

Discipleship Unlimited

Gatesville, Texas, Prisons



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“You’re not coming to see inmates — you are coming to see people.”

Since 1986, Linda and Dallas have traveled to Gatesville, Texas, ministering to the women inmates at Mountain View Unit, one of the prisons in the large system there. After the first few years, they began bringing teams of volunteers from throughout the country. Through the years, the team developed relationships with all of the women at the prison, including the women on Death Row. Linda developed a particularly close friendship with [Karla Faye Tucker](#) and was asked to be her spiritual advisor prior to her execution on February 3, 1998. Following Karla’s execution, more prisons in Gatesville opened their doors to the ministry, expanding opportunities to take volunteers to over 8,000 inmates in the eight prison units.



A month before her execution, Karla told the team:

“You guys come in here and you don’t see inmates, you see people. You see people who are either in the body of Christ, or people who are still lost in sin. You don’t see people who have committed crimes; you see people who have committed sins. That makes a big difference in someone’s life like mine. We feel acceptance from you You’re not coming to see inmates—you are coming to see people. That’s why people open up to you. God has anointed you to do deep inner healing and restoration.”

The Gatesville Prisons

The Gatesville, Texas, prisons have a population of approximately 11,000 inmates. They are located in Central Texas, about 120 miles south of Dallas (about 200 miles west and slightly north of Houston, which is on the Texas Gulf Coast).

- **Huntsville**—approximately 1500 male inmates; executions take place here; approximately 80 miles north of Houston
- **Gatesville**—approximately 8,200 inmates: 5,300 women, 2,900 men
 - **Gatesville Unit**—approximately 2,000 women (actually five “prisons”, including Hackberry, Reception, Trustee, and Sycamore)
 - **Hilltop Unit**—approximately 550 women
 - **Mountain View Unit**—approximately 600 women; includes Death Row
 - **Murray Unit**—approximately 1,250 women

- **Woodman Unit**—approximately 900 women
- **Hughes Unit**—approximately 2,900 men

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Discipleship Unlimited

Gatesville 2001 Trip



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“I was in prison and you visited Me!” (Matthew 25:36)

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Debbie Lassiter (Wisconsin) of *Halal* leads volunteers in worship before going into the prisons Friday night.



Local church members and inmates from the Hughes Unit join for a Sunday church service in a Gatesville church.



Volunteer Ellie Oster (Wisconsin) joins in praise and worship before the Friday night service. We celebrated Ellie's 88th birthday that night.



Members of the *Set Free* worship team get ready to load equipment and leave for the prisons early Saturday morning.



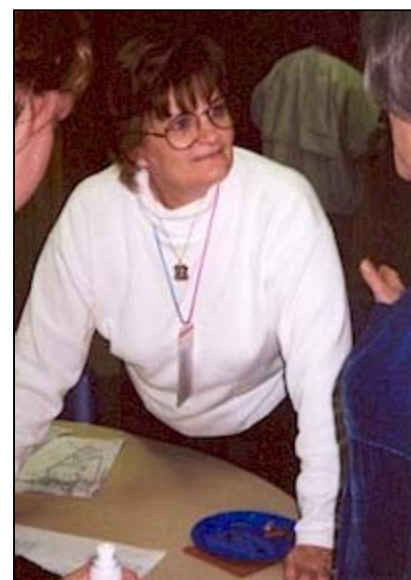
Our youngest Gatesville 2001 volunteer, 18-year-old Danielle Grogan (left; Texas), talks with Beth East (Texas) after one of the nightly prison services.



"The joy of the Lord"—Art and Aileen Jones (Texas) and David Marshall participate in praise and worship before a prison ministry session.



(Above) *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* photographer Liz Flores photographs volunteers as Halal leads worship.



(Right) **Donna Dixon** (Wisconsin) answers everyone's questions about schedules, maps, hotels, meals . . .



Volunteers gather for prayer and praise before the Saturday night prison ministry service.



Gathering for praise . . .



[Klaus Kuehn](#) (Texas) leads praise and worship before the Saturday morning prison service—and at the Mountain View prison chapel Saturday night.



Althea Turner (Wisconsin) joins in praise and worship with the rest of the volunteers.



