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Liberty University

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## **Freeing the captive: Former LU soccer coach finds purpose in prison ministry**

February 01, 2009 | Eric Brown

Awaiting surgery following a mild heart attack in 1993, Bill Bell, Liberty University's Head Men's Soccer Coach at the time, was distraught, but not afraid of dying. Confident he would spend eternity in heaven, his concern stemmed more from his earthly works. Sitting in his hospital bed, the 50-year-old Scotsman looked at his wife, Mary, and said, "If I die tomorrow morning, I haven't much to lay at the Lord's feet."

At that moment, the couple said a prayer, making themselves totally available to God's calling. Five days later, Bill received letters from two prisoners in England. The men had only heard stories about the legendary defenseman, who accepted Christ. Freeing the captive Former LU soccer coach finds purpose in prison ministry after playing soccer at the highest professional level. They informed Bill of numerous suicidal hangings taking place behind the bars of Feltham prison, Europe's largest young offenders institution. Feeling God tugging at their hearts, the Bells traveled to London to minister to the inmates.

Upon arriving at the prison, the warden gave Bill and Mary complete access to the cells. The couple's mission was simple — show the love of Christ to each prisoner. After befriending the inmates for two weeks, they discovered what the prison's staff could not — a negative spiritual influence.

"(The inmates) were playing with Ouija boards," Bill said. "God revealed it to us, and He showed us why they were hanging themselves. When we left after two months, we asked the staff to destroy the boards. The hangings stopped and the Lord was glorified."

After witnessing the power of God resonate through Feltham, the Bells founded Within the Walls, a ministry dedicated to sharing the message of Jesus Christ with detainees. Since 1993, the Bells have traveled to prisons throughout England, touching the lives of those who seem untouchable. Together, they train other married couples, instructing them on how to be Christ-like examples to convicts.

"We've found that, especially with young offenders, they are drawn to married couples because there is no stable home," Bill said.

As a professional soccer player, Bill suited up with England's Leeds United, squaring off against the world-renowned Pele and the Brazilian international team. Following a successful playing career, he began coaching a professional club known as Birmingham City in 1970. Before moving to the U.S. to take over as head soccer coach at LU in 1979, Bill spent several years as manager at Birmingham as well as Lincoln City, a Division III professional team.

During his coaching tenure, Bill guided the Flames up the ranks of collegiate soccer, reaching the NCAA Division I level in just five years. At the helm of LU men's soccer, he viewed coaching as more than just a full-time job — it too was a ministry.

In 1993, LU's longtime rival, Radford, visited Liberty while riding a nine-game winless streak. Prior to the contest, Bill called Radford's coach Don Staley, offering words of encouragement in the midst of the Highlanders' challenging season.

In the teams' September meeting that year, Liberty prevailed with a 2-1 victory, handing Radford another loss. As the proverbial cloud of discouragement loomed over the Highlanders' heads, Bill entered the visiting team's locker room. He shared with them some of his most challenging experiences as a coach and a former player. Bill then concluded his talk by telling the players about Jesus Christ and the importance of having a relationship with Him.

"When I was finished, I said, 'Did any of you lads accept Christ this afternoon?' And the whole team put their hand up. I came out of the dressing room and Don, the coach, said, 'Bill, I accepted Christ today.'"

In 2001, Bill and Mary left Liberty University to devote themselves to the prison ministry full time. Before he returned to England, Bill received an honorary Doctorate of Humanities from the late Dr. Jerry Falwell.

A few years ago, the couple came back to the states after Mary suffered a stroke. Now an ordained minister, Bill, along with his wife, reside in South Carolina, visiting prisons throughout the state.

Recently, the Bells teamed up with Kairos Prison Ministries International for a four-day crusade at Allendale Correctional in Fairfax, S.C.

During their initial meeting, Bill and his crew greeted dozens of inmates at the prison's conference room corridor, singing the famous hymn "This is the Day." The men entered the room with their eyes directed at the floor, only interested in the food provided by local churches.

The crew continued singing the hymn each morning as they ministered to the prisoners through small group meetings and various activities. On the final day, the team had trouble getting through security, causing them to arrive to the meeting place 30 minutes late. When they finally arrived, the inmates stood at the conference room corridor to greet them, singing "This is the Day."

Touched by this miraculous four-day turnaround, the Bells hope to witness the same life-changing event replicated in England this April. During their stay, they will disciple other married couples, teaching them to go "within the walls" of prisons and break through the barriers that surround the inmates' hearts.

"The men are the same the world over, whether I'm in England or I'm in the United States," Bill said. "The Savior is everywhere. There is nothing He can't break down."