

Lessons in Making Disciples from the Anchorage Prison Ministries Program | BY JULI MILLER

Seeds first sown ten years ago in Anchorage are now bearing remarkable fruit. Donovan Kack, the pastor of the Hillside O'Malley Church at that time, and Bible worker Jordan Peck, sought to train church elders and other members to develop and sustain an outreach ministry. The concept of a *jail* ministry—where people are housed prior to trials or serving short sentences, as opposed to *prisons* where longer sentences are completed—took hold as a place to start.

Together with a few church members such as head elder Lane Campbell, Kack and Peck navigated the Department of Corrections' paperwork, four-hour training, and background check requirements for church members to be approved for access to correctional facilities and to conduct religious programs. Thus a small group began to regularly visit the jails, as well as some halfway houses, establishing friendships and facilitating worship services and Bible studies. Pastor Kack also developed a series of Bible studies, called *The Power of the Cross*, for use in these settings.

Two years later, in 2009, Steve Steenmeyer was bap-

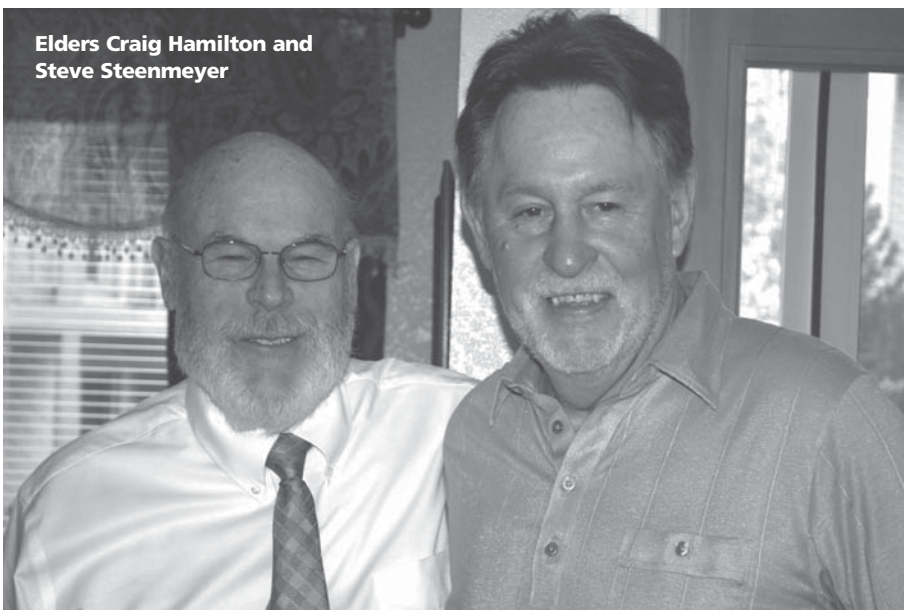
tized, joining his wife Tina as a member of the Hillside O'Malley Church. Steve remembers that Tina, who had not been an Adventist very long herself, called his attention to the Great Commission of Matthew 28, emphasizing the imperative to "make disciples," and explained that this must be his focus as a follower of Christ.

Previously a theater major at Whitman College, and co-owner of a dinner theater, Steve was a quick study on this new role of gathering and training new disciples. He volunteered in the correctional ministries activities of his church and determined to learn how best to bring this special audience into discipleship with Christ. Steve's commitment, energy, and organizational abilities soon became apparent to others, and he accepted the invitation to direct the correctional ministries for the Hillside O'Malley Church.

"Begin with the end in mind" had been standard procedure in his years as a successful entrepreneur in an array of businesses. He applied the same approach to prison ministries. He fixed the imperatives of John 15:16 to "bear

fruit—fruit that will last" and to "love each other" as his compass heading. And he kept his eyes open for better tools with which to plant, nurture and harvest spiritual fruit.

