

## *A Tribute to Martin Weber:* *Founder of We Care Program*

*by Mike Strehlow*

If the definition of an apostle is someone who breaks new ground for Jesus Christ's kingdom on earth, someone who establishes foundations others can build on, Martin Weber was an apostle.

Martin Weber didn't look like an apostle. In 1962, he was a 37-year-old Mennonite farmer, raising his family in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. One day his sister, who lived in Atmore, Alabama, telephoned Martin and asked him to pray for help for her local church. "I prayed," said Martin, "and had an inner feeling that God was calling me." So in 1962, Martin, his wife Anna, and their seven children packed up and moved south.

Martin's plan was to go on farming in Atmore and to minister to the tribe of Poarch Creek Indians living nearby. But when he got to Atmore,

he learned that Atmore State Prison Farm was also located there. Martin was not planning to do prison ministry, but the more he saw and heard about the prison, with all its sin and hardness, the more he felt the desperate need for the love of Jesus Christ to be taken there.

The devil must have been snickering on the day in 1963 that Martin first went into Atmore State Prison Farm to preach Jesus. Atmore State housed some of the roughest inmates in Alabama. That tall, white, straight-arrow Christian farmer probably looked like the last man in the world who could go into such a place and connect with men like those.

But connect he did. He preached; he counseled; he taught Bible studies. When Martin began his ministry, Alabama prisons had no state chaplains. There was just Martin and nobody else; if he didn't do it, it didn't get done. So Martin got it done. When the inmates saw how he cared for them and spent himself working for them, they listened to what he had to say about Jesus, and they responded. And so, Martin stayed. By 1965 Martin was in prison ministry full time.

### In this issue...

- Pg. 4....Staff Retreat
- Pg. 6....From the Field
- Pg. 8....Perspectives

Proclaiming Christ & Discipling Inmates



[www.wecareprogram.org](http://www.wecareprogram.org)



*Chaplain Weber baptizes an inmate in prison.*

It was as tough as you could imagine. Atmore State Prison was so violent that Martin recalled the time one of his first wardens said, "Any day I could go home without blood on my clothes was a good day." Martin was never assaulted in prison, not for lack of opportunity, but because he was so respected by the inmates that he could break up fights and calm riots by walking right into the middle of the trouble. On one occasion a warden actually sent Martin into a near-riot, knowing he would calm it down.

After Martin had been ministering in the prison for about two years, his warden told him, "You've been doing a good job. We know you have a family to take care of and would like to see you get paid." But there was a problem. Martin did not have any ministerial credentials or college in his background. So the warden had him take a test for prison guard. Martin passed and was put on the payroll as a guard, except that, in the words of the warden, "Instead of a gun, you can carry your Bible."

Anna Weber recalls that the only way Martin could get raises was to get "promoted." So some time later he took a Lieutenant's exam and passed it. Said Anna, "He took three or four tests before they finally made him a state chaplain."

Martin Weber served as a prison chaplain for twenty years, and he pastored everyone at the prison, not just inmates. Anna remembers Martin ministering at a warden's deathbed, trying to convince him that Jesus would forgive his sins too.

As his ministry succeeded, it expanded to other

prisons, and Martin formed New Life Foundation in 1970 to meet the need.

One of Martin's best ideas was the yearly crusade. In the mid-seventies he held a revival at Fountain Correctional Facility (formerly Atmore State Prison Farm), bringing in an evangelist and five other volunteers to minister to the inmates. The crusade was so successful that he decided to make it an annual event. In 1977, 36 volunteers entered the prison. In '78 it was 67, and in January of 1979, 83 volunteers went in. The yearly outreaches had such an impact that other wardens noticed and asked for volunteers to go to their prisons, too, and Martin obliged them.

As years passed, Martin never slowed down. He brought a Bible college to Fountain, established a home for teenagers in trouble with the law, started a crime prevention program that included making films, opened community outreach centers in Mobile and Montgomery, and got involved in prison aftercare. In 1983, New Life Foundation was renamed We Care Program in a merger that placed all of these ministries under one board of directors. In the midst of all this he shook hands with mayors and governors and started several businesses, including a hotel and restaurant.

