

Title: How Can You Provide Sustainable Help for Inmates?

Subtitle: A nonprofit's unconventional methods lead to surprisingly effective results

A man from Norton Correctional Facility boarded a bus headed to Kansas City. Just released from prison, he had only the clothes on his back. As the wheat fields rolled by, he wondered where he would stay once he arrived. He could hardly afford to buy dinner, much less rent a motel room.



But by the end of that day, the man from Norton had a cell phone, fresh sets of clothes for the week, and a house to live in. Two days later, he had a job. Two months later, he owned his own car.

What changed?

On the bus, the man from Norton met someone who told him about Share the Hope—a support group for people transitioning out of prison. He walked into the group meeting that day with only his prison clothes and left with everything he needed to start a new life.

Share the Hope support groups grew out of Gracious Promise, an organization that helps former inmates transition back to life in society. The man from Norton is one of thousands of people whom Gracious Promise has helped lead successful lives post-prison.

Adopting Unconventional Methods

Gracious Promise is led by Mike Farmer. Before joining Gracious Promise, Mike worked for fifteen years with Chuck Colson's ministry, Prison Fellowship. As Mike watched Prison Fellowship's fruitful work in prisons, he saw that the inmates needed even more help transitioning to life outside of prison. So in 2000, he joined the board of directors for Gracious Promise.

Around 2015, the organization ran into a financial crisis, and he found himself going into prisons less and less as he spent most of his time fundraising. He told the board that the organization needed to be volunteer-driven, with no building and no paid staff. The board felt reluctant to make that transition, so Mike left. Six months later, they called him and told him they were ready to adopt the vision.

Today, Gracious Promise functions entirely from volunteers. Because it runs on volunteer labor, overhead costs make up 1% of their budget. The other 99% goes directly toward helping inmates transition. And most importantly, Mike and the other board members now have time for their greatest passion—serving people who are exiting prison.

Providing Practical Help

“The biggest problem for people in jail is that they feel alone, like no one cares about them,” Mike told Faith Horizons. “And we have the love of Jesus in us. We want to share that love—you are not alone, you've got a place to go, and you've got a group of people who care about you.”

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Gracious Promise partners with local churches to provide former inmates with clothes and a cell phone, pay their first two weeks of rent, and help them find a job. The rest is up to them.

“We don't do any more work than they do,” Mike told Faith Horizons. “They have to want to do the work for themselves. It all depends on the individual.”

Meeting practical needs is just the beginning. Once inmates find a house and a job, Gracious Promise encourages them to join the support group Share the Hope.

Share the Hope began when two previously incarcerated men approached Mike about creating a fellowship group. Mike agreed, and together they started the first group. Today Share the Hope support groups are completely run by former inmates. As they lead the groups, they gain character, confidence, and leadership experience.

Gracious Promise and Share the Hope have helped thousands of people transition out of prison and go on to lead successful, stable lives. The organizations' unconventional models of using volunteer labor and allowing formerly incarcerated people to lead have created a method that works. Just ask the man from Norton.

For more information, visit graciouspromise.org and sharethehopekc.com.