



## Surrendering at Church: Alumnus' Initiative Helps Fugitives Turn Their Lives Around

by MARK A. STAPLES

Imagine your congregation's sanctuary turned into several "courtrooms" featuring judges from your city or community and all the technology found in a typical courthouse. Imagine nearly 1,300 non-violent offenders streaming to your church over four days to "turn themselves in" in exchange for "favorable consideration" regarding charges for such crimes as drug possession, scofflaws or other summary violations.

Hard to picture? That was the scene in September, 2008 at True Gospel Tabernacle Church at 16th and Mifflin Streets in South Philadelphia in what was called "Fugitive Safe Surrender," a U.S. Marshals Service program brought to the city by **The Rev. Dr. Ernest McNear**, a 1999 graduate of the Urban Theological Institute (UTI) of The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia (LTSP). McNear founded

the True Gospel congregation as a storefront church in 1985 while working as a computer librarian for the Philadelphia Electric Co., now known simply as PECO. For the past 11 years the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) congregation has occupied a one-time Episcopal Church building it has renovated.

Through the four-day "surrender" program, offenders turned themselves in at the church, clearing warrants, sometimes setting court dates or finding their cases disposed of altogether. Many came away from the church crying in relief. Some had been "wanted" for four years or more. The offenders only came from Philadelphia. Juvenile, traffic, or domestic relations cases were not included.

Why would a church get involved in such a program, especially when its members or neighbors are so often vic-

timized by crimes such as drive-by shootings, rapes, robberies and burglaries?

McNear calls the initiative a demonstration of law and grace.

"Before the eyes of God we are all offenders in one way or another," he said. "We all sin and could be found guilty in the eyes of God. And yet those of us who are believers know that God loves us unconditionally. You hear a lot in the news these days about terrorism, and we in this urban community experience terrorism daily in the form of violence. To minister in this community is an exercise of faith because we see instances where a child is raped or someone is shot. It is painful and hard. But we also experience help through the healing power of God. Faith in action is not letting fear have its grip upon us."

The "surrender" initiative is a win-win situation for both the church and the justice system, McNear said. "We're

not allowed to evangelize during the program,” he said. “What we are doing is living the Gospel, not preaching it. But the reality is that offenders feel more comfortable about surrendering in a church than they would be by going to a jail or a police station. That helps the justice system. For those who surrender here, the environment is a safe one. The program promotes safety for police officers too, who often fall into harm’s way out on the street. And through the initiative, the justice system has a constructive and efficient way to dispose of hundreds of cases on its books.”

True Gospel Church runs a learning center for 130 youngsters in kindergarten through fourth grade, in part because “the lack of education is a direct cause of incarceration,” he said. “More than 70 percent of those in jail have not graduated from high school,” and most of those in Pennsylvania jails, including 26 state correctional institutions come from Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Harrisburg. “If we are going to conduct a meaningful ministry in this community, then we have to be involved in ministry with offenders and with people in prison,” McNear said. “I tell young people in trouble that they are not the only ones going to jail. They put their families in jail. They put everyone who cares about them in jail. Their family members visit them in prison. They send them money while they are in jail.”

McNear knows first hand about the trials of the justice system. A 1968 high honors graduate of Simon Gratz High School, McNear grew up in the projects of Philadelphia. “My mother and

grandparents raised me and we were poor.” He gave the valedictory address at the Gratz commencement exercises. A gifted musician, he went off to the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston, MA, and played professionally for nearly 10 years. But at the same time he fell into drug abuse. In his early 20s he was arrested in Philadelphia and did some time. “It seemed like I knew everyone in the jail cells around me,” McNear recalled. “And they kept telling me, ‘What are you doing here? You don’t belong here!’ But there I was.”

During some of his darkest days he attended his 10th class reunion at Gratz. And there he was reminded of what he had once been able to accomplish and of the gifts he had. He began to turn his life around. “I realized that all along God was preparing me for something.”

In the 1990s he heard about LTSP from The Rev. Dr Andrew Willis, “a mentor who founded the Urban Theological Institute at LTSP,” McNear recalled. Willis insisted that McNear needed to study seriously for the ordained ministry, and study McNear did. “LTSP was just an amazing place for me,” he said. “The academics were rigorous and the professors amazing. What I appreciated the most was how inclusive the education was. The school is a Lutheran seminary, but the professors and the community as a whole encouraged me to be who I am as I learned. Being part of an inclusive community like that was pivotal to my growth as a pastor and theologian. My education at LTSP influences me every day of my ministry.”

True Gospel Church today has more than 600 parishioners. McNear has guided many significant ministries including missionary work with 65 pastors in Ghana. (He persuaded former Philadelphia Mayor John Street to donate two desperately needed refurbished trash trucks to the city of Cape Coast, Ghana.) The congregation runs an educational and support ministry to people with AIDs.

He still plays the saxophone he played professionally during his 20s. He sometimes plays Gospel music in a “smooth jazz” style during worship. “But music for me today is not the most important thing,” he said. “It is just a part of the ministry of the Word that is central to what we do at True Gospel.”

Central to McNear’s ministry clearly is prison ministry outreach. The congregation is the hub for the four-year-old Kingdom Care Reentry Network for ex-inmates, which inspired McNear to bring the “surrender” program to Philadelphia. The four-day “surrender” program took many months to organize. But McNear said the hard work was well worth it in view of the outcome. “So many people with warrants who had been living in fear were able to turn their lives around during those four days,” he said.

“At True Gospel we meet such souls at our door,” McNear said. “We work diligently to reintegrate them into society. We tell ex-inmates who come to us that God loves them, that they are somebody and that as people of faith they can seek their destiny as part of our church family.” †

*Expanded video interview with Pr. McNeal online: [www.Ltsp.edu/UTIALum](http://www.Ltsp.edu/UTIALum)*