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48 hours in a Teen Challenge center

By [Kirk Noonan](#)

Editor's note: In June, the Pentecostal Evangel sent News Editor Kirk Noonan to the Minnesota Teen Challenge in Minneapolis. Though staff and residents were aware he was there to do a story, they were asked to treat him like a normal resident.

Friday

2:30 p.m.

I miss the Minnesota Teen Challenge building by a block and find myself in a dilapidated neighborhood run down by drugs, gangs and poverty. After a few left turns I find my way to the stately brick building which houses MTC.



Director Rick Sherber talks to a worker from the female adult program.

Inside, I meet Rich Scherber, the director, who quickly ushers me to a small conference room, called the intake room, where a mother and father are enrolling their 14-year-old son in the program.

"This one gives Teen Challenge the right to drug test him at any time," says Hayden Severin, an intern, as he slides a paper across the table toward the parents. "For the first three weeks there is a total blackout. No phone calls. No visitors. No mail. He can't communicate with anyone outside this building."

The parents nod, then sign and date the document.

"We tried almost everything, and that's what brought us here," says the mother who is on the verge of tears. "After trying all that we've known we are thinking maybe something spiritual will help."

3:10 p.m.

Scherber and I walk across glasslike floors in the lobby and hallways as he shows me around the first floor. Scherber tells me that MTC is a 12- to 15-month

residential Christian discipleship program for people with alcohol, drug and other life-controlling problems. There are 120 residents here. I'll be spending the weekend in the male adult program, which is one of four arms that reach male and female teens and adults. Scherber has already instructed one of the interns to make up my bed.

"Seventy-five percent of adult residents here are considered chronic addicts," says Scherber. "We're dealing with a hard-core community."

Some of the residents are former gang members and drug dealers; others are business professionals — including a doctor and a minister.

In a small office near the lobby I meet up with Hayden Severin, the intern from the intake room. He tells me he came to MTC after his addiction to alcohol left his medical practice and family in shambles. But since he came here in February 1999, his life has changed.

"I rededicated my life to Christ on the sixth of February. I remember the day so well because of the things that started to happen," he says. "I called out to God and asked Him to forgive, restore and redeem me, and He began to work miracles in my life."

MTC is offering hope for a better life. Severin is the first of many I'll meet this weekend whose lives have been transformed.

3:45 p.m.

The buzz of sanders and saws drifts down the hallways. Throughout the building residents are renovating, cleaning and painting. In 1998, the building was purchased for \$300,000. It was in disrepair; but, after extensive renovation done by residents, the building is now appraised at \$1.3 million.

"Here you work for God," says Dan Pederson, a resident who has been in and out of 19 drug- and alcohol-treatment centers. "You either come here and get busy or you leave — if you aren't serious this place will drive you crazy."

4:15 p.m.

In the lobby I meet Herbert Dean, a former gang member and drug dealer from Chicago. He says he came to MTC to escape Minnesota's cold weather and planned to leave when the weather warmed, but God touched his life and changed his mind.

"God is doing a wonderful thing in my life," he says. "He restored my family back to me, and He has helped me with my reading and writing. Before I came here, my life was basically gang banging, drinking and selling drugs."

Dean says he plans to do an internship here, then go to school and learn a trade. The pride and hope he feels about his new life exude from his brown eyes as he talks about his future. When our conversation ends, he grabs a mop and disappears behind the elevator's sliding doors.

Saturday

10:30 a.m.

Outside it is hot and humid. In room 231, on the men's floor, I meet Joshua Pridgeon, 20.

On his tiny desk there are several books, a Bible and a cup full of pencils. The room has a huge plate glass window, a small closet, two dressers, a wash basin, chair and two beds built of two-by-fours.

As Pridgeon irons his shirts, he tells me about his family, his past and that this is his second time in MTC. The first time he was kicked out.

"I don't know what happened [the first time]," he says, shrugging his shoulders. "I'm here now and hopefully I'll be able to get it right this time."

Pridgeon leads me down the hall to a room where three men are working on their contracts. A contract is an individually designed curriculum that addresses the issues that led each resident to an addictive lifestyle.

"That's the difference between Teen Challenge and other drug treatment programs," says one resident. "Here they deal with what caused the addiction, not just the addiction itself."

11 a.m.

The first-floor lobby is quiet except for the whispers of two women who are waiting to see their loved ones. When residents have reached a certain phase in the program, says one of the women, they are allowed to have visitors.

The other woman tells me she comes here every weekend to visit with her son. Today they will go to the mall and have lunch.

"He is going to be graduating in September," she says proudly. "I think he has made really good progress being in this atmosphere. It gives me hope."

1:30 p.m.

In the second-floor lobby, where residents must wait for their visitors, I meet Ben Larson, 21, who is waiting for his family to arrive — they are two hours late.

In the 14 months he has been here, Larson says, he has made a commitment to Christ, been delivered from his addictions and has nearly completed the requirements for his general equivalency diploma.

One month before coming here Larson was almost killed when he and his cousin were attacked while partying. Larson escaped with a deep stab wound to his abdomen. His cousin died after being stabbed 20 times. Today, Larson is hopeful for his future, but with graduation only a few weeks away he is apprehensive about leaving.

