

A residential ministry deals with the sex offender registry

## To rejoin society, ex-offenders need a place to live.

by [Steven Yoder](#) in the [January 31, 2018](#) issue



Thinkstock

Baptist minister Glenn Burns calls the evening of April 7, 2016, the “crucifixion.” It was the toughest test of his 40-year career.

Burns leads a Christian social services ministry in northern Florida called the Good Samaritan Network. Until last April, the nonprofit was headquartered in the town of Woodville, just outside Tallahassee. Its food bank served 7,000 people a month. It also ran a thrift store and a home for women transitioning off the street from sex work. And it operated a Christian home for men reentering society after prison who had no other place to live. Many of them were on Florida’s registry of sex offenders.

It was that last program that got Burns in trouble. As in other states, Florida’s state-run registry puts the names, photos, and addresses of those convicted of sex crimes on a public website. In Woodville, a few neighbors had searched the site and found

that 11 of the 16 men at Good Samaritan's home for ex-offenders were on the list. They called the program to find out why it served people they thought were dangerous. There was a school less than a quarter of a mile away.

Burns invited the neighbors in for a tour of the facility and to learn about the program's work: teaching men skills they'd need to transition from prison to civilian life, giving them jobs, providing spiritual direction. Staff closely supervised the men. The state corrections department confirmed to a local paper that none of the men was out of compliance with the terms of his parole.

The visitors seemed satisfied. Burns and his wife, Beth, left for a long-planned two-month sabbatical.

But another group of neighbors wasn't satisfied. About two dozen of them showed up to protest in front of the program's offices. "Move the group of trash out of Woodville," read one sign, according to a news report. The protesters demanded a meeting, and the county commissioner called one for the next day at the Woodville Elementary School.

The Burnses were at a campground when Good Samaritan program manager Andy Messer called. "Man, the phones are blowing up over here and the press is coming down," Messer said. Burns turned their RV around and headed back to Woodville. When he got to Good Samaritan, the men were scared. Death threats had come in. "Look, we're going to work with you no matter what happens," Burns told them. "We're with you all the way."

About a hundred people were jammed into the school's small library when the Burnses walked in. Beth Burns took a seat. Glenn Burns's walk up the aisle was his own *via dolorosa*: people crowded in, waving signs in his face. He took a seat at the front with the sheriff, county commissioner, and school superintendent.

The commissioner opened the meeting for questions, and a man asked how Good Samaritan had gotten a permit to operate. The commissioner said he wasn't responsible for keeping track of every permit. Burns said he'd take the question. He got only a few words out before the crowd shouted him down. "Baby rapist!" a woman screamed. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" someone yelled. On his third try, Burns told the crowd that the program was going to move.

Another question came in, and when Burns tried to answer, the crowd silenced him again. Then Sheriff Mike Wood stood up. "I'm an old boy. I grew up here," he said, according to Burns. "We have more than 600 registered sex offenders in this county, and we've been monitoring this man's program for many years. And I'll tell you, the safest sex offenders in this county sleep under this man's roof."

A Good Samaritan volunteer grabbed the mike. "You bunch of hypocrites," she said, pointing at members of the audience. "You, and you, and you, were all in our store yesterday, and these very men you're persecuting carried your food to your car."

That stopped the shouting. Burns answered every question raised about the program. Gradually the signs were lowered and people started easing out the door. Within half an hour, some of the women who'd been screaming were talking quietly with Beth Burns, who runs Good Samaritan's program for former sex workers.

An African American janitor walked Burns out of the building. As he locked up, he turned to Burns. "Son, Jesus is proud of you," Burns remembers him saying.

America may have entered a new era in which some survivors of sexual violence finally get justice. That Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, and James Toback could face prison time for alleged sexual assaults suggests that those who force themselves on others finally will be held to account.

But there's another reality to face: once perpetrators have served their punishment, what's the best way to make sure they don't repeat the crime? Burns and law enforcement officials have a counterintuitive answer: reintegration. Programs like Good Samaritan, they say, don't just minister to society's lepers. By giving ex-offenders a place to live, jobs, and social support, Christian ministries can help society move toward a world of no more victims.

But they're fighting ongoing official efforts to fence off those who have served time for sex crimes.

At the other end of Florida is an activist who's carried on a two-decade battle to isolate those with a sex-crime record.

In 1996, prominent Florida lobbyist Ron Book and his wife hired a Honduran immigrant named Waldina Flores to be a nanny for their 11-year-old daughter, Lauren, in their home in Plantation, outside Fort Lauderdale. Flores had been given a

background check and came highly recommended.

Perhaps a year into her tenure, Flores began sexually abusing Lauren. It would be just as accurate to describe what she did as torture. The Books recounted the ordeal in a 2009 *Newsweek* interview and in the 2016 documentary *Untouchable*.