Halal leads the volunteers in praise and worship.



Elaine Soerens (Arkansas), Debbie Lassiter (Wisconsin), and Laurie Watter (Wisconsin) enjoy each other's stories at Rancher's Restaurant in Gatesville after the Friday-night prison service.

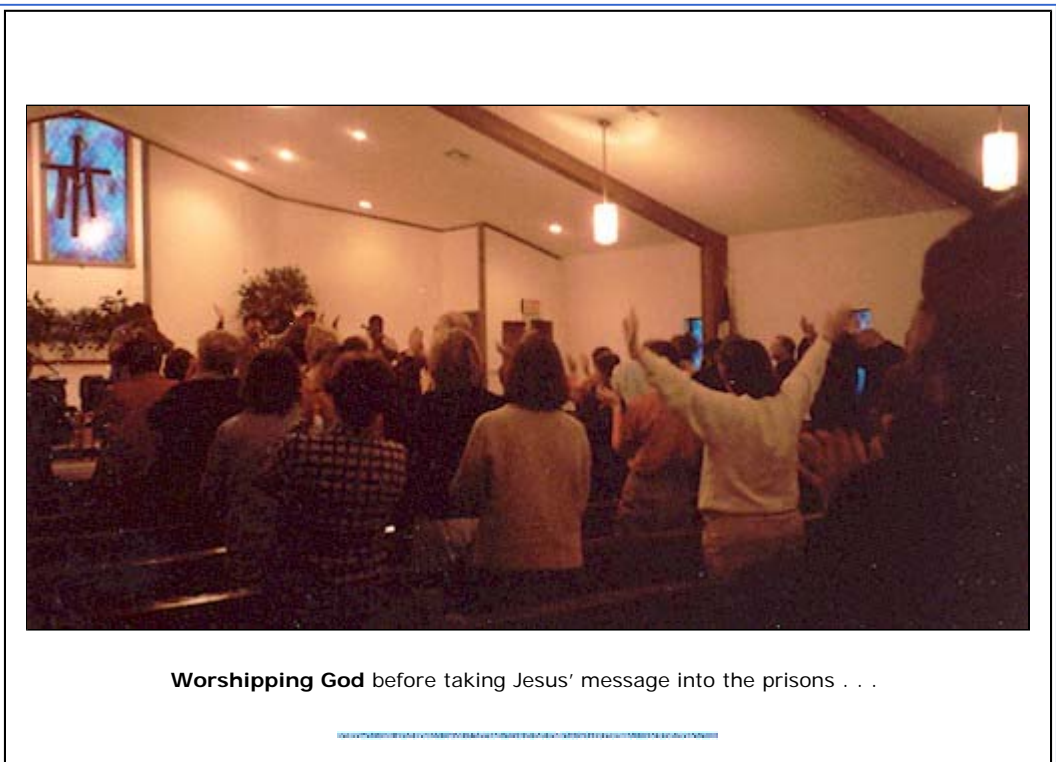


Volunteers gather for prayer and praise before Saturday night's prison service . . . another time we thoroughly enjoy together.



Many of the Wisconsin team members gather for supper at Chili's the night before flying to Texas . . . and are more than excited to be going to Gatesville!

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Worshipping God before taking Jesus' message into the prisons . . .

.....

¹The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
^{2a}to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
^band the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
³and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD for the display of His splendor.”

—Isaiah 61:1-3

“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

—Jesus, in Luke 4:21, after reading Isaiah 61:1-2a in the synagogue

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Gatesville 2000 Trip



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February 2000 — "The joy of the Lord . . ."

(By Linda Strom—March 2000)

I left my tennis shoes at my friend's house in Gatesville, Texas. For those who know my weakness, this may not surprise you. I've left things all over this country. However, this time I left my shoes on purpose. Since Mary Alice Wise and I walked through [Karla Faye Tucker's](#) execution together, I'm always ready to go back. It feels like home.

What is it about Gatesville? Why did we have nearly 70 [volunteers](#) with us on this trip? Many of us are there because we've been broken on life's journey. God's life flowing through our brokenness enhances our healing. Besides, we love the women behind the fences. They are aware of our love, and sharing together is free and easy. I've long ago stopped worrying about the cost of these friendships. Karla proved to me that the pain of her departure would spiritually prepare me to live life to its fullest.