Martin was not perfect; he was a visionary, and the way of things with visionaries is that not all their plans succeed. But he was the first state chaplain in Alabama. And at this writing We Care Program is still growing, with 25 chaplains, assistant chaplains, and associates placed in 17 Alabama, Florida, and Ohio prisons. We Care is still involved with education in the prisons and has just opened an aftercare facility. We Care's Economy Shop has three locations. And the January 2009 We Care Crusade was the largest ever, seeing 366 volunteers ministering in 18 prisons statewide. Martin's vision goes forward.

Martin Weber retired as president of We Care Program in 1987 but remained active in ministry as long as his health permitted. He spoke at the 2008 Crusade, and attended the 2009 Crusade, even though he had to do so in a wheel chair.

This year's crusade was Martin's last. He went to be with Jesus on April 18, 2009. Though I knew Martin for only a short time, I am convinced he is known in Heaven and pulled men out of Hell. It would be hard to pay a Christian higher tribute than that. 🙏

*Mike Strehlow began serving as a chaplain with We Care Program in early 2005. Mike gives leadership to the Bible College at Fountain.*

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# Dad's Legacy

by Phil Weber

Martin Weber was my father. When I was growing up in his house, that fact pleased me more on some days than on others, but I think I came to understand pretty early that I was fortunate to have such a remarkable Dad. His influence on my life was deep and positive, and the following points are some of the first that come to mind when I reflect on his legacy to me.

**The gospel of Jesus is a life-changing message.** He and Apostle Paul shared that conviction in common, and I think about Dad every time I teach the early chapters of Romans. His boldness in declaring to a very cynical and worldly-wise staff at Atmore State Prison Farm that if the inmates would accept Jesus and learn to follow God's word, it would change them, was something close to raw courage. And great faith. Dad was positively made for that kind of challenge, and he seemed to relish it. It brought out the best in him, and as it turned out, the best in a lot of other people also, both incarcerated and free. All of which confirms the power of the gospel to change lives—when it is believed, when it is lived out, and when it is shared. The truth about Jesus really is amazingly good news.

**Marriage is for life.** Reflections on Dad's life are surely imbalanced if they do not acknowledge the partnership of the remarkable woman who shared his life and made room in her heart—and often in her home—for the many people who received Dad's time and attention. One of the things I am so grateful to Dad for is the example of faithful married commitment which he and Mom lived out before us.

**It is possible to be "in the world, but not of it," as Jesus said his disciples would be.** I'm pretty sure that prison, with all its crudity, violence, and perversion



*Chaplain Weber visits through prison bars.*

qualifies as a worldly environment, and for over two decades, Dad saw the sights and heard the language there most work days. Yet I don't recall ever hearing him tell an inappropriate joke, use crude language, or swear. He made deep friendships with unsaved men in prison, so he was not aloof, yet he never allowed their moral carelessness to weaken his personal commitment to honoring God with his character.

**When it doesn't go well, learn from the experience and keep on going.** In the early years of New Life Foundation, Dad used to take selected inmates from the Christian Brotherhood Church at Fountain to visit free-world churches around the state. The inmates would share testimonies and songs, the churches would be encouraged, and the ministry would gain support and volunteers. It was a good pattern, but some of the prison officials were skeptical, warning that the inmates were just looking for a good chance to escape, and had successfully conned their way into Dad's confidence. As the saying was at that time, "They're putting the hat on you, Chaplain." The time did come when Dad returned to the prison with fewer men than had left with him. He returned to work the next day wearing a new hat he had bought. When the inevitable taunts started, his good-natured challenge—"At least when they put the hat on me, I'm man enough to wear it!"—helped to minimize the damage the escape may otherwise have done to the ministry.

God made Martin Weber with an unusual and dynamic combination of gifts and motivations, and most of us are not gifted or called to minister exactly in his mold. On these points, however, and on many others, I am genuinely challenged to follow Christ as my father did. It's a good legacy. Thanks, Dad. 🙏

*Phil Weber succeeded his father as President of We Care Program from 1987-2001. He is currently serving as Academic Dean at Rosedale Bible College in Ohio.*



*New Life Foundation chaplains pose with Martin Weber in the early 1980's.*



Left: We Care family attending the retreat at Shocco Springs Conference Center.

Below: Hiking up the mountain demands an occasional well-deserved break.



# Retreat 2009

## Frivolous Flamboyant Family Function



Left: Don and Phyllis Metzler illustrate a scene from Dave's sabbatical.

