

# Church on the Street

A Phoenix First Assembly ministry helps ex-inmates transition back to society — and avoid returning to prison

BY JOHN W. KENNEDY IN PHOENIX

It's 6:30 on a Friday morning, and Walt Rattray is halfway through a teaching session with dozens of men about developing sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.

Although the hour is early, Rattray doesn't allow the men to get too relaxed. This isn't a lecture; it's an interactive lesson in life.

"You said, 'I'll never take drugs again,'" Rattray says to the men, who are mostly in their 30s and 40s. "How long did that last? I tried and tried to keep my commitments, and I couldn't — until I was empowered by the Holy Spirit, until I relinquished control."

For the past quarter-century, Rattray has been senior pastor of Church on the Street (COTS), which runs a residential discipleship program of the Dream Center sponsored by Phoenix

First Assembly of God. His congregation isn't typical: 85 percent of the 160 resident attendees have been paroled from prison or jail.

Nor is the ambiance a church's customary wooden pews and shag carpet. COTS disciples live on the premises, a former four-story Comfort Inn and Suites Hotel where guest rooms have been converted into dormitories. Here residents stay for six months — and often for a year — before transitioning back into society. The rigorous schedule, which includes daily spiritual training, is designed to keep them from going back behind bars once they are on their own.

Rattray, decked out in blue jeans, burgundy cowboy boots and a red jacket emblazoned with a Church on the Street logo, speaks expressively and enthusiastically in

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— Pastor Walt Rattray

Church on the Street Pastor Walt Rattray and his wife, Louene, are impacting the lives of hundreds of men and women.



the COTS sanctuary, the hotel's former conference room. He doesn't stay stationary on the platform. The trim pastor is a bundle of energy, gesturing demonstratively, changing his voice inflexion and stepping to the side of the wooden pulpit to make a point. He continually peppers the men with inquiries.

The disciples, as they are called at COTS, respond by asking questions, interjecting comments and occasionally applauding for a particularly salient insight.

With his history and temperament, Rattray is the perfect tutor in discipleship classes. He's authoritative, yet transparent; humorous, yet intolerant of nonsense; demanding, yet compassionate.

"I was a mess, a drunk," says Rattray, who has been sober 33 years. "I was wheeling, dealing, drinking and

chasing. I failed at everything."

At age 67, the tireless Rattray wakes up at 3 a.m. to prepare for the day's messages. By the time he begins his 6 a.m. class, he's already lifted weights in a gym and prayed for half an hour.

The classroom crowd is made up of Anglos, Hispanics and African-Americans; men who are obese and skinny, bald and ponytailed, covered in tattoos and unadorned. Most don't mind the rugged schedule or daily tasks at the complex. They certainly don't want to return to jail, especially in a county where the sheriff makes inmates live in tents, wear pink underwear and eat green baloney sandwiches.

At 7:20 a.m., Rattray is lingering to answer questions after class. He rushes to his

next one-hour instructing assignment down the hall. This is an advanced, mixed-gender class. For the students, it's an even more intense interactive dialogue than the one for beginners. No one is allowed to be a spectator. Again stressing the theme of relying on the Holy Spirit, Rattray calls a couple of disciples up to the podium to preach a five-minute sermon. Everyone in the room must recite a Scripture verse from memory.

"God wants to use broken-down people like us, the outcasts of society," Rattray says. "We can overcome bondage to alcohol, cigarettes and prescription drugs."

As this session ends, Rattray dashes back to his office for a prayer service with the COTS pastoral staff, which includes several former prisoners.

## Grateful for 'boot camp'

Randal Koch

After spending more than a decade in prison, Randal Koch didn't exactly feel less restricted during his first two months at COTS. That is, until he truly committed his life to Christ.

"That's when I finally started understanding Scripture," says Koch, who is now a third-phase resident working at a fleet vehicle washing service. "That's when I saw the place as a blessing rather than a burden."

Koch initially opposed the idea of enrolling in a "Christian boot camp" for six months upon his release from prison, but felt he had no other option. Otherwise he would have returned to a neighborhood plagued by alcoholism, drug abuse and theft. He figured that environment quickly would land him back in the penitentiary.

Now, after more than a year at COTS, he has saved money and will have no problem renting an apartment and paying his bills.

In addition to maintaining spiritual disciplines, Koch also is in shape physically. At 49, he just ran a marathon.

John W. Kennedy photos

Immediately afterwards, Rattray presides over an hour-long class for two dozen women, most of whom recently have been released from being locked up. The pace is less frantic, the teaching more methodical and full of anecdotes, including the revelation that Rattray's wife, Louene, has to tell him how to dress properly. Realizing many of these women have been used and abused by men, Rattray appears more like a tender, caring father figure.

In his younger days, Rattray had some experience mistreating women. Nine months after his wedding, he

visited a fortuneteller, who told him to divorce his wife — which he did.

Two years later, Rattray saw an advertisement for spiritual healing and figured the meeting dealt with white witchcraft, to which he had become a devotee. It turned

out to be a Christian service. By the end of the night Rattray had made Jesus his Savior.

Before long, Rattray began preaching on the streets. He ran into his ex-wife, who in the interim also had become a Christian. Today, Walt and Louene have been remarried for 31 years.

### REALIZING THE DREAM

For most of its history, COTS existed as a patchwork of small houses in inner-city Phoenix. Two years ago, Tommy Barnett, pastor of Phoenix First Assembly of God, committed to putting the ministry under one roof. The church paid \$4.5 million for the 192-room hotel. The top floor of the complex, with Mediterranean-revival style architecture, serves as headquarters for the Dream Center, which sponsors various community programs to aid at-risk youth, the homeless and needy families.

