

Helping incarcerated men see their own worth

“My goal is to teach men to love themselves,” says Men’s Workshop founder James Enoch Banks, “so they can love others.”

Interview by [Philip C. Maurer](#) in the [August 2023](#) issue

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James Enoch Banks, founder of Texas nonprofit the Men’s Workshop (Source image: Courtesy photo)

In 2021, James Enoch Banks completed a nearly 20-year prison sentence at the Torres Unit in Hondo, Texas. While there, he began creating a program for self and group study that would become known as the Men’s Workshop. He now leads a nonprofit organization, *Enoch Says*, which aims to widen the reach of the Men’s Workshop, fight recidivism, and bridge gaps in society. The organization has expanded into three additional units in the Texas prison system, and it successfully

graduated 83 men last fall.

What are the goals of the Men's Workshop?

The primary goal is for each individual who goes through the Men's Workshop process to find the better part of himself.

The secondary goal is for it to be placed in prisons as a resource. So many individuals in prison believe they don't have an understanding of what's going on in themselves and in the world. I want them to realize that they do have an understanding and that they can use that understanding to make change.

Where did the idea for the Men's Workshop come from?

I had written an article about gangbanging. I called it a lie, a poison that infects you. I made a bunch of copies and passed them around. That became the skeleton for the work.

Then I saw in a dream a picture of what could be, and I started to give what God gave me.

A few of us started to build on that first article. We would sit in the common area. There was no air-conditioning, and the TV was blasting, but we started to come up with different subjects. This was around Christmas 2017.

Can you say more about the article?

When you don't have an identity, you go out and find an identity. In prison, the most convenient place to get an identity is from the negativity that's in your face.

Gangs are a microcosm of the police, the army. You *become* an officer; you *become* a soldier. But that's not who you are; that's what you do. That's one reason a lot of soldiers get out of the army and are depressed. They lose their identities.

If you strip away the titles, the alphabet you got attached to your name while you were in college, the teaching your mother said was right, your homeboys, your tattoos—if you take away these things that cover you up, who are you on the inside? I want people to understand that I am a person. That I have feelings. That I have a family.

The system works the way it was designed: to hurt, to cause discord. It was set up for individuals to look like they were failing—in their own eyes, first of all. Look at the welfare system, the Jim Crow laws. When they tie your hands behind your back and tell you to run a race, that's an unfair race. Some people don't have bootstraps. Some people don't even have the boots.

So you help him get the boots, tie the boots, pull up the bootstraps. You can assist that individual who wants to run the same race you're running. Then you can train him to run it and let him run.

Offering that kind of help is not a handout. Individuals just want to be seen as people, to be seen as who God made them to be—as equal to anyone else they look at.

The Men's Workshop helps men see that about themselves. We try to act as a catalyst, exposing the biases and the belief systems all around us. We are aiming for the full transformation of a person. God promised it, and his word doesn't come back void. We're capable of becoming something totally different from what we started out as.

You mentioned a dream that offered a picture of what could be. What did you understand from that dream?

I dreamed of an image of a surgeon with an open toolbox, with individuals stripped of everything they possessed. And on the other side, there were grown men walking.

I understood two things: First, if we don't get the heart problem right, then we are going to fail. My goal is to teach men to love themselves so they can love others. Second, two things cannot possess the same place at the same time. For your cup to flow over doesn't mean that everything in that cup started out good. It has to be displaced. God is pouring into you, replacing other things.

When did you start to write?

I have been writing since I was in elementary school. I had a mentor who always pushed me to write my poetry.

But in prison, you don't want to seem like the smartest or a know-it-all, because that can become a weapon others use against you. So people hide inside their shells. Any man who goes in has a fear of not coming out. You know you're living a lie. You

know there's something greater out there. But you act so long that you become the character.

I started peeling away layers. I realized I didn't have to be afraid of being myself anymore. Our situations and our circumstances do not define us. These adversities make you who you are by the choices you make.

Say more about becoming unafraid to be yourself.

Once, I asked my mentor Drew, "What do you want me to do?" He said, "Just be. Just be who you are." I realized that what I was doing and what I was being were a lie. I am greater than that. I am who God made me.

