

washingtonpost.com

## Church Helps Ex-Cons To Live on the Outside

By Timothy Wilson  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Thursday, October 26, 2006; DZ03

Gregory Johnson was listening to National Public Radio in June 2005 when a comment from the guest author, a former inmate, caught his attention.

The author, who had been paroled from prison after serving 20 years for armed robbery, said that although many churches have ministries to help those who are incarcerated, former prisoners are usually on their own when they get out.

Johnson, a member of the Mighty Men of Metropolitan, an all-male ministry at Metropolitan AME Church in Northwest, accepted the author's words as a challenge. He organized his ministry cohorts and developed the Daniel Alexander Payne Reclamation Program, in honor of an AME church founder, to help former inmates with the difficult transition back into society.

The eight-week program began in August with five former inmates, who received help in computer literacy, self-help strategies and career counseling. The first graduation ceremony was earlier this month.

"It's a beginning," Johnson said. These "brothers have committed themselves to try to make a difference. We want them to come back and teach the brothers who come behind them."

Evans D. Hopkins, the author whose appearance on "The Diane Rehm Show" inspired the creation of the program, said he is impressed by the church's work. Hopkins shares his story in his book, "Life After Life: A Story of Rage and Redemption."

"This church has provided an example of what can be done," Hopkins said. "There's no other program like it."

Unlike most prison ministries where churches enter a detention facility to offer spiritual guidance or mentoring, the reclamation program focuses on providing support to men who have returned to their communities.

The initial participants were nonviolent offenders, ages 22 to 38, who required minimum supervision and have a high school diploma or a general equivalency diploma (GED). They also were recommended by the federal Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency, which is responsible for pretrial services and the supervised release of criminal offenders in the District.

Each man received a free health exam and a weekly stipend, along with bus tokens to defray the expenses associated with attending the program.

"This has been a great program as far as giving us brothers something to do," Akintunde "Mike" Kayode, 28, one of the graduates, said during the ceremony. "I'm proud to be an inaugural member."

Johnson said the support provided by the church program enabled the participants to achieve a 95 percent attendance rate for workshops and should help minimize their chances of returning to prison. The federal Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that more than two-thirds of inmates released from prison will return within three years.

"We're looking beyond that three-year window," Johnson said. "These are lifetime relationships that are being built. We are here for the long haul."

Despite limited funding from a private grant and donations by church members, Johnson said the program could expand to provide three sessions annually and has already received interest from inmates who want to participate upon their release.

According to Court Services, more than 2,000 inmates a year have returned to the District since 2001. A partnership between Court Services and the religious community was created in January 2002 to accommodate the influx of former inmates with a support network and to offset the burden on government resources.

"The faith community is a long-standing institution in the business of healing," said Hal Williams, senior manager of community justice programs at Court Services. "We welcome [the Daniel Alexander Payne Reclamation Program] and other faith resources to try to keep these men and women home."

The graduates of the reclamation program are hopeful their short-term success will lead them to an enduring victory.

Kayode recently wrote a novel, "Suckers for Sale." Anthony Bowser, 38, another program graduate, got a job in Bethesda by the program's end. The remaining graduates will enroll in a heating-and-air-conditioning apprentice program in January.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company