The Voice of Prophecy (VOP) organization then entered the stage. In 2011, in concert with the Alaska Conference, VOP executed a statewide direct-mail campaign inviting every postal customer to enroll in *Discover Bible School* (DBS), a series of twenty-six correspondence Bible lessons. This would prepare the ground for a ten-day evangelistic series planned for the Anchorage Conven-



Elders Craig Hamilton and Steve Steenmeyer



Tony Pouesi, Tina Steenmeyer, and Kathy Shipp. Tony's Mom flew up from Washington state for Tony's baptism; Kathy is now attending an Adventist church not far from her home and studying for baptism.

tion Center in July 2012.

The Alaska Conference hired Tina Steenmeyer to coordinate response to DBS enrollments in Alaska. She oversaw the timely mailing out of lessons, grading of completed lessons along with personalized notations, and training local churches so they could develop longer-term relationships with the DBS students.

From his ringside seat, Steve was able to envision the role DBS could play in nurturing disciples in the correctional facilities. The orderly progression of correspondence studies pulled inmates into an organized study of the Bible and could provide the glue for an ongoing relationship, even when the church volunteers were not visiting the inmates.

In August 2012, Steve and Lane began inviting the prisoners who attended their Bible study classes at the jail or at the halfway houses to sign up for DBS. Enrollment cards were on all seats at all services, and attendees were reminded of the opportunity to participate in the free Bible studies at the beginning and closing of each meeting. There was also an option to enroll for a thirty-lesson, *Native New Day* VOP series, especially created by and for Native Americans.

The Hillside O'Malley Church continued using the DBS Bible study series as a core piece of its prison ministries, even after the VOP evangelistic campaign concluded. The flow of enroll-

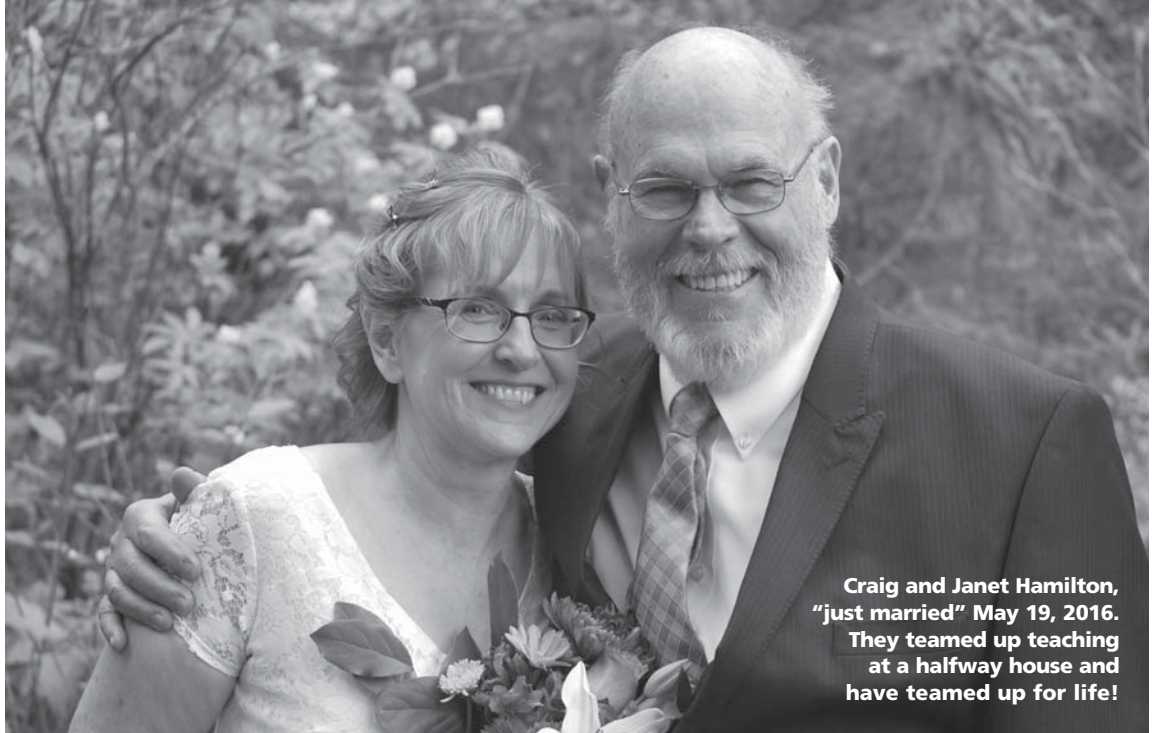
ment cards has been continuous from the beginning. There are usually ten new students per week, with an average of 100 or so active ones at any time. A total of over 2,000 people have signed up since the DBS program began, and an average of 22 percent of them complete a series. Many students also enroll in the *Bible Prophecy* or *Christian Lifestyle* study series after completing the first series, deepening their knowledge of the Bible as well as their relationships with the program team.

