

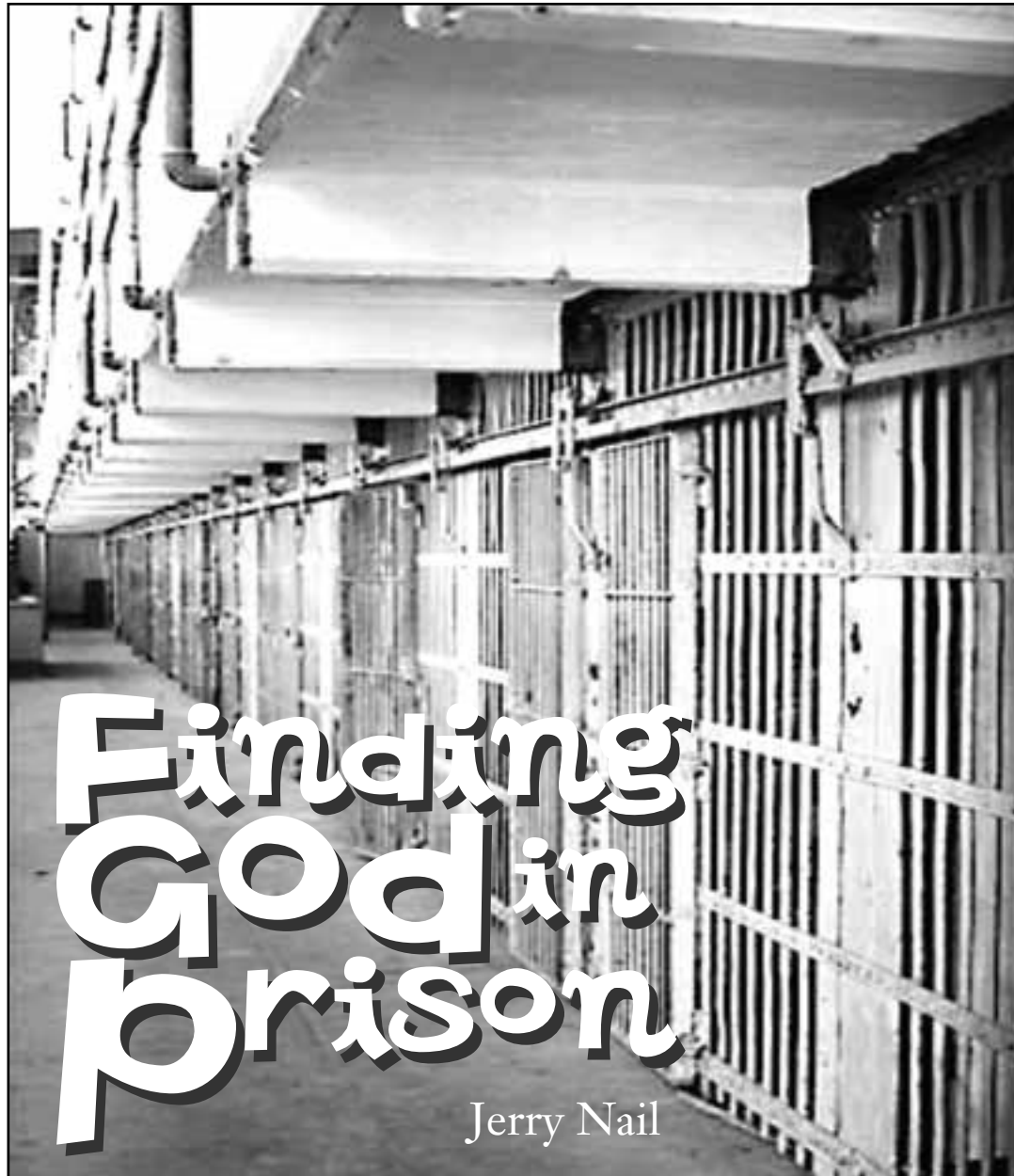
For a number of years, Christ United Methodist Church in Franklin, Tennessee, has had an active and transformative ministry to prisoners. The driving force behind that ministry is Jerry Nail, a lay member of the congregation. *Circuit Rider* recently spoke with Mr. Nail about his congregation's ministry to this particular group at society's margins.

How did you get started in prison ministry?

A former pastor of our church, Rev. Bill Miller, was deeply involved in the *DISCIPLE Bible Study* program. He told us that he had attended a *DISCIPLE* training event in North Carolina where he met the individual in charge of the North Carolina Department of Corrections, a deeply involved UM layperson who was spearheading the introduction of *Disciple* classes into the prisons in NC. I had just finished taking my fifth *Disciple* class, and knew what it meant to my own spiritual journey. I knew that the folks in our local prison—Riverbend Maximum Security Institution—needed a program like this, too. I felt that God wanted me to do this, so I contacted the chaplain at Riverbend, who allowed us to leave one of the *DISCIPLE* videos so some of the inmates could take a look. When the word came back that the inmates were impressed with what they saw and wanted to participate in a group, I started one, along with my friend Harry Boyko, also a member at Christ UMC. That was in 2001. Harry, I, and a growing number of other members of our church have been going out there ever since.

