Jesus wants to do for all of us.' He asked a couple questions. He was just curious about how that worked, because adoption is not a common thing where he's from."

Amir worked diligently to write his note and even recorded a video message for Timothy before putting on his bracelet and moving to the next station.

"I may never know if the seeds planted there will grow into something or not," Mike said. "But God doesn't promise us that we will see how they grow. Our job is to go plant the seeds by building relationships and sharing the gospel to the best of our ability."



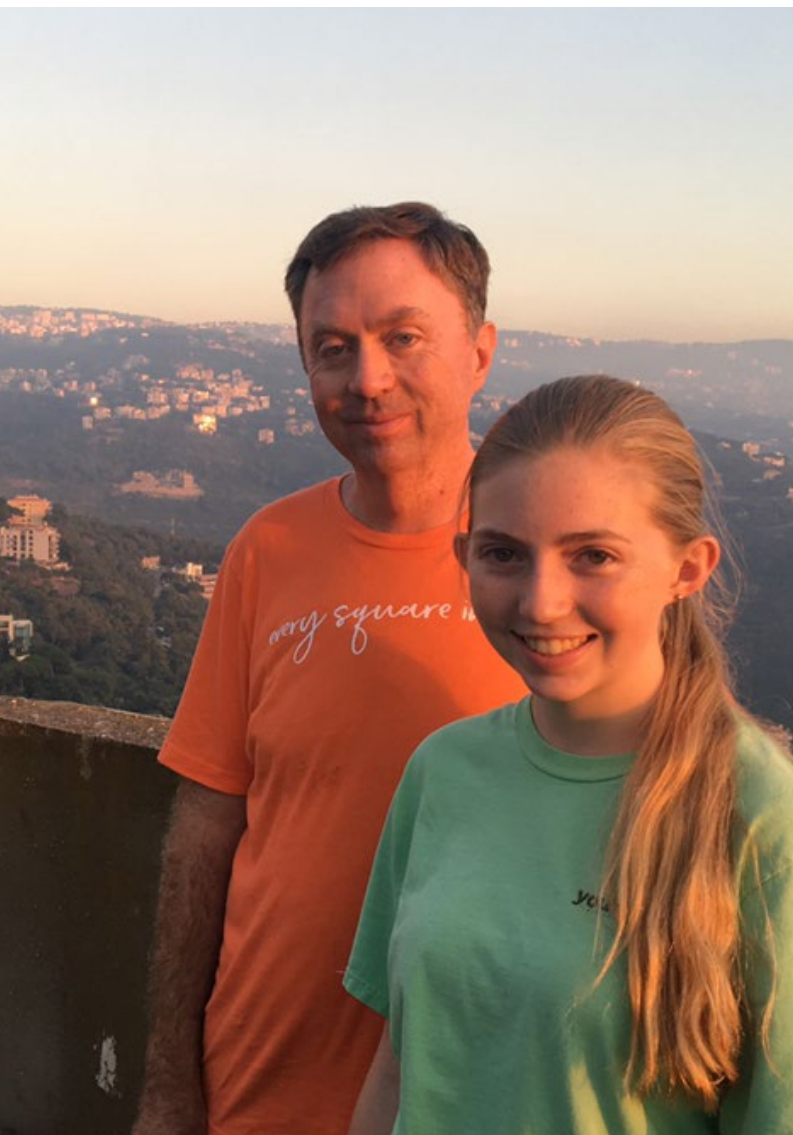
(Left to right) Timothy, Rebekah, and Sarah Manchee

From a Firm Foundation



For Mike, this encounter was also a reminder of the countless ways that First Baptist had laid the foundation for his family to be a part of God's mission.

"As I watched Sarah lead VBS music, build crafts, and have impromptu discussions about her faith... and when I remember my other daughter, Rebekah, telling stories about Acteens and GA's and getting to serve across the street, at the Food Bank, and different places... And when I see Timothy's note show up halfway across the world that I didn't even know he wrote and it landed in the exact perfect set of hands... That's what I'm thankful for.



"The people and leadership in this church have nurtured, fed, and loved my children and many others so that they are prepared to go out into all the nations and be the gospel. I know that my children have a solid foundation, and I know that many others do because of what First Baptist has done. I am excited to see the work in Lebanon. I'm also excited about seeing the growth in our next generation of missionaries."

"Consider serving," Mike challenges. "Pray, and then look for the next opportunity, whether it be foreign or just across the street. Go and find a place to be the gospel."