COTS occupies the rest of the facility. Men live on the second floor; women, on the third. The ground level includes the cafeteria, chapel, classrooms,

*Church on the Street has its headquarters at a former Comfort Inn and Suites.*



Danny Palacios relaxes in what used to be a hotel room.

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prayer room and offices. Volunteers staff the first-level counseling center, health clinic, dental clinic, beauty salon and clothing outlet.

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The disciples live in identical rooms, which contain a bed, dresser, wardrobe, bathroom with shower and small kitchen area. Residents aren't allowed to smoke, drink or fraternize with the opposite sex.

The 85 percent who choose to stay another six months receive advanced spiritual and financial counseling. Those in phase two are allowed to work a part-time outside job and may obtain a microwave, television set and phone. The few who stay another three months may gain full-time employment,

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Toby Ray

## A prodigal's second chance

Toby Ray enrolled at COTS 12 years ago when the ministry operated a three-month residential program. He took off just before graduation and went back to selling drugs. More than a decade in prison followed.

Now, Ray is back at COTS and midway through his second six-month phase.

"I've made a vow to set apart this time in life to learn who Christ is and build on that foundation," says Ray, who remodels houses and works security for COTS.

Ray, 38, is amazed that COTS offered him a second chance.

"I was accepted again even though I messed up," he says. "They're concerned about me, like a prodigal son."

Ray had lessons to learn while locked up, which included time in "the hole" for dealing drugs inside. In isolation, he started reading the Bible in earnest.

"This place is perfect in its imperfection," Ray says of COTS. "I'm around so many different attitudes and personalities that I have to learn how to get along."

such as carpentry, plumbing and roofing jobs. Those who receive an income are expected to pay \$200 a month to COTS to defray room and board expenses.

In the past 15 years, 4,500 men and women have gone through the COTS discipleship program.

All disciples are expected to participate in ministry outreaches. Options include 26 jail services and a dozen prison services a week.

Besides learning spiritual truths, residents are expected

to exercise regularly and do their share of chores around the facility. Disciples have one day off a week.

In addition to his other teaching roles, Rattray leads church services three nights a week as well as Sunday mornings.

For the past two years, Louene has overseen the education program at COTS. Louene, who has a master's degree and spent 22 years as Christian education director at Phoenix First AG, puts together individual curriculum



John W. Kennedy photos

study plans for disciples, who range from those barely literate to college graduates with multiple degrees. Disciples copy biblical Proverbs verbatim, read the *Life in Christ* manual by Tony Salerno and memorize Scripture cards. "We try to help them get organized and have a structured life," says Louene.

### FROM PRISON TO STAFF

Charles Crouch is director of information technology and security at COTS. He has a master's degree and worked for Fortune 500 companies. He also has a prison record resulting from hacking computers.

"Education didn't keep me from hanging out with low people," Crouch says.

Crouch admits having a bad attitude when he came to COTS as a disciple. He immediately wanted to repair computers. Instead, his supervisor handed him a bucket and mop. Lessons in humility paid off. Now, as a COTS staff member, Crouch teaches courses where men learn everything from repairing computers to designing Web sites.



Eddie Adorno (far left) left a prison chaplain job to work at COTS. The Rattrays (center) take a break near an outdoor fountain. Rattray preaches at an early morning session (right). Charles Crouch (below) now has a more noble purpose.



"We want to give guys job skills so they know more than how to flip burgers," says Crouch, 46. At the height of his career, Crouch made \$75 an hour; now he earns \$25 a week.

"I'm more joyful than ever before," Crouch says. "I'm glad God arranged for me to get caught."

Eddie Adorno left a full-time paid position as a prison chaplain to work as a COTS volunteer. He's in charge of mentoring the 60 men in phase two.

"We're trying to make a dent in that revolving prison door," says Adorno, 40. "It's

one thing to see men walking with God in prison. It's another thing to mentor them beyond the walls."

Danny Palacios, who is Rattray's assistant, came to COTS after 15 years in prison, half of it in isolation. He is involved in nursing home outreaches three times a week. His wife of 10 months, Stephanie, served time for armed robbery, but now helps with women's discipleship at COTS.

One day in 2003 Palacios ran across a magazine advertisement for Christian literature that promised liberty from bondage: "If the Son

sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

At the time Palacios didn't fully understand the implication. But it caused him to examine his past life of heroin addiction and to contemplate his bleak future.

"Drugs were all I had done for 24 years — on the streets and in prison," says Palacios, 45. "I was in desperate hopelessness."

In his cell, Palacios asked Jesus to become his Savior.

Soon, a New Living Translation Bible arrived in the mail for him. Palacios hadn't ordered it; he didn't have any money as an inmate. The package had no return address label. Palacios began to read the Scriptures voraciously. He hasn't been the same since. He is convinced that same kind of change is available to everyone who comes through COTS' doors. **tpe**

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## Saved from death

Maurice Lattimore is on his second go-round at COTS.

"The first time, I was displaying a form of godliness but walking in no power," says Lattimore, who just began his second phase. "I still had a foot in the world. I did it wrong."

Not too long after graduating the first time, Lattimore revisited a life of what he calls "drinking, drugging and fornicating." One night, out of his mind on drugs, Lattimore committed an armed robbery. A police chase ensued.

Maurice Lattimore

Lattimore pulled his car over, got out and started charging a police sergeant.

"He cocked the trigger and three times he told me to halt," recalls Lattimore, 50. "The man could have killed me that night. He had the right."

As he ran toward the officer, Lattimore tripped and fell. He believes God is responsible for the stumble. He spent more than four years behind bars.

"Jesus Christ came for the ungodly, a rotten piece of dung like me, to free me from bondage," Lattimore says. "Now I know who I am in Christ. Being truly submitted will make the difference this time."