Right: Ruth Schrock admires Emma Bender's shiny shoes.



Left: The Bucher family shares a few songs with the rest of the group.

Right: We learn all about bottled water in Wilma Mullet's FFFF contribution.



Left: Paul Smith challenges us to keep a healthy heart.

The We Care staff retreat on May 20-22 was a wonderful balance of fun, fellowship, and good input sessions. Paul Smith, a pastor from Blountstown, FL, shared in five sessions about different aspects of leadership.

One thing Paul talked about that continues to come back to me is the importance of ministering from the overflow of our heart, as opposed to just continually giving of ourselves, which very often leads to discouragement and burnout. Ministry from the overflow requires several things of me. I must keep my heart in good health, establishing good habits—confession, forgiveness, generosity, celebration—to ward off “diseases” that often afflict people in leadership roles—guilt, anger, greed, jealousy. Whatever I do goes through these “filters” that I have established in my heart.

I was very challenged in regards to living with and growing in the awareness of my own very deep need for God; choosing to live out of my passion for God rather than myself. Ministry from the overflow of my heart means that God must be continually pouring in. “The effectiveness of my public leadership [relationships, day-to-day ministry] is determined by my private life.” I definitely needed the reminder of the importance of focused, specific, and constant prayer; again, recognizing who He is and my total need for His work in me. I want a healthy heart, one that is full of God's grace and aware of His work in me. It's out of that fullness that grace and love will effectively overflow to others.

Yes, the input sessions at this retreat gave me good things to mull over, to implement, to work on. I long to grow in Him, to be passionate and motivated, learning, caring, totally dependent on the Father God who not only loves me, but desires to love others through me. Thanks, We Care and Paul, for this good “family care-giving” time. - Marj Heatwole



Above: Free time included relaxation through a hike.

From the very first staff gathering that we attended in May of 2007, the We Care staff has felt like family... our family away from family. The bi-annual We Care retreat had the feel of a family reunion — the kind of family reunion that you are excited to attend. It was a chance to reconnect with and encourage each other and a chance for the kids to play together, a chance to rest, a chance to play and a chance to reflect. Together, during our free time, we enjoyed walking, hiking, softball, swimming, volleyball, putt-putt golf, and relaxing in the deck chairs.

We all participated in a time called Frivolous Flamboyant Family Function (FFFF) where we shared our family "talents" with the rest of the group. We shared in lots of laughter and uncovered hidden talents that are just waiting to be discovered.

The highlight of the retreat for me personally was an adult teaching session led by Paul Smith, who challenged us to keep the proper perspective or focus on our relationships. Without a proper growth and nurturing from our key relationship with the Lord, all of our efforts will be futile. Next, he challenged married people to keep their marriage relationship the second priority, followed by the family relationship. Only then, should ministry be in the picture. In reality, this applies not only to those in ministry, but also to those in all walks of life.

- Shirley Kurtz

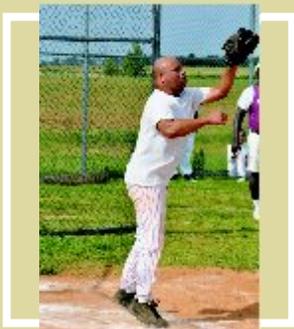


# Softball Outreach

On June 12 and 13, forty-one men participated in two days of playing softball in six Alabama prisons. Players from PA, OH, TN, and AL joined the We Care chaplains for this event. With temperatures in the mid 90's and a heat index of well over 100 degrees, it was two brutal but very rewarding days of playing ball. With coordination between the Alabama Department of Corrections and We Care, the volunteers were able to play softball games in the mornings and afternoons against various inmate teams. The We Care teams sometimes won and sometimes lost, but regardless of the final score, it was a great way to share a word of encouragement and to demonstrate the love of Christ to many inmates who do not normally attend chapel services.



From the top: Softball at Atmore Work Center; Prayer time before a game; Ben Hubert sharing with an inmate; Dean Miller safe at home.



# From the Field

## Ohio Reformatory for Women Marysville, OH



Wilma Mullet

Time for the Faith Choir's Directors' Meeting. The director and piano player waited for the flute player. Waiting, they started unburdening their hearts and found they were equally burdened for their husbands, not knowing the flute player had just been asked for a divorce by her husband.