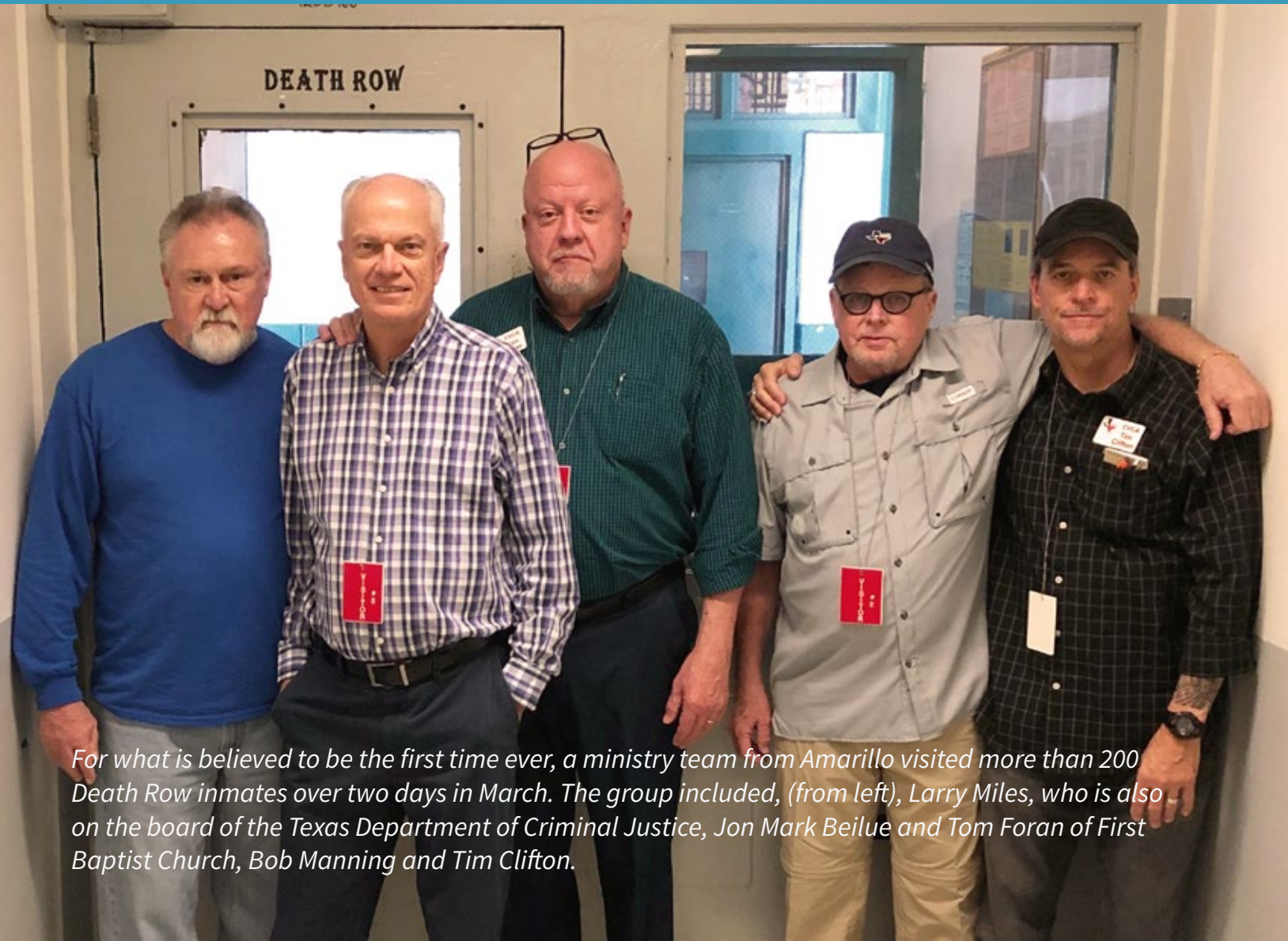
First Baptist Amarillo is preparing people to find those places, especially amidst the place-less.

**Names in this story have been changed.*

Mike and Sarah Manchee overlooking Mansourieh, Lebanon

Visiting Death Row

JON MARK BEILUE



For what is believed to be the first time ever, a ministry team from Amarillo visited more than 200 Death Row inmates over two days in March. The group included, (from left), Larry Miles, who is also on the board of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, Jon Mark Beilue and Tom Foran of First Baptist Church, Bob Manning and Tim Clifton.

We didn't have long. After all, there were 198 men over two days to see, to voice some encouragement and words of hope, and to provide them with a Bible, two books and some hard candy.