Lauren Book eventually told a psychiatrist what was happening, and Flores was arrested. In 2002, Flores was sentenced to 15 years in prison for sexual battery and molestation. But Lauren Book says the physical effects were such that she's not sure she can ever have children. Ron Book wept while recounting the story to a reporter in 2009 and said he still couldn't bring himself to read the police report.

Since then, Ron Book has made it his mission to keep anyone convicted of a sex crime away from kids. In 2005, he helped Miami Beach pass the country's first municipal ordinance restricting where those who are on sex offender registries can live—houses and apartments within 2,500 feet of a school are off limits. Most of the county's municipalities soon enacted similar laws, as did counties and cities in other parts of the state.

The new rules left ex-offenders with few options for where to live. A 2009 study found that 96 percent of homes and apartments in Miami-Dade County were off limits. Affordable apartments were especially hard to come by—there were only 43 available outside ban zones at the time of the study. Homeless shelters and subsidized housing don't help since they're under the same restriction.

Registrants have responded by setting up squalid homeless encampments in the few places they're allowed to live. Last summer, investigations by local newspapers found that 270 registrants were camping in a warehouse district near Hialeah. Their tents were moldy and full of insects. Rats scurried along the paths between them. Without bathrooms and running water, the surrounding area became an open sewer. Local businesses were up in arms.

Miami-Dade County commissioners now are considering a draconian move. An ordinance introduced in November would make it illegal for those with a sex-crime record to camp on county property even if they have nowhere else to go. If it passes, registrants will face prison time for sleeping outdoors.

In August, Book visited the warehouse district encampment in his role as head of the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust. But he was unmoved: "The Constitution doesn't

guarantee where you can live when you break the law,” he told a local paper.

The story of offenders sleeping outdoors because of residency bans could be told in other parts of the state. A 2013 study in the journal *Criminal Justice Policy Review* found that those with a sex-crime record in Florida were ten times likelier than those in the general population to be homeless. Thirty other states have residency restrictions too, as do hundreds of local jurisdictions around the country.

The impact of such residence bans on deterring sex crimes has been well researched. A U.S. Department of Justice roundup of the results of eight studies on these policies notes that “there is no empirical support for the effectiveness of residence restrictions.” In fact, the unintended consequences of such rules, the Justice Department said, include “loss of housing, loss of support systems, and financial hardship,” which “may aggravate rather than mitigate offender risk.”

Research like that is at the heart of Burns’s argument about the need for a Christian residential program. After Good Samaritan was forced out of Woodville, Burns scrambled to locate housing for the men. For a few weeks, he rented rooms in a crumbling motel east of Tallahassee. But two of his guys couldn’t go there: while the city has no blanket residency restriction like Miami, a state law forbids ex-offenders on probation for a sex crime from living within a thousand feet of a school, and the motel was too close. Both men ended up homeless and back in prison—not for new crimes but for technical violations of their probation terms, Burns said.

In July 2016, a Pentecostal minister in north Tallahassee stepped in to offer Good Samaritan space in a strip mall his church owned. Then two supporters offered the nonprofit three houses and land on the west edge of Tallahassee for the residential program for men. All three homes needed renovation but are outside the thousand-foot boundary, so there are no legal risks.

On a Friday morning in October, Burns and 11 guys sit on couches at the front of the new thrift store in the strip mall. After Burns leads a 45-minute discussion on prayer, the men split up for their jobs—one to work in Good Samaritan’s landscaping business, two more to remodel one of the three houses for the residential program, a third to barbering school. That night after work, they all show up again—they’re required to be back at 6 p.m. sharp on Fridays for pizza and another talk from Burns. “In these guys’ previous lives, Friday night was party night,” Burns explains. “We don’t want them slipping into old habits.”

All the men have to either hold a job or attend school. Their names and photos appear on the sex-offender registry and most lack job skills, so they struggle to find work. Those who can't are given jobs in the program in exchange for a small stipend.

The crimes for which they've served time run the gamut. Chris, crew-cut, built like Captain America, with tattoo murals on both arms, served time for two sex crimes. Now 37, he said he grew up watching his dad beat his mother. He joined a gang at 12 and started dealing drugs. In 2005, he was judged guilty in juvenile court for molesting a child when he was 17. He served five years in prison for that. He claims he never did the crime—he says he broke into a home as a young gang member but says the victim of the home invasion wanted to get the charges trumped up and told police Chris had molested his daughter. (That story can't be confirmed—an Alachua County court representative says court records for cases involving crimes against minors aren't available online.)

Chris got out of prison in early 2010 and that April started a sexual relationship with a young woman who he says he thought was 18. Court records show she was actually 17 and that he was 25 at the time. He says the teen's mother found out and reported it to police. That put him back behind bars for another five years.