Aileen Jones, a new Texas friend, called from Houston last night. They stayed and prayed for me at the close of our seminar. "Art and I weren't even tired after the long days in prison and our drive home," Aileen said. "I've decided it's because of the joy of the Lord."

Joy and pain are mysteriously linked. Because of prison system schedules, we plan our Gatesville ministry trips a year in advance. We couldn't have known then that it would be the weekend before Betty Beets' execution (on February 24). Once again it was God's timing for us to be on Death Row.



Art and Aileen Jones with Linda Strom (middle)

[Pam Perillo](#), who helped in writing [Karla Faye Tucker: Set Free](#), was again watching a cell mate prepare for death. This time it was different, though. Although she still grieves the loss of her closest friend (Karla), Pam is mentoring a 28-year-old Death Row woman named Brittany. God has used this process to help Pam stay focused. Although Britt is

still a relatively new Christian, God is working in her life. She wrote me a long letter of encouragement that came the same week the editors told me to rewrite *Karla Faye Tucker: Set Free*. On Monday, the day after our weekend seminar ended, I remained behind in Gatesville and visited with some of the women on Death Row. During my time with Britt, I asked her to pray for me. It was the first time she prayed out loud. Yesterday I received the **letter** that is included in the side bar.

Friendships like those with Charlie and Mary Alice Wise, the camaraderie we have as a team, the time we spend in prayer for one another, and the joy of His presence—that's why I left my shoes in Texas. Thank you for making this possible!

“Let's pray...”

Letter to Linda from Brittany:

My dearest prayer friend, Linda,

Well, Pam just woke me up crying, “Britt, get up; they've taken Betty.” My first thought was, “Let's pray.” I know that is a most common phrase said by Christians. It's their bond, and their power to such a wonderful Father. But until our visit Monday it was something I'd never done, Linda.

I know the power of prayer is in each of us. But you brought the gift to me. Now I want to pray about everything. It just felt so good! You left me with such a powerful tool at a time in my life when I needed it so desperately. I love you, Linda. I believe in you.

Lots of love, Britt

“And these eyes beheld His glory ...”

Volunteers' Reports

➤ L lavish grace poured out every place we went, hope restored to those who had none left and heaped back up on those running low . . . Abundance of love, first from Father's heart to us, then to the girls and back to Father once again . . . it was seeing through His eyes the hurt and the fear and feeling His heart of compassion for those so badly wounded, then watching Him work as He poured out His spirit bringing healing and joy, forgiveness and restoration.

And these eyes beheld His glory: Kim's dance of joy, Father's word through Linda as she rocked on, Alma's brokenness, Susan's surrender, Chaplain Nelson's face glowing with love as he led his girls in praise (and their countenances beaming back at him!), the tears in the eyes of one of the guards, the thirst in the souls of some in Seg

and on Cell block, the unity among the team as each member did their part, in honor serving one another And these eyes beheld His glory . . .

—**Daria Hermann (Wisconsin)**

- Picture this—hundreds of women dressed all in white, who were very aware of their need for God, and who were infinitely grateful for His truly setting them free and giving them a future and a purpose . . . and who worshipped Him wholeheartedly and unreservedly. I got a glimpse of heaven, I think: the Church—the bride of Christ—dressed in fine white linen, worshipping the Lamb of God with everything they had in them. These are the people I'll spend eternity with; that's how Jesus said it would be. God uses and WANTS what the world thinks is foolish and throws away.

I can hardly wait to go back in February 2001. As crazy as it sounds, I felt so "at home" in prison.

—**Lauri McIntosh (Texas)**

- It's 3:15 Friday afternoon, 2/18/00, and our flight to Dallas has just been cancelled. We are in the airport wondering how we're going to get to Dallas. We did the only thing we know to do in an impossible situation: WE PRAYED. God did what He always does in an impossible situation: HE ANSWERED! Our God moved in such an awesome way that four different airplanes later, we arrived in Gatesville and entered the Mountain View Unit at about 3:15 Saturday afternoon. Yes, it took 24 hours, but God is faithful and, yes, He does answer prayer.

