

Ministry's work goes beyond prison to help inmates

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bers would decline." Larry Sarratt and John Jennings were helped by Return Ministries. They are former inmates who now minister to other inmates.

"I'm a successful man because of Return Ministries and other prison ministries like it," said Jennings. "I have a business, I'm married and now I'm returning back to prison to talk to other prisoners. Recently, I had the opportunity to minister to a man

that was my roommate about 10 years ago. It made him feel good to see me come back."

Sarratt says Jesus wants all people to go back and assist people in need.

"He wanted everybody to go back and help the poor disadvantaged," he said.

"When a man comes out of prison he needs to be retrained on how to live. He needs to be trained and showed how to be on time, how to dress for a job and how to hold on to a job."

The ministers say the only limit is resources. "We load up in cars and vans to do what some people want to do but will not do," said Jennings. "We are that extended arm to your loved ones who are locked up."

Although the ministry is lacking funds, York says Return Ministries will press on. "We need financial support but this is a ministry that will move forward without it," he said. "We serve a CEO that supplies all of our needs."

"I think the public would help more programs like this if they could see more success coming from more community-based programs."

"I tell people in the churches I visit I would much rather see an ex-inmate go to work when I'm going to work instead of watching me go to work."

Return Ministries needs volunteers.

"We need volunteers that can spend time with ex-offenders," York said. "We need a person that can pick

up the phone and talk to a man that has pounded the pavement all day long and has been rejected. We need a person who can provide an encouraging word to a person."

"We need someone to say something like 'Hold on things are going to get better. We need people with the willingness to give of themselves to help people get back on track. We ask volunteers to stay in the life of a ex-offender six months.'"

Return Ministries, isn't a

church, but when ex-offenders are looking for a church Scott says he usually sends them to one of the five that are big supporters of the ministry.

"I send them to First Baptist, Manna Bread of Life, Greenville AME Zion Church, Garr Memorial Church and Mount Carmel. "Those churches will let the former inmates come in the house and they will help them," he said. "These pastors will welcome the inmates."

Scholars find a unique and varied American version of Jesus

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In some ways, both books fit into a growing body of literature that is finding new things to say about Jesus, despite all that has been previously written. Elaine Pagels' best seller, "Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas," has attracted widespread notice for shedding further light on the very different ideas about Jesus that some early Christians held.

"I think part of the reason is (Prothero) and some other people as well realize if there was ever a kind of monopoly claim by the Church or churches on who Jesus was, the significance of Jesus, that monopoly is now gone," said Harvey Cox, a Harvard University scholar, who is also finishing a book on contemporary depictions of Jesus,

due out later this year.

The range of American interpretations of Jesus testifies to a power and flexibility in Jesus' message. It also says something interesting about America, Prothero argues.

"Jesus is on the agenda because of the public power of Christianity," Prothero told The Associated Press in a recent interview. "The kind of Christianity that now dominates is Jesus-focused. But we have the First Amendment. We have a culture that highly values religious toleration and even, I think it's fair to say, diversity. In such a culture, Jesus won't become a national figure unless he can move outside Christianity."

The new books survey the transformation of Jesus in

America from the detached figure of the Puritans — more "principle than person" in Prothero's words — to the rationalist Jesus who survived the Enlightenment to the humane presence dominating the current evangelical movement.

While the colonists were "God-fearing rather than Jesus-loving," Prothero said, they revered Jesus as the sacrifice of an awesome God. But Calvinist theology empha-

sized the distance between a perfect God and sinful man — and a part-divine, part-human bridge did not fit neatly.

Both authors credit Thomas Jefferson for helping to make America the kind of place where Jesus could evolve and flourish.

It was Jefferson who used a razor blade to cut out the portions of the New Testament he couldn't accept, such as

the virgin birth. He was left with just one in 10 verses, but he found in them a true Jesus who could be reconciled with the rationalist thought of the Enlightenment.

Similarly, Benjamin Franklin retranslated the Lord's Prayer into a version more compatible with his version of Jesus, as moral exemplar.

"By the late 18th-century, Jesus is made into a kind of democrat, and therefore you

can keep him," Fox said. "You don't have to throw him out when you throw the established church out."

Both Jefferson and Franklin, of course, influenced the formation of a republic where there was no established religion in government, which made possible the competitive milieu in which conceptions of Jesus rapidly evolved in popular culture.

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