"I've made so many mistakes," he says, tearing up. "I'm stressed that I won't get a job. And I'm worried I won't find a permanent place to live."

Adam, 27, wears black-framed glasses and has the careful diction of a teacher. "I'm the last one my family would have expected to end up in jail," he said. He grew up in a working-class home, got married at age 22, and got his associate's degree in biology. He worked at Best Buy as an inventory specialist, a job he'd held for two years when his life turned upside down.

Adam says that he downloaded a lot of illegal songs and movies. In March 2015, while on a peer-to-peer file-sharing site called Cross Wire, he downloaded a file that he says turned out to show two girls, 14 and 15, on a bed, clothed but kissing. Two weeks later, the cops raided his home and seized his electronics. They found ten files that involved child pornography, though Adam claims he has no idea where the other nine came from and thinks they may have been embedded in the original file. It was his first arrest. (Court documents show that he pled guilty to five counts of child pornography possession. A Leon County representative said she couldn't

release other details that might confirm his account because the case involves a minor.)

Adam went to prison for 15 months and got out in July 2017. He'll be listed on Florida's sex offender registry for 25 years. He and his wife of five years divorced—they agreed that the stigma he faces now would make their life together too difficult. He's not allowed to use the Internet, so looking for jobs is tough since most listings and applications are now online. So his ex-wife fills out applications for him. Today he works as the cashier at the program's thrift store. "Spiritually I needed this place," he says of the program. "The stuff that I'm dealing with—it's going to be a rough future."

Burns says registrants are the easiest population he's had to work with. "They're so grateful to be given any help," he says.

Burns mostly avoids talking to his guys about the fairness of the policies governing their lives. He wants them to change what they can control—learning work skills, living free of alcohol and drugs, gaining the attitudes they'll need to persevere, deepening their Christian faith.

But privately he says that current sex offender laws create the conditions that make future offending more likely. Politically, he's voted Republican in every presidential election since Reagan, calls abortion a "deal-breaker," and quotes conservative Christian writer James Dobson in his morning devotional. But when it comes to keeping his guys straight, he thinks current policies—especially posting their names and photos on registries and limiting where they can live—are doing more harm than good. "I'm very sensitive to the perspective of the victims and their families. I get it," he says. "But a hopeless person is a dangerous person."

That conclusion is supported by multiple evaluations and reentry studies: those who have served time need support, not isolation. Ex-offenders are less likely to commit another crime when they have jobs, housing, and social support.

Two Tallahassee law enforcement leaders don't need convincing. Crisna Logan, inmate programs director for the Leon County detention center within the sheriff's office, says she wants to stop seeing the same people cycling back to prison. Programs like Good Samaritan do that by offering hope, she says. "They're definitely beneficial, especially for those with a sex-crime record because society has given up on them." The probation officers she's spoken to say they're happy about the work

of people at Good Samaritan because “they give [their guys] a curfew and jobs, and they hold them accountable. . . . We’re all on the same team.”

Another supporter is state attorney Jack Campbell, chief prosecutor for the district that covers Tallahassee. “It’s extraordinary the way this sex offender legislation has been passed. It makes it difficult for sex offenders to exist in society.” He says those who’ve served time for a sex crime need places to live and a life coach to comply with the thicket of rules they’re subject to. He supports what Good Samaritan does “because if we’re going to have these people reenter our community, then we have to give them a path to doing so successfully,” he says.

Good Samaritan program manager Andy Messer says that about 500 men with sex-offense records have been served through Good Samaritan and a previous faith-based rescue mission that Burns directed from 1999 till 2009. Of those, he says, none returned to prison for a sexual reoffense while they were in the program. One was reimprisoned for a technical violation—Burns himself called police after finding the man standing in front of a school.

The program doesn’t have numbers on how its long-term recidivism rates compare with that of the general population leaving prison. In part that’s a tracking problem—staff can’t follow what happens with all of their men after they leave the program. That’s a study that the state Department of Corrections would have to carry out, and department representative Matt Sampson says it’s never been done.

America’s singular sex-offense regime means the issue won’t go away anytime soon. Only a few countries operate public registries, and the U.S. system is far and away the most extensive in terms of the number of people registered, length of registration, and degree of public access to names, photos, and addresses. And no country outside the United States appears to restrict where registrants can live.

Burns says Good Samaritan wants to replicate its work elsewhere, partnering with other churches. So many men are coming out of prison with a sex-crime record, Burns says, that the program could have “a hundred guys overnight” if it had the capacity.

“Not everybody is called to work with this population, so I have no hard feelings if someone doesn’t—we get it,” says Messer. “But somebody has to.”

*Read the sidebar article on [church policies for sex offenders](#).*



*A version of this article appears in the January 31 print edition under the title “Where can sex offenders live?”*