What are the different kinds of ministry to prison inmates in which your church engages?

We do four main things. The first of these is mentor relationships with individuals. A few members of our church go out to the prison on a regular basis to meet with inmates who have signed up for a mentor. When the mentors and inmates



get together, they talk about what's going on in the inmate's life, what's happening with his family, and similar things. They pray, read Scripture, and share in each other's Christian walk. At the prison where most of our ministry takes place, this happens in both the lower and higher security areas. On the "high side," where prisoners spend 23 hours each day in their cells, the mentors bring small stools so they can sit down and speak to the prisoner through the slot in the door their food comes through.

Second, we lead *DISCIPLE Bible Study* classes at the prison. We now have a group of guys who have been through *DISCIPLE I-IV*, *Christian Believer*, and *Jesus In the Gospels*. There are a number of folks from our church who lead these classes, most of whom have now led more than one class. Third, we

lead a communion service every Sunday morning in which clergy and laity from our church and other congregations participate. Finally, when inmates who know us through these ministries are released, we help them find jobs and places to stay through our reentry program. Many of these folks wind up coming to our church, along with their families.

What is different about the way your church does prison ministry than other churches?

Most of what goes on in other prison ministry programs in our area focuses primarily or solely on converting the inmates. That's an important ministry for us as well—especially so in our mentoring relationships—but we've realized that there has to be a lot more. As one of the inmates told me, "So many of the other churches come to bring God to us, not realizing that God is already out here." Many of the inmates we work with have come to know Christ through the ministries of our church or others, and some of them have a previous relationship with God that they've fallen away from. These are Christian brothers who desire, and benefit from, fellowship with other believers as they seek to live a Christian life in an environment not particularly friendly to that life. So our goal has been to give them opportunities to worship, take the sacraments, study, pray, and simply hang out with other Christians.

We understand that inmates have joined your church while still in prison. How have you made them part of the life of the congregation?

Actually, they're the ones who've made themselves a part of us. Even before they join the church (currently we have five members with Riverbend as their address), they become active in a number of ways. Some of them tithe the small wages they're paid; some have pledged and contributed to the building fund; last year a couple of them wrote articles for our Advent devotion book; they frequently send other members birthday cards; and they pray for the church. One of our "outside" members who teaches *Disciple* at the prison comments on the fact that, through the newsletter and correspondence, they often know more about what's going on in the church week-to-week than he does!

Tell about some of the individuals whose lives have been touched by what you do.

As a way of letting you see how our church has responded to this ministry, I'll mention Frank (not his real name), a person who had little or no spiritual experience but got involved

" God is already out here."

—INMATE AT RIVERBEND

with our mentoring program and found a new life in Christ. Not long after he was released, he went through a serious car accident, one that involved the danger of permanent paralysis. A couple in our church volunteered to let Frank stay in their home while he recuperated from this accident. Others in our church have supported Frank emotionally, spiritually, and financially. Then there's John, (also not his real name), who had a reputation, both in the prison and out on the streets, as someone not to be messed with. Yet he found out about what we were doing, entered into a mentoring relationship with our pastor, Rev. Tom Gildemeister, and came to know God. One day after he had gotten out of prison, he was sitting in our church. One of our pastors announced that John would be joining the church that day, having come to know us through our work at Riverbend. "I thought that was it," John says; "nobody would want to know me or speak to me then. But everybody turned around and smiled at me, and came up and shook my hand at the end of the service. It's been that way ever since."

What advice would you give other churches thinking about starting a prison ministry program?

Before you take any step, give it prayerful consideration. You have to be able to commit for the long haul. Our chaplain at Riverbend, Rev. Jerry Welborn, has told me that so many individuals, groups, and churches get into prison ministry, but then quit after a short time. If you want to make a difference in someone's life, however, you have to stay with them. When we arrived at Riverbend we discovered that these are people who need support. We found there a Christian community that is longing for fellowship with and affirmation from a Christian community on the outside. On a practical note, I would suggest that churches call their annual conference office to ask about the corrections committee, which most conferences have. Find out what other churches in the conference are doing, and speak to their leaders. Finally, you need to ask yourself "Am I ready to work with these people when they get out of prison? Is my church ready to welcome them into our fellowship?" Apart from their families, there just aren't that many support structures in place for these folks when they rejoin society. They're going to need your help. □

JERRY NAIL lives and works in Williamson County, Tennessee, where he attends Christ United Methodist Church. In 2006 the Tennessee Annual Conference presented him with the J. Richard Allison Social Holiness Award for his work in prison ministry.