

Rev. Frank Ray: His caring hands softened grip of law's long arms

By Jerome Wright

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For several weeks late last summer and on the eve of fall, Rev. Frank Ray allowed authorities to turn his church into a criminal justice center.

At New Salem Missionary Baptist Church Sept. 19-22, 1,600 people were able to get a law enforcement monkey off their backs during Operation Safe Surrender.

The program, sponsored by the U.S. Marshals Service, allows people with outstanding criminal warrants to surrender and, in many cases, have their charges dealt with that day by judges who moved their courtrooms to the church.

A variety of social service agencies also were on hand, so many of those fugitives were able to find some closure to their legal problems as well as help with job searches and other needs.

"It was a high sacrifice on his (Ray's) part. He allowed us to take over his church not only for those four days, but longer than that for meetings and to get things set up," said David G. Jolley, U.S. marshal for the Western District of Tennessee. "What was important to me beyond the surrenders were the social agencies that worked with us. More than 100 men who never drew a paycheck are working now. Several men are into drug rehab.

"It helped us because it meant 1,600 less confrontations (with officers trying to make arrests) and allowed people to get the help they needed to lead productive lives," Jolley said.

Those were the initial goals of U.S. Marshal Pete Elliott of the Northern District of Ohio, who conceived the voluntary surrender idea in 2004 after a police officer was killed while chasing a man wanted on an outstanding warrant.

His idea evolved into the Marshals Service's Fugitive Safe Surrender program, which has been staged in several cities and others lined up.

It's not an amnesty program, but the main aim is not to lock folks up. Although those wanted on serious violations are taken into custody, many of the warrants can be settled that day by judges who move their courtrooms to churches.

In an interview earlier this year, Elliott said churches are important safe havens, because of their trust factor, for the program's success.

That certainly was the case in Memphis, where 1,600 people came to New Salem -- more than any other safe surrender program so far.

Ray, the dynamic pastor of the South Memphis church, thinks Operation Safe Surrender is one of the best things that have ever happened in Memphis.

"First, it had people working together -- law enforcement, courts, churches, social services and medical.

"We've been a part of this community for a long time," Ray said. It showed that our church has the type of respect and recognition for people to feel free and comfortable to come here and surrender. This was not a gimmick; they trusted us."

Ray added: "People were set free. Some had been hiding (from authorities) two or three years. ... Some have had their driver's licenses renewed; others are in rehab. All of that is a plus for Memphis.

"It shows that Memphis can be a tremendous city when we all work together and not pull each other down."