When you hold on to certain ideas of who you are and who you are supposed to be, it's scary because you don't know what comes next.

Historically, African Americans were taught to think of themselves as lesser than. Years of degradation and oppression led to almost universal self-esteem issues and self-loathing. Our culture is compiled of fast lifestyles, of thinking that we will die young. The residual effects of our history and culture imprison us as surely as any bars.

God says, *Seek me*. If we seek God we find our true selves during that journey. There is no freedom like knowing who you are, finding your true self, and getting closer to God.

In prison, you witnessed a conflict that was starting to break out. Can you describe that situation and your response?

There were a bunch of Black guys out of Dallas and a bunch of Hispanic guys out of San Antonio. For whatever reason, things got heated between two guys.

I was going to do nothing. Then one of my bros said to me, "Are you just gonna let that happen like that?"

I said, "I'm about to be up for parole, and you want me to get involved?"

But finally I did. I went up to the one from Dallas and said, "Really? You're going to fight about this?" I put my two cents in, and as I walked away, that guy walked the other way.

The me in me was like, *They want to be fools, let them be fools. I'm trying to go home.* But those around me were saying, *Why don't you do something about it?* So the situation was de-escalated—not by me but by the God in me.

How did the structure of the Men's Workshop develop?

We had our first class in 2017–2018. It lasted seven weeks. We met twice a week for two to four hours a day.

In those sessions, we heard men's real life stories. You see grown men crying about how their mothers were treated. There was a beauty in it, but it became draining. I wasn't trained to facilitate, to be with people in their emotions. After two or three months I felt weary.

At that point I was just looking for a break. But then I realized, a break from what? There is no break. That's when I started training other men to lead one session a week. Each participant becomes a facilitator in his own right. God didn't put us here alone; he put us in community. Because if one person falls, who's going to help him up?

What challenges did you face as the workshop developed?

First, being called a hypocrite. There were some bad habits I still had, and the changes I was making in myself didn't happen all at once.

Second, I needed to be reprogrammed if I was going to become a good guy in that negative place. I had to recondition my thinking, my beliefs, and my actions. God allowed me to be who I was meant to be despite the surrounding circumstances.

What is the status of the Men's Workshop now? What might it look like in the future?

We are currently offering the course in prisons in Texas. Having the opportunity to run the program in a classroom setting has given clarity to our aims and validated our claim of its effectiveness. Since we have more than 25 men in each class, we've been breaking into smaller, more intimate groups for deeper conversation. In these smaller groups, the men have begun to open up more. It has been humbling seeing them grow and gain an understanding.

After ten weeks of class, the men have built strong bonds, but most importantly, they have gained a sense of hope in a place where hope is scarce.

The presence of my wife, Kenae, in the class brought a new dynamic to the course. Most of the men have women supporting them during their incarceration, and she was able to help soothe concerns and explain realities that they might experience upon their release.

I feel I was able to give them a model and a tangible example of the truth of their ability to change their behavior. My life is an example of what is possible once you align your life with God's will.

I would like to see the Men's Workshop placed in prisons throughout the United States as an *entry* course, not a reentry course. I would like to see mentors on the outside assisting. I would like to use it with youth before they are incarcerated in the first place.

To that end, you have created Enoch Says, a nonprofit that supports the Men's Workshop. What would you like people to know about Enoch Says?

First of all, I'm unable to build this by myself. I need help. I have a beautiful, strong wife and a mentor who came out of nowhere. My story is an accumulation of the stories of everyone who has affected my life.

Second, apathy must leave before empathy can arrive. It's not just the individuals who are locked up—it's the culture we come from. That's why we lock men away. You don't want to look at evil, but it's in your backyard. If you're inside the church, and you're not out there picking weeds and cutting grass, are you really doing God's work?

I see myself as a bridge: God has made me comfortable speaking with the corporate guy, the doctor, and also the culture I was raised in. I am willing, able, and obedient, and I'm not going to do it alone.

Can you say more about obedience?

First, pray. Then, act. After that, go to your closet and talk to God. If you're quiet enough, isolated enough, God talks back through you. You know in the pit of your stomach that it's correct, and later on you see the sign, the confirmation.

That's how it is for me. But I know he speaks in other ways to other people.