The three decided to meet weekly and study Stormie Omartian's book, *The Power of a Praying Wife* which they borrowed from the religious library. They passed the book around to each other until they had all read the first chapter.

A few days later, their time together was cut short so they came into my office asking if I'd close their prayer time for them. Excitedly they told me they copied the book's prayers longhand before passing the book to the next person. "Isn't anybody going to ask me for a book?" Their eyes got big and they asked hesitantly, "Do you?" I gave each of them a copy. You should have heard the whooping and hollering!

They told me the past few days' events. With 2,500 women in the camp, they seldom saw each other during the day; now God was having their paths cross daily. They had their prayer time on the bleachers on the ball field one day. Looking up, another inmate stood in front of them. "I need to pray with you!" When she finished praying, two more inmates were waiting to join them. "God is enlarging our borders!" Knowing they had reference to Jabez's prayer, I asked whether they had copies of that book. Total quiet. Eyes even bigger. "Do you?" I actually did. "God is so good!" They were so excited. Humbly they asked, "Did you hear we're all here for the same crime? Are we true sisters or what!"

Their prayers are #1, for their husbands' reconciliation to God, #2, for the healing of their marriages. As God brings them to your mind, pray for Michelle & Mike, Cheryl & Andy, Juanita & Dana. They're one of the most exciting things happening at the Ohio Reformatory for Women.

## St. Clair Correctional Facility Springville, AL



John Kurtz

On April 27, 2009, the men at St. Clair Correctional Facility celebrated something different. With festivities throughout the day and a church-sponsored lasagna meal, it was a big event with everyone enjoying the good food and many hearing a good word. What happened? From my perspective the answer is simple. God is doing a good thing in the midst of the men. He is working to bring men to a place of reason and awareness about the effects of violence in the prison. The men are being drawn to peace, a place where right and sound decisions can be made without fear. The day was about celebrating the Self Accountability & Violence Elimination Directive (S.A.V.E.D.), which was birthed through inmates for the improvement of the prison and the building of God's Kingdom.

Allow me to backup and share how this came to be. As part of my work, the state chaplain guided me to become involved with the Fatherhood Initiative program that teaches men how to become better fathers (and sons). In 2008, a local pastor and I began meeting weekly with the 12 inmates who were teaching these fatherhood classes to their peers. Our group began to bond. During one of our meetings, one of the men shared how he stood in the gap to prevent two other men from fighting with each other. That led to a discussion of how we could intervene in potentially fiery situations with peace. One man began to see that this could be widespread and did not just have to be the attitude of only a few good men. His vision included each man being able to govern himself peacefully. He formalized his thoughts and presented a document to the group with the idea of having a celebration day to promote self accountability and the elimination of violence from the prison.

Over the following months, our group began to plan the event, while other things began to happen in the prison regarding violence. Another group began asking fellow inmates to turn from violence. A Mentor Dorm was started to allow inmates to begin to encourage each other to change their perspective. So the celebration became the culmination of several things that I believe God has been working on. As the camp reduces the number of occurrences of violence, the S.A.V.E.D. day will be repeated quarterly to celebrate.

It is Christ who brings true peace between God and man. He also brings peace in our midst. Jesus has the power to bring the calm so that men can come to a place of reason and faith. It is our hope that the men of St. Clair will consider the One spoken of in Isaiah 9:6, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."

## Atmore Work Center Atmore, AL

“Chap, today is my birthday.” At age nine Kenny was introduced to—no, literally forced into—drug use by a brother who pushed drugs into his mouth to show him what it was like. That was a part of the string of events that led to Kenny’s spending his twenty-fourth birthday awaiting his release from prison. He is also waiting for a set of false teeth, his own having been ruined by that same drug use. Kenny has committed his life to Christ and is learning what it means to walk with the Lord. He regularly attends discipleship classes and Bible studies and has torn down the pictures he once had pasted on the bottom of the bunk above him. (Evidences of faith are shown in many ways.) On this, his birthday, the We Care volunteers presented Kenny with a soft drink, a large prepackaged sandwich, and some snacks from the prison vending machines and sang “Happy Birthday” to him. I would say from the smile on his face that in his heart he caught a little glimpse of kindness and our affection for him.



