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6-Friday, November 12, 1982 THE SAMPSON INDEPENDENT

Religion

Ministry behind bars follows Lord's command

By CLAIRE BRISSON
Lifestyle Editor

At first, led by the Spirit, Sampson County farmer J.C. Pridgen began to go to the county jail on Sundays to minister to the prisoners.

Some cursed him. Others confessed Christ.

Later, when the Rev. Pridgen accepted a call to pastor a church and his Sundays became full work days, he continued his prison ministry by visiting the jail on weekdays.

"I try to go at least once a week," said Pridgen, pastor of Christian Light Baptist Church, Autryville, and Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church on the Carolina Beach road.

"I have met people from Maine to California over the past 12 years. I never have the same people when I go. There are new ones every time. Recently, I had five to confess Christ in one night. Three blacks and two whites.

"A judge once asked me, in court, whether I thought I was really doing any good. I said, 'That remains to be seen. I've done my part, whether they've made it or not.'"

Evidence that he may have been influential in helping some is found in the number of letters Pridgen has received from former prisoners who've written to thank him for the time he spent with them.

"One time, they took up an offering for me," he says, still amazed at the memory. Then a sad expression crosses his face. "I only wish I could contact them before they got in trouble."



Inside the jail, Pridgen is a familiar figure to prisoners.

Many get in trouble, Pridgen feels, because of a bad situation at home.

"They have their way at home, and they think can do it all through life. Some don't understand right from wrong. One boy asked me if what he had done — he had killed somebody's cows — was really wrong, since he didn't have any of his own.

"They don't understand that you have to work for what you get. I came up

working for 25-cents a day, and I bought my place and raised six kids. Four of them finished college, and the last two — our twins — are at the University of North Carolina now.

"The Lord's been good to me," he says quietly. "The reason I do this ministry is because, one night I was reading the scripture, and it was like a voice saying to me, 'I want you to share with others what I've done for

you.'"

Going about his work without making any noise about it is important to the Rev. Pridgen, who expressed surprise that the reporter had learned about his ministry at the county jail.

Not all the prisoners accept the literature and messages that he brings.

"Some take the Bible just like any other book. Others ask for a Bible, and I try to get them one. One man asked for a pair of glasses to read with, and I got him a pair.

"I sometimes make calls to parents, both local and long distance, to give them a message. They may want me to say, 'Mama, I love you,' and 'Would you come see me?' One boy had never seen his mother. I prayed with him that the Lord would help him find his mother one day."

Pridgen stays no longer than two hours at a time during his visits to the jail. He will go from cell to cell trying to answer questions, reading scripture and otherwise ministering to the one to 15 people that may be in each cell at a given time.

"Sometimes they send for me. They say, 'Tell him not to miss.' I get my reward from the joy that lights up their faces when one or two confess Christ.

"One Sunday, before I was pastor of a church, I went to the jail to minister, and this man was standing outside with his Bible in his hand, waiting for me. He had been in jail the week before and confessed Christ. The next



The Rev. J.C. Pridgen stands in front of the Sampson County jail, where he ministers weekly to

those behind bars.

Photos By Claire Brisson

Sunday he was out, and he wanted to go to church."

At Christmas time, Pridgen takes bags of goodies to distribute among the prisoners. "It lets them know somebody cares, and I get joy out of whatever I'm doing for them."

There is also the heart-break of not being able to

reach some in time.

"Two men were in jail awhile back, and I tried and tried to reach them, to get them to confess Christ. One of them stood up, but he just couldn't do it. Later, I learned that both of them had gotten burned up in a fire."

Pridgen does not confine his efforts to church and prison ministry alone. A civic-minded man, he is a former member of the Clinton Board of Education, and has served on the Social Services board and the County Commissioners advisory board, among others.

His civic and religious work, along with his concept of family responsibility, is based on one belief.

"We've got to love one another. It's a new commandment that Christ gave us, and we have got to do it!" he says, conviction strengthening his features.