From hell to hope

How the gospel changed everything in a desperate Kentucky community

Page 12
Justice, mercy save drug-infested Kentucky community  

Stronghold of hell to sanctuary of hope

BY RANDALL MURPHREE

Tessie’s* life had been a challenge – multiple marriages, several children by different men, addiction to methamphetamine, prostitution, trying to care for Tara*, her 12-year-old daughter, the only child still at home.

Walking home from her drug dealer’s house one cold December night in 2003, Tessie apparently blacked out and lay unconscious beside the street for some time before police found her there. She had frozen to death. Police asked Tara if she had someone she could call – her father? family members? Tara didn’t know who her father was, didn’t know where her older half-siblings were. No, there was no one.

But wait a minute – there was pastor Ken.

“Tara had started coming to our church,” Ken Bolin recalled, “and we were trying to minister to her. The coroner called me that night and told me Tessie had died, and right on the heels of that call, Tara called me. We had the funeral on Christmas Eve at their house. There was no Christmas tree. No lights. Nothing.”

Nothing except a vivid picture of the tragic consequences of drug addiction. Tara’s story sounds like a tawdry tale right out of the slums of a giant, impersonal city.

But ironically, it’s a Bible Belt story. The setting: Manchester, Clay County, Kentucky, one of 29 eastern Kentucky counties in a largely impoverished area of Appalachia. By 2003, the county had earned a reputation as the “Painkiller Capital” of America.

A USA Today story said that from 1998 to 2001, nearly half a ton of narcotics found their way to six counties in Appalachian Kentucky. That amounted to more prescription painkillers per capita than anywhere else in the nation. The inordinate flow of legal drugs translated into much illegal trafficking of the same.

Add to that the abuse of the explosion of marijuana and methamphetamine traffic, and a dismal picture emerges: one drug-related death a week, poverty-stricken living, hardly a family who hadn’t lost a member to drugs, dealers operating in the open, ineffective or disengaged churches, drugs rampant in the schools, spiraling corruption among local officials.

It was a picture of pain and hopelessness for Clay County during the dark decades from the 1960s to the 2000s. (See sidebar.)

Desperate pastors

Ken Bolin and Doug Abner seem an unlikely duo to spearhead a campaign against the growing Clay County darkness. But the two Manchester pastors illustrate how God works in surprising ways.

“My best friend is Doug Abner, pastor of Community Church, a charismatic, non-denominational church,” Bolin said. “I doubt if Doug and I would have ever been close if he hadn’t had his bookstore. I’m a book fanatic.” Bolin is pastor of Manchester Baptist Church.

“I loved Ken because he was one of the few pastors who had a book allowance,” Abner laughed. “He liked to put food on my table.”

“Doug’s bookstore was different,” Ken said. “It was a ministry for him. People would come in looking for a book dealing with some issue in their life, and Doug would end up having prayer with them and just loving on them.”

The two men also shared a passion for ministering to addicts and families victimized by the area’s mushrooming drug business. Bobby Jones epitomized what the pastors were up against.

For many years, Jones had operated an illegal drug and alcohol business openly at a drive-through window at his home. His son later told Abner that Jones had a dozen – sometimes more – elected officials on his monthly payroll, buying their protection or at least their silence. As early as 1999, he served up to 600 vehicles a day, more than the traffic through Manchester’s fast food windows combined.

Nonetheless, Bolin and Abner agreed to begin praying together for a transformation of their town from a stronghold for illegal drugs to a sanctuary for godly families.

“We covenanted together that we were going to fight together shoulder to shoulder, side by side,” Abner said. And fight they did, on the cutting edge of a movement that would sweep Clay County and result in more than a dozen elected officials imprisoned, churches regaining respect in the community, illegal drug dealers serving time or run out of town, and scores of addicts being restored to health and hope for a future.

“We talk now about how bad the darkness was, but the lack of...
light was more of a problem," Abner said. "Good people sat back and did nothing. That was a big part of the problem."

“Our county was fragmented,” Bolin added, “because no pastor would dare venture outside his comfort zone and try to seek fellowship, especially with a pastor of another denomination.”