Ed Ranck

## Fountain Corr. Facility Atmore, AL

Right now, we are working on a genuine big deal at Fountain Correctional. Fountain of Life Bible College just finished its ninth semester, and after all this time we now have five Diplomas of Biblical Knowledge and four Diplomas of Christian Restoration to award. And so, we are preparing to have a proper graduation ceremony this summer, complete with caps and gowns, speakers, and (hopefully) guests allowed in.



Mike Strehlow

There are security issues involved, and we haven’t gotten permission yet to do any of this. But that’s what prayer is for.

We need to do this because the inmates need it. You see, one of the saddest things about prison inmates is that most of them have never accomplished a thing in their lives. Never once has anyone they respected shaken their hand and said, “Good job.” Ever. They never finished a project. They never graduated from high school. They never played on a team. They never made good on a job. If they are married, being incarcerated doesn’t make them feel they’ve succeeded as husbands and fathers either.

So when an inmate finishes a Liberty Theological Seminary course, and we have a little ceremony and give him a certificate of completion, it’s a big deal. Those handshakes Chaplain Eskelinen and I give him might be the only ones he’s ever gotten. Mind you, the certificates are for finishing a course. These diplomas amount to finishing a dozen courses.

This is an accomplishment, achieved by study and hard work. After this ceremony no one can ever say to any of the men receiving the diplomas that they’ve never accomplished anything in their lives. Imagine how that will feel to them.



Stan Schrock

## Century Correctional Institution Century, FL

One thing that tugs at my heart is that not only are the incarcerated locked inside prison walls, they also are locked out of life. Life on the outside keeps moving on. Their children grow up during their absence. Their spouses go through difficulty while they are locked up and cannot do a thing about it. Some choose to end a marriage, to distance themselves emotionally, since it seems easier to mentally survive inside prison if they can sever emotional ties on the outside.

I think the toughest thing would be to have a loved one pass away. Imagine what it would be like if your grandmother died, like Joe’s (name changed), and you could not go to help comfort your mom or your sister, who are the only ones that really care. The only thing you could do is make one five-minute phone call. How would you cope? Perhaps you were only two weeks from release as another fellow was. Along with dealing with the emotions of grief, you would have to face issues of anger, bitterness, and forgiveness.

Recently I spent some time talking with Sam (name changed). In addition to other health issues his mother was facing, she has been diagnosed with cancer. The prognosis does not look good. She had visited him several weeks ago and seemed fine. Then suddenly she was in the hospital. She is fairly advanced in years, and now he faces the possibility that he may never see her again. She lives only a 30-minute drive away, but he cannot go to her. His prayer is that his mother will live at least another nine months until his release so he can see her.

This is a reality in prison. While their own choices have put them where they are, incarcerated men and women still have the fundamental human need of relationship. Those who have accepted Jesus can go through this difficult time with Him. We stand along side each one to encourage them through this tough time.

# PERSPECTIVES

with Don Metzler  
Vice President

My first impressions of Mr. Martin Weber were from my childhood years. One of the most vivid memories was when I was about 6 years old. I distinctly remember sitting in the basement of Martin Weber's house with my family and quite a few other people watching a film (the movie projector kind with the big reels) about prison ministry. Even as a young child, I could tell that Mr. Weber felt a very strong call to minister to those in prison. Little did I know that some 26 years later I would be called upon to serve in the ministry that he started. I count it a privilege and an honor to be able to carry forward the torch that was lit by Mr. Weber and has been faithfully carried on by many different people over the years.

I am grateful that I had the opportunity to grow up around a man like Mr. Weber. I saw how he was faithful to God's call on his life and how he enjoyed living in that call. When something did not go as he intended, he learned what he could from the experience and then moved on to try again or to try the next thing. He always seemed to have a positive, forward-looking

attitude, and I appreciated that.

Mr. Weber was a man of strong faith. I think that if Hebrews 11 were to be rewritten today, Mr. Weber could be one of the names listed as someone who not only had faith but put his faith into action. No, Mr. Weber was not a perfect man; but neither were Noah and Abraham, and neither are you and I. However, even in our weaknesses, we can choose to follow God's call on our lives and put our faith into action. Then, and only then, can God use us to minister to those in need whether they are in a physical prison, an emotional prison, or some other form of bondage. May God grant us the courage to say, as Mr. Weber did, "Yes, God, I will follow you," and then live our lives in such a way as to bring Him glory. 🙌



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