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AAA

### Call to aid ex-convicts sold salesman on new life of service

By [Lindsay Melvin \(Contact\)](#), Memphis Commercial Appeal  
Monday, November 17, 2008

Bob Sauter had dreamed of retiring with his wife to a cozy condo on the white sands of Sarasota, Fla. It was to be his paradise. The ultimate reward for years of hard work.

But that was before he was saved and his faith led him to exchange the beachside condo for a building to house ex-convicts in Memphis.



Nikki Boertman/The Commercial Appeal

Bob Sauter (right) leads the nightly prayer before dinner at Aphasis House Memphis, a halfway house to assist men as they transition from prison back into society.



Nikki Boertman/The Commercial Appeal

Bob Sauter serves up flank steak dinners at the nine-bed halfway house. He gets 20 letters a week from prisoners, but must tell many: "Sorry, I have no room."

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A slight man with a gray buzz cut and an intense gaze, Sauter, 62, opened Aphesis House Memphis nearly two years ago to help men released from prison rebuild their lives and strengthen their spirit. This month, he helped form a coalition of inmate support groups.

"When God puts it into your heart to do something, you do it," said Sauter, who quit his sales job to run the nonprofit shelter.

Aphesis is the Greek word for forgiveness. The nine-room ministry was modeled after a successful Christian halfway house in Nashville with the same name.

On a busy strip of gas stations and convenience stores on Summer Avenue, Sauter's retirement dreams now sit wrapped up in a squat brick building with a giant white cross out front.

Everything about the nine-bedroom structure is unremarkable, except for the lives that are being transformed inside.

"When I got out, I had absolutely nothing," said Joseph Jones, 32, who had been imprisoned for 21/2 years for identity theft and forgery.

He had no license, no job, and his family had sold his belongings, he said.

Three other guys Jones left prison with, he says, are now back in jail. But in the slightly cramped Aphesis House, where Jones stayed for four months, he said being with other Christians gave him the support to get back on track. He now lives in an apartment and is general manager for a small business.

Jones still comes by to see "Dad" or "Pops," as many residents call Sauter, and never fails to tell the unordained minister he loves him before heading out.

Sauter spends his days shuttling his residents to parole meetings, scurrying after job leads, and ministering to a variety of needs from recovering addictions to emotional damage from sexual abuse.

Men stay with him until they can make it on their own, usually several months. He carefully screens applicants, asking what he says is the most important question: "Do you read the Bible?"

Ten years ago, Sauter was a high-octane Ohio businessman, who at one point worked for a defense contractor dealing with Washington pooh-bahs.

Raised Catholic, he rarely went to church and preferred a round of golf over The Good Book.

That all changed when he attended a gathering for the Christian organization Promise Keepers. During the prayer service, Sauter was touched by the bond he saw among men of different Christian denominations.

When he moved to Memphis in 2000 to be closer to his grandchildren, he joined Kairos, an international prison ministry. Sauter formed close bonds with some of the toughest men inside West Tennessee State Penitentiary, near Henning.

He was so fired up about how the gospel was impacting inmates that he began returning weekly to minister to them.

But after being paroled, those same inmates were landing back in jail after returning to their old neighborhoods, he said.

"After watching guys we knew, who had faith and could preach the paint off the ceiling, getting sucked back into the sewer, I had to do something," Sauter said.

The most recent statistics show more than 67 percent of parolees return to prison, according to Richard Janikowski, a criminologist with the University of Memphis.

"It can be a circular trap," he said.

Sitting on a donated couch near twin crosses hanging on the wall, one of the newest members at

Aphesis House, Steve Robbins, 38, said, "As long as I can keep these guys around me, the better I can be. It's too easy to get caught up in everything else."

Even inside some halfway houses, drugs are rampant and men lose their way, he said.

Aphesis House gets 20 letters a week from prisoners up for parole who want to move in.

Grabbing a stack of letters on his desk, Sauter said, "I've got to write these guys and say, 'Sorry, I have no room.'"

He hopes to raise enough funds to buy another building, he said.

But he's not alone in his mission.

Just this month, he helped form WesTCORE, a dozen-member coalition of local faith-based organizations helping ex-convicts.

With only nine beds, Sauter's \$70,000-a-year operation hardly gets recognized, but all together WesTCORE will represent 140 beds, he said.

"Without the community's help, everyone ... is going to have a continuing noise level of crime," he said. "Christ didn't die on the cross so we could be self-centered Christians."

-- Lindsay Melvin: 529-2445

### How to help

Faith-based local re-entry programs for ex-prisoners are looking for help from the community:

[Aphesis House Memphis](#)

3515 Summer

(901) 218-5423

[West Tennessee Coalition for Offender Re-Entry](#)

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