

Connecting the incarcerated with mentors

Crossroads Ministry's mission reaches thousands

By Joe Pryor

Crossroads Prison Ministries has a pure and simple mission: to connect incarcerated men and women with mentors from the Church through the study of God's Word. By serving people behind bars, Crossroads answers the biblical call to "remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering" (Hebrews 13:3).

Crossroads was founded in West Michigan in 1984 by Tom de Vries, a car salesman and real estate agent

with a passion for prison ministry. He began by regularly visiting men in Kent County Jail, offering encouragement and spiritual guidance as they studied the Bible together. But Tom soon grew discouraged as he learned incarcerated people get transferred frequently. He would return to the jail to meet with the men he was mentoring only to discover they were gone. In response, Tom came up with an innovative solution. He began creating Bible studies he could send to his students through the mail. He built a team of volunteers to review

the completed Bible study lessons and return them with encouraging letters. Because it was done through the mail, the program could follow people no matter where they were transferred.

Over the years, Crossroads has grown into an international ministry, bringing the hope of the Gospel to incarcerated people in more than 20 countries. By creating life-changing Bible study materials relevant to those in prison and training the church to correspond compassionately with incarcerated people around the world, Crossroads continues to lead the way in long-term discipleship.

Today, more than 2,500 volunteer mentors are journeying alongside tens of thousands of incarcerated students as they pursue a deeper understanding of the Christian faith through biblically based mail correspondence courses. In a typical year, Crossroads enrolls more than 20,000 new students.

Crossroads believes every person has been created in the image of a loving God with tremendous potential to bless the world. This includes men and women who are incarcerated. In fact, God has a special place in His heart for people in prison (Matthew 25:31–40). When the Church partners



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with what God is doing behind bars, there is real hope for change in prisons and churches. Unlikely friendships develop through the Crossroads mentorship program, and God transforms the hearts of students and mentors alike as they encourage each other, study God's Word together and apply biblical truths to their lives.

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Crossroads adding new material

In response to the ever-evolving needs of people in prison, Crossroads has recently added new Bible study courses to its curriculum. In 2018, Crossroads launched an introductory course called *Who Are You?* Written at a third-grade reading level, the course encourages self-reflection and reminds students they are more than their prison ID numbers; they are children of God. The course has improved student participation and retention. Crossroads created

two additional courses through a partnership with the organization BibleProject: *Who Is Jesus?*, released in spring 2021, and *What Is the Bible?*, released in summer 2021.

A Bible is an essential tool for participation in the mentorship program, and Crossroads wants to ensure that all its students have access to the powerful Word of God. Every student who requests a Bible from Crossroads receives one, as long as their facility allows it. For some men and women in prison, this is the first Bible they have ever owned. These Bibles are treasured by students and provide enduring access to God's truth. Requests for Bibles have increased significantly in recent years. Last fiscal year, Crossroads shipped 11,948 Bibles to students across the country.

Uniquely positioned during pandemic

The advent of the COVID-19 virus, though not without its challenges, has not slowed the growth of the ministry. Although volunteers were prohibited from entering most facilities during pandemic-related lockdowns, Crossroads was uniquely positioned to continue its ministry, and the faithful volunteer mentors continued to correspond with their students through the mail. More challenging to the Crossroads program is the system of scanning incoming mail many corrections departments have now adopted. Crossroads' Bible studies, which are formatted as booklets, are not easily scanned. Making every effort to ensure incarcerated men and women retain access to these life-changing studies, the Crossroads staff is working closely with corrections

officials to find acceptable solutions, and the ministry remains open to adapting its materials for digital use in the future.

For thirty-eight years, Crossroads has been committed to sending the good news of the Gospel into prisons and bringing hope by connecting incarcerated men and women with caring people from churches outside the prison walls. As the ministry has expanded around the world, Crossroads continues to witness the transformational power of the Bible in the lives of countless individuals. While working to find new ways to connect with incarcerated people through digital technology, Crossroads continues to pursue its mission to spread God's redemptive Word.

Crossroads values its partnerships with chaplains across the country and is pleased to provide resources to assist chaplains in their ministry. To find out how your facility can implement the Crossroads mentorship program, please call (800) 668-2450, extension 2258, or email chaplain@cpministries.org.



Joe Pryor is the President and CEO of Crossroads Prison Ministries. With thirty years of experience in corrections, Joe has dedicated much of his professional career to prison ministry, including time spent as chief chaplain for the Federal Bureau of Prisons, senior director of reentry services, warden and assistant warden. Before taking his first chaplain position, Joe earned his master of divinity degree from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He earned his bachelor of arts degree from Marshall University. Along with his chaplaincy career, Joe has served as the senior pastor of three churches.