**Divine Intervention**

In 1999, Clay County churches first cooperated to bring the John Jacobs Power Team to their schools. In preparation, pastors and others began praying together for financing for the big event. About 800 people gave their lives to Christ or made other commitments that week. Finally, Clay County churches and pastors realized they could work together for the good of the community. With a wry smile, Abner recalled one prayer meeting that year that had him worried for a short time.

“I had an elder nicknamed Scrappy, who could get pretty loud when he prayed,” the pastor said. “One Saturday morning at Manchester Baptist, we were praying and I heard Scrappy start praying in tongues. I prayed, ‘Oh, God, not here at the Manchester Baptist Church. Please Lord, make him hush.’ But he just got louder.”

A photo from the front page of the Manchester Enterprise newspaper (May 2004) shows Manchester Baptist Church Pastor Ken Bolin addressing anti-drug demonstrators following a March Against Drugs.

When the prayers ended, Abner was stunned to see Scrappy’s Baptist brothers surrounding and embracing him. Abner teared up and continued: “I thought, ‘God is really doing something in this town.’”

Fast forward back to late 2003. Abner, Bolin and many others were growing more and more alarmed about the county’s out-of-control drug problem. After Tessie’s death, Bolin’s prayers grew more desperate.

Both pastors find humor and irony in how God orchestrated the march they planned for May 2, 2004. The idea came to Bolin in a vision as he pledged with God in his prayer closet.

“We laugh about this and kid Ken,” Abner said. “If I’d had a vision, they’d say, ‘Well, he’s just that crazy ol’ Pentecostal charismatic — it’s probably the pizza he ate last night.’ But Ken, Southern Baptist Ken, had the vision! Desperate prayer gave us a plan, and that plan was to march.”

At the first community prayer meeting, they were joined by a handful of pastors and laymen. They watched a Transformation video from the Sentinel Group, which later chronicled the Clay County story in the documentary *An Appalachian Dawn* (See sidebar on next page.)

“God was troubling people all over the county,” Bolin said, “causing us to deal with who we were and whether we were really making a difference. The answer was, ‘Not very much.’” Still, he and his best friend were determined to give it their all to change that perception of Christians. In the months leading up to their May 2 march, threats were the norm for both men — threats on their lives, their homes, their churches. They were not deterred. They marched.

“When we marched, it changed everything,” Abner said, “because it came from prayer.” They sensed that the march was a make-or-break event for the growing anti-drug campaign. If it fizzled with only a few dozen people, they would be defeated.

May 2 dawned wet and cold. Even at 3:00, it was still wet and cold. Bolin and Abner gathered with a small band of diehard supporters, disheartened and saddened by the light turnout.

“It looked bleak,” Abner said. “I thought, ‘God, we’ve missed

1960s — Bobby Jones begins illegal drug, booze sales at drive-through window in his home.

1989 — Near half of county population involved in pot business (USA Today cover story).

1990s — “Midnight farmers” make Daniel Boone National Forest the nation’s biggest pot field.

1999 — Up to 800 cars/day drive through Jones’ window. Churches work together to bring John Jacobs Power Team to schools.

Pastors begin praying together.

2003 — One death a week is attributed to illegal drugs.

Tessie’s death (above) moves Pastor Ken Bolin to take action.

Bolin’s personal challenge and decision to take a stand; Bolin dreams of a march to put drug dealers on notice.

2004 — One in six Clay County adults are arrested on drug or alcohol charges.

May 2, “The March Seen Around the World”

2005 — Sixth poorest county in the nation; 60% on government assistance.

Since 2003, through UNITE and local efforts …

- $9 million drugs off the street including 92,000 prescription pills, 23 pounds of cocaine and 460 pounds of processed marijuana
- 3,300 drug dealers arrested
- 97% conviction rate
- 1,500 vouchers for addicts’ rehab/recovery
- 50,000 children reached with help, education

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**An Appalachian Dawn**

By the early 2000s, overdoses and drug-related accidents in Clay County were claiming so many young lives that roadside memorial crosses began to resemble picket fences. In the words of one local pastor, “At the rate we were going, there wasn’t going to be a next generation.” But all was not lost. In May 2004, the people of God rose up to say, “Enough!” As TV host John Becknell put it, “Something broke.” The Sentinel Group spent nearly two years in Eastern Kentucky documenting the details. The riveting story is retold in a newly released DVD entitled *An Appalachian Dawn*.