The DBS students frequently send notes along with their answer sheets. "I really want to thank you for these lessons. Ever since I came to prison on this charge, I've made a commitment to change my life. It's kinda funny that a guy gave me an SDA Bible when I got here, and then I followed through with doing these lessons. I will say it has helped me in more ways than you will ever know."

Together, Steve and Tina formed a supporting tag team for Tony. "This young man got into trouble in a fishing-port bar and faced a sentence of seven to seventeen years," explains Steve. Tony found a DBS Pass-It-On card while he was in a pre-trial jail in Anchorage and began studying diligently. "Tina was correcting his lessons and felt impressed to tell me I should go visit this student, so I did," Steve explains.

Tony had begun to regularly pray the prayer of

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Craig and Janet Hamilton, "just married" May 19, 2016. They teamed up teaching at a halfway house and have teamed up for life!

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David in Psalms 51:10: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." Steve could see Tony's transformation as the weeks passed. When it came time for Tony's trial, Steve was unable to attend because he was already committed to going to another one. So, Tina went, walking into a courtroom where there was a very hostile atmosphere for Tony, as the family of the victim who died was there. Tina decided to leave the proceedings, but she thought she heard the Holy Spirit coaxing her to go back as she was putting the car key into the ignition.

Tony, and his mother, claim that it was the comments Tina made on Tony's behalf that changed everything. As a result, Tony's sentence was time already served, plus three years' probation. Steve and Tina brought Tony to the Greater Works Center to live and restart his life. Tony was baptized, his mother enrolled in DBS and is preparing for baptism in Shelton, WA, and Tony has introduced a handful of his childhood friends to DBS.

When Tony isn't working at his job as a cook, he is often in downtown Anchorage. "He's designed these t-shirts with messages on them that get people's attention," says Steve. Tony converses with the homeless and others on the streets, providing encouragement, friendship, and spiritual resources. "Tony prays for his employer, he prays for his mom, he prays for his

old and new friends. He is on fire for God."

As in a watch, there are many moving parts to this ministry. The "Welcome" enrollment cards include a space to write prayer requests. Volunteers at the church faithfully lift up each request in numerous prayer teams. A Pass-It-On card is inserted into lesson packages once a person has completed at least two sets of lesson mailings, so students can encourage someone else to engage in Bible studies. This simple act of discipleship—sharing opportunity to have a guided study to the Bible—continuously generates new enrollment requests.

With his characteristic attention to consistent quality standards, Steve makes sure there is a one-day turnaround on grading lessons, adding helpful scriptural references and encouraging words, and then sending that material back with the next set of lessons. "Treat it just like a serious business!"

Just as a business would find ways to stay in touch with customers, Steve makes sure that the program logs each new DBS student into the government website so that it will receive notifications if the inmate is moved to another facility. Not only does this support the continued mail exchange of lesson materials, but churches located near a facility to which a student is transferred can be notified and encouraged to visit and establish a relationship.

