

When I arrived on the John B. Connally Unit in 2002, it was a very different place. It was designated a level 6 maximum security disciplinary gang unit. The worse of the worst in every literal and figurative sense. It was something we lived up to; in 2000 the 'Texas 7' escaped; in 2002, a month after my arrival, a civilian medical receptionist was held hostage at knife point for several hours; and, in 2004 another civilian receptionist was killed in an apparent murder-suicide involving an inmate. There are many more instances of death, violence and escape attempts that never made the headlines. Be sure that Connally live up to the infamy.

Today, the environment isn't so drenched in the negative. It's still a maximum security prison and certain dangers will always exist, but there aren't as many as in '02. We are now categorized as a level 4 unit and Christ's presence is visible in the lives of many of us.

I would like to introduce you to our Connally Unit Parish. We are hundreds of prisoners hungry for God and seeking hope, conversion and reconciliation with our families and society as a whole. Our foundation was planted in 2008 with the arrival of Father Joseph Varghese. There was a drought of Catholic services for six years. With his arrival and after much struggle, we began services every Sunday with RCIA classes held every Wednesday. At our Mass, if we surpassed 20 attendees we were fortunate. At RCIA we were doing well if we reached 15.

Building any kind of foundation is a struggle. With what small foundation we did establish, God blessed us with an opportunity in 2009, our first Prison ACTS Retreat.

Most of us had never heard of an ACTS Retreat. Kairos, however, has been well established on the unit for years. So, when someone

asked what ACTS was, we said, "It's like Kairos, but Catholic."

The first retreat was a wonderful experience. Many lives changed at that event. The most important benefit that came out of ACTS I was the follow-up. ACTS Team Volunteers committed to returning every week to hold RCIA classes, bringing much needed resources like catachisms, videos, bibles and sharing themselves with individual attention.

In ACTS II, they invited some of us who had participated in ACTS I to become part of their team. We shared our testimonies and helped spread God's word to the retreatants.

We're coming up on ACTS IV and V. ACTS IV will be held in February and serve those in Medium Custody (a more restricted custody level) a first for the unit. ACTS V will be held in March and serve minimum custody.

It is due to Father Joe's leadership and the passion for Christ that the ACTS Volunteers shower on us every week that we've grown into the parish that we are. Today we have a Parish serving over 150 Offenders, holding three RCIA classes, a Catholic leadership class, and a life-skills class that prepares us for reentry. We are about to serve medium custody with its own Mass and RCIA class. We are also developing plans for unit beautification initiatives and family integrity programs. We are a very strong, progressive and growing community. Our goal is to build this parish into a model worthy of being duplicated on other TDCJ Units, and we are well on our way to achieving this.

We look forward to informing you on this progress and humbly request your prayers. Thank you and God Bless.