—**Debbie Lassiter for *Halal* (Wisconsin)**

- I feel so humbled and blessed that God would allow me to be a part of one of the most awesome weekends I've ever experienced. It was simply holy and powerful, and solely of God.

—**Rhonda Head (Texas)**

- Going to Gatesville is one of the most memorable experiences I know. Three things stand out most to me:

Alma's testimony where I learned God's "weakness" is His love for me!

Karen's story about how God uses "cracked pots" to show His love to the world. Boy, that makes me excited about life's hard places—just another opportunity for God to "shine thorough" my cracks.

And finally, after ministering in Cell Block, I realize how blessed and grateful I should be to God for my freedom and for the choices He allows me to make daily.

—**Mickie Kennedy (Texas)**

•• It was such a joy being with you all! Our experience at Gatesville is certainly unforgettable . . . like the sign at (our Colonia Guerrero Mission in Mexico) mission reads, "You will never be the same."



Alma kept repeating, "That could be me . . ."

It was very emotionally draining for me, especially ministering to those confined in small cells, not unlike the cell where our son resides. I can only hope and trust I was a channel of God's love and hope.

—**Charla Pereau (California; Foundations for His Ministry)**

•• We left Gatesville much like the lame man in Acts 3—walking and laughing and praising God. The speakers were all wonderful and God certainly used them, but it was in the more intimate small groups where God spoke loudest and clearest to all of us.

I heard women say being sentenced to Mountain View was the best thing that ever happened to them because "we have learned so much about how to live and how not to live."

If anyone doubts the goodness of God, one only needs to visit those in prison. Indeed, offenders are every bit as much ministers of the gospel as we who come from outside.

—**Anne Murchison (Texas)**

•• It was a heavenly success! I have tears of joy in my heart as I write this praise report about the Discipleship Unlimited weekend.

Under an unbelievably powerful anointing, hundreds made decisions to follow



Christ. We witnessed God at work in six prisons, the inmates weeping and praising God as they came one by one and repented. I've read about outpourings of the Holy Spirit in corporate repentance, but I've never seen anything like this.

I thank each of you for every prayer and every penny you sow in the Lord's mission field so His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. I saw a glimpse of the glory of the Lord as women committed their hearts to Jesus. Praise God!

—Carole Ross (Texas; full-time volunteer chaplain at the Gatesville prisons)

Beauty for Ashes

(by volunteer Susan DeGraaf)

To me, the amazing thing about prison is the way God draws volunteers and inmates together based on the area of need and pain of BOTH.

The first time I experienced this, I didn't appreciate its beauty. God ministers out of our pain, not in our comfort zone. Having seen Him work through my brokenness, I now welcome the opportunity to open that door.



I offer one example that is unremarkable in that it happens EVERY time I meet with a woman one-on-one in prison.

On the Seg unit, where women are placed because of behavior problems in General Population, a tiny, vibrant young woman was standing at her iron door regaling volunteers with stories and observations and complaints sounding to me as though they'd been practiced. Somewhere in her prison soliloquy, she casually mentions she has tested positive for HIV since her incarceration. After a few moments, the volunteer standing with me moves on to someone more obviously hungry. I listen a few minutes then casually mention that my husband died of AIDS. Her countenance instantly changes, and the self-assured prison comedienne disappears.

She tells me her story. (I never ask an inmate personal questions; what I know of their history comes only from what they choose to share.) Her family disowned her because of the disease. They will not accept her letters and told her that if she dies, they will not let her near their homes or their

children; and if she dies, which they wish she would just hurry up and do, the county can bury her. Somewhere in the narrative, she begins a practiced commentary on the situation, and I cut her off. This is a tragedy; has she ever cried? I know quite a bit about trying to be the all-capable-strong-woman-who-doesn't-need-anyone, but I know God desires us to surrender our own strength so He can show us His. She cries. "These are the first tears I've shed since they sat me down on my birthday and told me I had HIV."

God has seldom asked me to minister out of my strength. I have never felt I arrived in Gatesville with anything to give but my willingness to be used.

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