This story is the latest in a series of revival documentaries that began with The Sentinel Group’s 1999 release of a four-vignette video called Transformations. Since then, the ministry has documented remarkable turnarounds in places like the Canadian Arctic, Northern Uganda, the Fiji Islands, and the neighborhoods of Sao Paulo, Brazil. The hallmark of each of these stories is comprehensive social, political, economic and even ecological change.

To order these dynamic DVDs — or a companion music CD called “City of Hope” — visit [www.revivalworks.com](http://www.revivalworks.com) or call 800-868-5657.

you.” But then, church buses and vans began to trickle in. They kept coming until 63 churches were represented. The crowd was estimated at 3,500-4,000, roughly 20% of the county population. It was the milestone that marked a turning point. At last, the church, the body of Christ, had taken a stand for righteousness. They yearned to follow the prophet Micah’s admonition to “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly” with God (Micah 6:8). Their challenge was to find a balance between justice and mercy.

**Drug traffic attacked**

Abner said that at present, some 12-14 elected officials have been indicted. A number are already serving time and others are awaiting sentencing. But it has been a long road to justice.

According to former police chief Jeff Culver, a few years back, honest officers would plan a raid on a known drug dealer’s home. But when they arrived at the home, they would find nothing. Then a check of telephone records would reveal that the dealer had received a call from a police department office. Culver observed, “When you have your county clerk indicted, city council persons indicted, magistrates indicted, circuit judges indicted, mayors, police officials – that’s about as bad as it gets.”

As local citizens stepped up their efforts, an FBI undercover operation began to bear fruit. Also, in 2003, Kentucky 5th District Congressman Hal Rogers launched UNITE (Unlawful Narcotics Investigation, Treatment and Education). The UNITE acronym is an apt description of what happened in Clay County as citizens, churches and law enforcement worked together to tackle the drug problem.

“In April [2004], we coordinated a law enforcement effort with state, federal and local law agencies and we arrested 212 drug dealers in less than eight weeks of investigation,” said UNITE director Karen Engle.

Justice was on a roll, but what about mercy? Steve Collett could be the area’s poster boy for personal recovery. Collett grew up in abject poverty in a primitive mountain home without electricity. His father abused his mother. At age 13, Steve left home, and by age 17 he was working for local drug dealers, himself addicted to cocaine and meth.

“Steve was one of the worst of the worst guys,” said John Becknell, “You would never want to meet or tangle with him.” Becknell, a Manchester layman and leader involved in the transformation, heads up CCM Productions, a local television ministry of Community Church.

Even Collett’s brother Freddie is quoted as saying, “We’d see him coming and we’d lock the door.”

“He was one of the most dangerous,” agreed Paul Hayes, deputy law enforcement officer for UNITE.

In 1998, police arrested Collett after he had spent two decades in the drug culture as user and dealer. Soon after his release from prison, Collett accepted Christ. In recent years, he has devoted his time to telling people far and wide how a life that seems hopeless and meaningless can make a complete about-face with the help of faith in Christ.

While Collett and countless others found themselves beginning prison sentences, Clay County pastors and laymen began visiting them, teaching Bible studies in jails and ministering to inmates in various ways.

In fact, pastors often show up while prisoners are first being processed to see how the church can help them. For example, if a mother is arrested, someone will be there to ask if she needs them to pick children up from school or help provide for them in some other way.

According to Becknell, this quick, direct ministry is one of the things that has restored the reputation of the church in Clay County. “It has opened every door into families, every issue they have,” he said. “They see that if you care about their worst issue – drugs, then surely you can care about their children’s needs.”

Chad’s Hope, another big part of the ministry component in Clay County’s continuing transformation, was founded as an outreach of Community Church to offer a live-in rehab and recovery center for men addicted to drugs. The center is now operated by Teen Challenge, for decades one of the nation’s most effective drug rehab programs.

Other churches support Chad’s Hope, help graduates of the program find jobs in local businesses and encourage drug addicts (practicing or recovering) to join them in worship. Steadily and consistently, the church is demonstrating that God’s people may fight for justice, but they’re also quick to show in tangible ways that they love mercy.

Justice, mercy and humble ministry – it’s enough to give Manchester an appropriate new moniker: City of Hope. ☞