"We want to keep graduates from the DBS

studies in our sphere of fellowship, so I have designed another correspondence course, called *Journey to Transformation*, to keep the study relationship alive,” Steve announces. He hopes to add it to the ministry toolkit soon.

Steve estimates that there are currently 200–300 DBS graduates—“a good-sized congregation!”—within the Alaskan correctional facilities who are nominal Seventh-day Adventists as a result of their DBS experience. About a dozen new members of the Hillside O’Malley church, and one at the Wasilla church, have roots to the DBS series, and others are attending an Adventist church but have not yet been baptized. There was a baptism in July.

Got Mail?

With the plethora of instant communications avenues available to most people today, rushing to see if one has a personal letter delivered by the U.S. Postal Service doesn’t seem like the highlight of one’s day. Unless you are behind bars. Restricted from cell phones and internet access, inmates long to have an envelope in the daily mail drop with his or her name on it. This connection with someone “out there” is part of the draw for enrolling in the DBS programs; you get mail.

Recently, Steve added the *Discover Friends* program as another means to further cultivate relationships nurtured through DBS. Volunteers for

this develop a pen-friend relationship with an inmate, or one who has been released, and exchange cards or letters. Steve believes this will be an effective way to continue to encourage and perhaps mentor people, as they move from place to place and face new challenges within or outside correctional facilities.

A Refuge Along the Way

Other pathways for ministering to those behind bars, or those being released, are being taken. First, the Greater Works Center with accommodations for six people was organized in 2014 to provide transitional housing and support for those who have completed a DBS series and wish to be in an Adventist environment as they integrate back into general society. “We wanted to establish this halfway house because we understand the desperation some people faced because they had nowhere safe to go to begin their life again on the other side of the bars, especially if they wished to practice an Adventist lifestyle,” Steve elaborates.

Since August 2014, Craig Hamilton has served as the first volunteer on-site resident manager for the live-in Center. With a master’s degree in Social Science and a twenty-seven-year career in the State of Colorado in the field of mental health, he had also participated in programs for the homeless and for substance abusers. Through

his involvement with prison ministries in Colorado, he became friends with inmates who were later transferred back to Alaska. This led to his taking a very long motorcycle ride up to visit them and connecting with the Steenmeyers, who recognized



Anna Mathis and Rose Waller, lay leaders at the Hiland Mountain Women’s Prison.

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he had the skills and interest to make the transitional work at the Center successful.

In addition to creating a safe home environment and guiding each resident to appropriate resources for successful re-entry into society, Craig sees to it that spiritual activities are woven into the weekly routine. There is a daily group devotional period and church members often join them for Sabbath vespers service. Residents also attend Sabbath School and the worship service at the Hillside O'Malley Church. "Each man living in the Center represents the fruit of sharing God's good news and each enriches the church family with his testimony. Many members have become friends and mentors," observes Craig. "I also am richer by my experiences here beyond my imagination. I have learned to trust God more than I ever knew I could."

Joining Forces with Others at Rescue Mission

Local Adventist church members also support the Anchorage Gospel Rescue Mission with donations or as volunteers, including serving on the board. Each month, the faith-based nonprofit organization offers overnight housing to over 2,000 people and serves over 7,500 meals, in addition to its assistance with sobriety, work preparedness, and job searches. There is a nightly worship service in the chapel, and Adventist volunteers take responsibility for a regular schedule of these, and constantly become acquainted with new Mission guests.

Bob first connected with Adventists while he was participating in the Mission's New Life Discipleship program. He followed up on an invitation to attend an Adventist church nearby and met Steve in the Sabbath School class. The immediate connection Bob felt prompted him to ask Steve to be his mentor, and they began to spend time together horseback riding. One of Steve's prior businesses involved providing horse-outfitting services for hunters and horse-drawn sleigh rides for tourists. Steve happily reports that Bob is now on the staff at the Gospel Mission, using his prior experience in

warehousing and food distribution to organize inventory at the Mission and looking for new opportunities to disciple someone else.