"I told my counselor I'm probably not ready to leave, but at the same time I am confident in Him," he says, pointing skyward. "When I look back at my life before

I came here I see hopelessness — but not anymore."

3 p.m.

In the recreation room men gather for prayer around a weight bench and other exercise equipment.

"Let us be an encouragement to one another," prays a muscular black man. "Help us build strong and healthy temples for Your glory."

Segregation between the races does not exist at MTC. Blacks and whites room, eat, study, worship and exercise together. Part of this is by design, says James Dent, a former resident now staff member, but the driving force behind it is God.



James Dent used to inject more than \$150-a-day worth of drugs into his veins. But after he came to MTC in 1992, his life was radically changed.

"There are a lot of stereotypes about each race, but through God we are all the same," he says. "Our cultures have nothing to do with who we are in Christ — we are all children of God."

5:30 p.m.

With brown plastic trays, bowls and plates in hand, we stand in line for dinner. Chicken and corn-beef-cabbage soup are served — leftovers from the week. Tonight Coca-Cola is also served because a local fast-food restaurant donated it.

After dinner Don Davis, 19, tells me he used to deal and use drugs. Wanting to get his life straightened out he came here, but some members of his family think he is involved in a cult. In a few weeks, he says, he'll go home for a short vacation and let his family see how his relationship with Christ has transformed him.

"God pulled me up for a reason," he says. "I think I'm going to go into the ministry. I believe God has big plans for me."

6:40 p.m.

Across the second floor many are resting or studying. In the television room the Stanley Cup final is being shown. In the staff offices Dent, the staff member, tells me how he used to inject more than a \$150-a-day worth of heroin and cocaine into his veins. But after he came to MTC in 1992, his life radically changed.

"I learned it wasn't me, but it was Christ in me that was going to make the difference in my life," he says. "Now I'm just hoping God will use me to make a difference in these guys' lives."

7:30 p.m.

With basketballs, guitars and Bibles in hand, nearly 20 of us and three staff members walk to a local park.

"Remember, gentlemen," a staff member tells us, "we are in this world, but not of

this world."

At the park some find a tree to sit under; others go to the basketball court to play ball. A few of us spend the next hour soaking up the fresh air and beautiful scenery. There is no way the staff can monitor everyone — they don't want to. This excursion is as much about building trust as it is about getting outdoors.

9:45 p.m.

In the television room we gather for the nightly devotion, which is part pep talk, part town hall meeting. With Bibles in hand we hear a devotion. This is perhaps one of the most important routines the residents are developing.

"Staying in the Word will keep you grounded," a staff member tells us. "Having a daily devotion is critical to your success both in here and after you graduate."

10:30 p.m.

Across the second floor lights are turned off. Pridgeon, my roommate on Saturday night, turns out our light then kneels beside his bed and prays. His box fan rumbles gently near the window. After he prays we talk about life and God before falling asleep.

Sunday

5 a.m.

The door to our room swings open and the lights come on. The early morning wake-up call is part of a typical Sunday for Teen Challenge residents. The Teen Challenge choir, of which every resident is a member, travels to different churches to help raise awareness and funds for the ministry.

"Rise and shine, gentlemen," says a staff member.

Just as I open my eyes, the staff member disappears into the hall, probably to the next room. I look out the window into the darkness of dawn.

"I thought you guys got up at 6," I say to Pridgeon.

"Not today," he says as he reaches for his Bible and opens it to the Book of Proverbs. "I read a chapter of Proverbs every day. By the end of the month I've read through the entire book."

In several other rooms residents remain in bed or sit at their desks with their Bibles spread open before them.

7 a.m.



Members of the Teen Challenge Choir board the bus destined for Salem Covenant Church outside the city.

After cold cereal and juice for breakfast we return to our rooms. Some of the residents iron their black slacks and white shirts — standard attire for the choir. Pridgeon demonstrates to two other residents how to tie a tie. The halls are quiet until we gather in the second-floor lobby where final instructions for the day are given. Then residents load into a bus destined for this week's service at Salem Covenant Church outside the city.

8:30 a.m.

In the lobby of the church two residents put the finishing touches on the display table where tapes and compact discs of the Teen Challenge choir are sold. Two other residents stand like sentries at the door greeting members of the church as they enter.

"The choir's chief purpose is to share the ministry of Teen Challenge and gain support for the program," Scherber says. "When we go out and sing, people see good fruit and they want to invest in this ministry. Nearly 85 percent of our budget is raised by the choir."

"We go to 70 to 80 churches a year. From tiny churches with 15 in the congregation to churches with 3,000," says Chris McLarnon, who runs the soundboard. "I used to get real nervous about giving my testimony, but now I just let God control what I say."

Twenty minutes after the service begins, the choir takes its place and begins singing. The collection of their voices fills the sanctuary moving some to tears. The choir's singing is a testament of God's unfailing power and mercy to both choir and congregation.

As I leave the church and those I have come to know this weekend, the words from an earlier conversation with one of the residents come to mind: "As they say here, 'Hope is being restored.' "

Kirk Noonan is news editor of the *Pentecostal Evangel*.

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