

A Tragic Need
By Roy A. Teague Jr., Chaplain

It has been my great joy and privilege to serve our Lord now for nearly a decade as the Senior Chaplain for the Lyle B. Medlock Youth Treatment Center, Dallas, Texas. The Medlock facility is a long term (6 to 9 months), secure rehabilitation facility which houses ninety-six resident male juvenile offenders in Dallas County. It has been just over 4 years ago that a deputy director for Dallas County Juvenile made known to me a very sad and tragic crisis that nearly a third of the juvenile residents face regularly.

Imagine the following scenario facing you personally as a fifteen to seventeen year old incarcerated youth. You have been working hard over a 5 month period to achieve your "Phase 4" designation for being able to be released back "into the free", as the youth say. You look forward to being released in 3 weeks with this achievement. You are finally getting another chance at going straight and succeeding with your life. At the end of your school day your dorm supervisor informs you that your caseworker needs to see you and so you are escorted to his or her office. You are surprised to see your Parole Officer (PO) is there, also. After the usual greeting your PO congratulates you upon your achievement of your exit status. However, your PO then informs you of an unfortunate dilemma. You hear the following words from your PO, "I have just left an appointment with your judge to discuss your exit. I take no pleasure in telling you this but Child Protective Services (CPS) has determined your home to be severely dysfunctional and inappropriate for you to return to that setting. Since you have no extended family, the judge is placed in the position of having to issue an order for your placement into a Texas Youth Commission facility until you reach the age of 18, or it could be until you reach the age of 21."

A second and just as terrible scenario is that your family completely abandons you. The result is the same; you are sent to a TYC facility until you are considered an adult and no longer a threat to society.

Can you possibly imagine the emotional let down and disappointment a youth in this position experiences?

There is astonishment, anger and disbelief, all coupled with the tearful thoughts "nobody cares, nobody loves me, I'm trapped with no way out, what's the use of even trying to do what's right anymore?"

It is not uncommon that the youth then begins to act out all his frustration with angry disruptions of all sorts for several days. They may assault a fellow resident or even a staff member which then results in additional criminal charges and demotion from their exit status.

What words of comfort and hope can even be said to a youth in this position? A glimmer of hope for the youth comes only if they have become wonderfully born again and received new hope and new life attached to their faith in Jesus Christ. As a Chaplain, I can then share with the youth scriptures such as Deuteronomy 31:6, "*Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the LORD your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you*" or Jeremiah 29:11, "*For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.*" As powerful and as true these words are from our Lord, it is still so very difficult for a youth to find hope and comfort to which they may cling.

Is there a solution that can offer hope to a youth facing such a crisis? The body of our Lord Jesus Christ cannot be idle with the revelation of such a great need. Praise the Lord for Scott Larson and the "Straight Ahead Academy!" They have been working with exiting juveniles in the Boston, Massachusetts area for a number of years offering short-term residential aftercare and guidance. But what about those in need of long-term aftercare that fit the description of those aforementioned whom have literally no place to go? Foster families are seldom willing to take in a teenage offender and "halfway houses" for ex-offender youth do not exist.

I have personally always felt that the use of the term "halfway house" is both demoralizing and distasteful. Most of these youth have come from what was less than even a halfway house if you catch my drift. What these youth need is a place they can call *home*.

Don't you just love it when you walk into a friend's or neighbor's home and you see a wooden plaque or framed needle stitch that says *Home Sweet Home*? Home is supposed to be that wonderful place which was always filled with love, encouragement and instruction. Home is supposed to be that place you look back to and the very thoughts fill your soul with fond memories of friends, family, holidays, your favorite home-cooked meal and mom's homemade cookies and apple pie.

Sadly and tragically, youth who face the kind of crisis I've described, have never been given the opportunity for *home* to become their favorite vocabulary word. Instead of home stimulating fond memories, joyous remembrances and an affection or excited anticipation for returning to, thoughts of *home* have become acquainted with pain, grief, sadness and even fear.

Imagine experiencing no one to come visit you, no family to send you a birthday card, no family to celebrate the holidays with or receive presents from or to give presents to, no one to share your personal achievements and say "I'm proud of you, *Son!*", no one to encourage you and say "You can do it, *Son!!*" or "Well done, very good job, *Son!*" There is no one to encourage you to PRESS ON!

If there is hope and a solution to be offered for these disadvantaged and often abandoned youth, shouldn't it be the Church, the body of Christ that comes together and provides the answer? I hope very soon to be able to put forth a model of hope for youth who find themselves faced with this horrible situation. It is not a model that can provide hope for every youth in this crisis; however, it will provide a beginning for some and will enable them to have hope in Jesus Christ that is tangible where they will have a chance, a real opportunity to equip themselves for success, in a place called home.

It is a model called Discovery Farms. It is a rural *home* setting where boys will be loved, mentored, educated and equipped to become independent, productive servant leaders upon graduation from high school. Please pray for LifeQuest Essentials Ministries as they strive to follow our Lord's burden for these children in providing an alternative to becoming career criminals. After all, *home* was the first institution God sanctioned for man and woman way back at the beginning of creation. Home, family, the two go together. They are the strength of any free nation.

"Children's children are the crown of old men, And the glory of children is their father." Proverbs 17:6

Chaplain Roy Teague can be reached by email at roy.teague@jjmnt.org or by phone at 214-718-7679.