Fishers of Men Busy Behind Bars

Steve's eyes sparkle as he talks about Robert, who received a DBS Pass-It-On referral card and began attending Bible study classes in the prison. Steve decided to meet privately with Robert and observed his hunger for learning more Bible truths. Before long, Robert was leading in Bible studies, signing other people up for DBS, and even organized a foot-washing service for a group in his unit.

With Steve's encouragement, Robert accepted a transfer to a correctional facility where the majority of inmates have sentences of over twenty years, but the facility contains a "faith unit." The chaplain at this unit is very cooperative, recognizes the character transformation in Robert, and is offering more access to religious materials via computers. Numerous graduates of DBS are in this unit, and more will be headed that way in the future. Steve sees great opportunities for Robert to lead out in Bible studies, worship services, and the development of more disciples while they are behind the bars.

Growth Spawns Reorganization

In the Greater Anchorage region, there are now about thirty volunteers from five churches ministering to people in eight prisons or jails (including a women's prison), three halfway houses, and five federal facilities. When an inmate has a federal violation, he/she can be transferred to an out-of-state federal institution. Steve and his team try to stay in touch and keep lesson materials and communications flowing. One such inmate wrote in April: "If you did not receive my last courses, please send replacements. I refer to them in a small Bible study I have here at Atwater. There's quite a large mission field here."

In 2013, Steve also accepted the responsibilities as Alaska Correctional Ministries Coordinator, so he also contemplates ways to broaden the outreach to the prison population across the vast landscape of the largest state in the USA. In

addition to the geographic challenges, he notes the long-standing cultural and language barriers connected with the native communities who also inhabit isolated places, 80 percent of which are generally only accessible by air. Some can be accessed seasonally by waterways.

To establish a sustainable structure for the two core programs of prison ministry and transitional living, a formal change of status is underway to transfer these under the umbrella of two separate 501(c)(3) organizations. Steve points out that this will make it easier to incorporate additional support systems for the expanding programs, while continuing to allow church members to participate as donors or volunteers.

Prison ministries hasn't just been life-changing for inmates. Lane, one of the earliest volunteers in the program, looks back at the evolution of the prison ministry with humble gratitude and amazement. "I would never have dreamed I would be involved with something like this. It felt so awkward at the beginning to go into a jail or a halfway house, but I made it a habit to pray for the Holy Spirit to be with us and learned to trust the Lord." For Lane, a painting contractor, evangelism through prison ministries has become his lifestyle. "It's not an occasional event or activity. I organize the painting work I accept so it won't interfere with the group services or many

individual sessions I do each week. Along with other volunteers, Campbell also drives 250-mile roundtrip to Seward numerous times a month to minister to inmates at the only maximum-security facility there. "If we don't have time to be involved with ministry, if we are too busy making ourselves comfortable on this earth, we do not have the right priorities."

As Steve applies his knowledge and experience from the theatrical stage, and a variety of business ventures, to the enterprise of bringing in new disciples for the Kingdom of God, he likes to emphasize the power of compounding. "If I can reach one person this year, the next year there are two of us planting seeds of discipleship. The following year there are four of us. In twenty years, there would be 1,048,076 people if each person continued to bring in one more each year. That's the kind of soul harvest we wish to bring in, and it can happen if everyone becomes an active disciple." ■

Adventist travelers to Sun Valley, Idaho frequently visit the small Seventh-day Adventist Church in neighboring Hailey,



Idaho where **Juli Miller** is a member. It was there she learned of the Anchorage Prison Ministries from a visitor passing through. Juli is a health care consultant and a member of the *Spectrum* editorial board.



Former inmates at Hiland Mountain Women's Prison attending Sabbath service with Tina Steenmeyer, right.

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