There's nothing like urgency to get to the point.

My intro went something like this: "There are five of us here who came to Death Row, and we drove nearly 600 miles from Amarillo just to see all of you. We want you to know that you are not forgotten, that there are those who care for you and are praying for you.

"We have a New Testament Bible, two books that we believe will help you and a roll of Life Savers."

There would be some additional muffled conversation through the windows of the thick doors before we would move on to the next one. Most often, it was gratitude, sometimes amazement, for taking a full day to reach the Polunsky Unit. There was initial curiosity of the two other books, and a realization that some hadn't had a simple roll of Life Savers in 25 years.

"This matters, man," said Steven Long, on Death Row since 2006. "It really matters."

Tom Foran, business administrator at First Baptist Church, and I were among five who had similar conversations over two days in late March. Foran also leads FBC's prison/jail ministry, of which 19 members teach weekly classes and pray with the men at the nearby Clements and Neal units, as well as the Potter County and Randall County jails.

This was not a nearby trip. We joined Bob Manning, Larry Miles, and Tim Clifton from another congregation in an outreach we found later had never been done before on Death Row.

We were in teams of two and three, and with the help of guards Brandon Huff and Jake Turner and offender Corey Thomas, our mission was simple, but historical:

To speak with every offender there and provide them with some hope through Christ, a word of encouragement, a small gift, and two books, "Freedom From Your Past," and "Ten Steps Toward Christ." This was the idea of Miles, a member of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice board of directors since 2014.

"This has been bubbling in me for about a year," Miles said. "In all prisons, there's hopelessness and despair, and Death Row is hopelessness and despair on steroids. There had to be something we could do for them."

He shared the idea with others. Foran tried to get to the heart of a trip to Death Row.

"Tom asked me a question – 'Can we put something in the hands of every man on Death Row and possibly change their lives?'" Miles said.

All of it came together quickly. Brent Womble, FBC member and active in the local Gideons chapter, helped secure more than 200 Bibles. There were 400 combined copies of the two books, plus more than 200 rolls of Life Savers. Miles smoothly worked with top TDCJ administration, as well as those at Polunsky, to get permission to go onto Death Row on an assigned date.

"I've made this statement before on various projects," Miles said, "but if this is God's baby, He's going to kiss it. And He kissed it."

The dates: March 26 and 27.

‘There was mutual respect’

“I had some reservations because I didn’t know what to expect,” said Manning, president of Panhandle NUC, Inc., which has raised \$2 million in private funds to build chapels at the Neal and Clements Units.

“But there was also this anticipation of a new adventure and new part of our ministry that had not been done before. We just hoped, in some way, we could make a difference in men’s lives.”

On that Monday, we unloaded all of the books in two fold-out wagons. We prayed, went through Polunsky security, and went inside. It was there that we met Warden Michael Butcher, Assistant Warden Perez, and others at Polunsky.

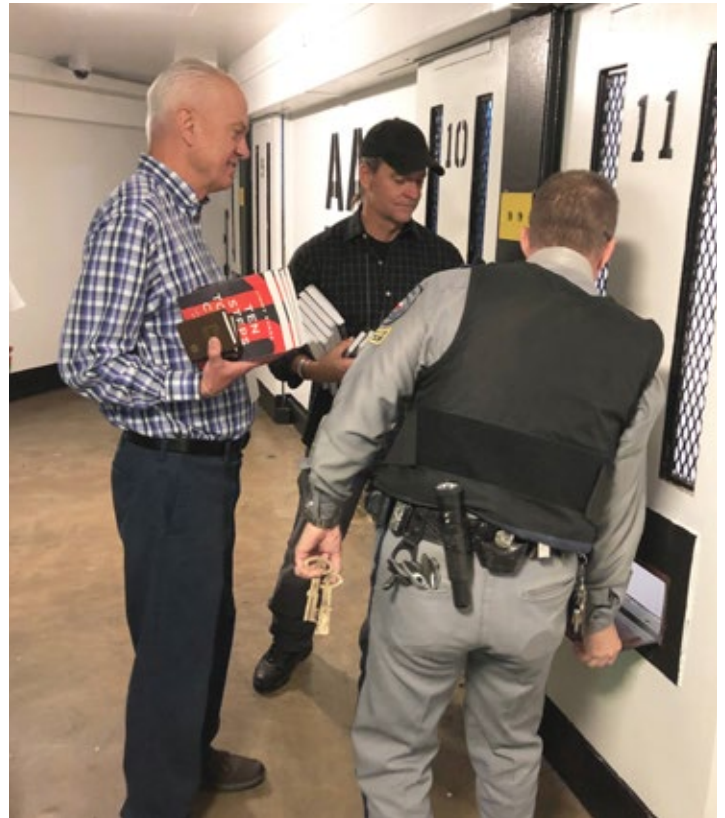
“Warden Butcher is a good man, and in my humble opinion, he and his staff could not have done a better job to assist us,” Miles said. “I thought it would take us two 14-hour days, but with their help, we got almost all of it done in one day.”

Indeed, Butcher and staff were as accommodating as could be in this rare trip inside Death Row. They were ready to help us in any way.

With guards Huff and Turner split among the two groups, we headed toward Building 12 and the pods on Death Row. Those on A pod have an execution date.

One of the guards would tap on the glass, and announce to each man that he had a visitor. Contact with family is infrequent, and so just a voice, a person from the outside, brought the men to the door for some human contact. After all, for 23 hours a day, they are confined to their cells.

“It was more solemn and somber than I thought,” Clifton said, “but they were more receptive than I thought, too. I felt there was mutual respect, which kind of surprised me.”



Jon Mark Beilue and Tim Clifton of Amarillo, with the help of guard Jake Turner, visit one of the 198 members of Death Row at the Polunsky Unit in Livingston.

Combined estimates were that only 10 of 200 on Death Row waved us on. So 95 percent were receptive. Either Huff or Turner would open the slot, place the books and Life Savers on top and let them take it. We’d then talk to them in the time we could.

“This means a lot to me because I’m a believer,” said Paul Storey, on Death Row for 10 years.

“Hey, man, I got some Life Savers. I hope these are Life Savers,” said Elijah Joubert, holding up his books.

George McFarland, on Death Row for 26 years, and I had a meaningful though short conversation through the door. “Christ’s love for you,” I said, “is deeper than an ocean.”

“One second, one hour, one day at a time,” he said. “God is still on his throne.”

‘The Lord blessed it’

We had time on the second day to visit individually with any of the men on Death Row. Foran was struck by Irving Davis, whose voice, he said, “was two octaves lower than James Earl Jones.”

I saw more light than most in the face of David Renteria, and asked if he wanted to talk one-on-one on Tuesday. He quickly said yes.

The next day, Foran and I had visits of about a half-hour. Davis is 36, and has been on Death Row for 18 years, half his life. His difficult home life had him spiraling out of control by the time he was in his teens. He believed in a higher authority, someone bigger than him.

“He spoke of his brief commitment to Satanism, but quickly believed Satan is a fool,” said Foran. “He spoke of his all-in conversion to Christ in 2014 after confessing that he could not continue on the path he was on.”

Davis’ daily activities include prayer, Bible study, listening to Christian music on his radio – an earned privilege – and witnessing to others.

“As we closed, I asked him to sing something for me, but he declined with a grin,” Foran said. “I told him, ‘His Eye Is On The Sparrow’ would sound awfully good coming out of your mouth. He said to send him the lyrics, which I did.”

Renteria is from El Paso, who has a father and sister in law enforcement. He’s been on Death Row for 15 years. Renteria, who had read three chapters of “Freedom From Your Past” the previous night, said he has difficulty forgiving himself of his past.

“David, God forgave you a long time ago,” I said. “Jesus died for you, for your sins. I just pray that you can forgive yourself.”

Renteria said he is a Christian and has interaction

with some of those on his pod. “Be a light,” I encouraged. “Grow where you are planted. Let others see Christ in you.” We touched fingers and agreed to correspond.

Our group also toured Polunsky’s impressive craft shop, where offenders excel at making saddles and boots, leather covers, remodeling furniture, key fobs and key chains, medals, custom-made travel coffee mugs, and airbrush paintings. The list is a long one.

We also talked to the men in the gym converted into a chapel. It was a welcome contrast of hope when we’d often been clouded by despair.

But the men on Death Row were what stayed with all of us. We aren’t naïve enough to believe that change is sweeping through Building 12, but we aren’t limiting God either.

“This is why Apostle Paul said some days we just plant and water,” Miles said, “and the Holy Spirit does the rest. That takes the pressure off. We won’t know today or tomorrow, in fact, we may never know the full extent of our time here. But we know the Lord blessed it.”



Bob Manning and Tom Foran of Amarillo, and guard Brandon Huff, helped provide a Bible, books, and candy to every prisoner on Death Row.

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THE JOURNAL

Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name;
Make known among the nations what he has done.
Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts.

Psalm 105:1-2



FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
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