

2004-05 INTERVIEW WITH TONY GARCIA

Prison Ministry & Reaching Homeless, Drug Addicts and Delinquents

Tony's family was "healthy," he says, no violence, no drugs, and they all worked.

His father abandoned him as an infant and then "recognized" (a term meaning to accept as one's offspring) when he was 18 years old. He lived as an only child with his mom all those years.

At 10 years old he began his life of crime, "delinquency" as he put it. He got caught trying to steal some chocolates from a corner store and got sent to *Tutelar de Menores*. It is similar to Juvenile Hall, though more like prison for minors.

He increased his crimes and violence. Neighborhood boys formed a gang that began to assault people to steal their cars, break into businesses, commit armed robbery, mug tourists. By the way, he adds, most of those "friends" are now dead.

The first time he ever heard the Gospel was in the *Tutelar de Menores*, "Pastor Willy" was sharing Christ with him, and all his gang-buddies were laughing at him. This was right around the time of the founding of *Catedral de Vida*, Panamá's first AG church planted by pioneer missionary David Godwin.

His conversion happened after a long drunken spell. On his way home in the bus, he heard a voice in his head say, "Go to church." Another voice said, "Go home, drink juice and relax." Next thing he knew he was walking out of the bus, then up the steep driveway to *Templo La Fe*, AG church of our current assistant superintendent. He was warmly welcomed by the believers. That night he experienced a total transformation of his life as he surrendered completely to Jesus.

Two months later he was out preaching anywhere he could. In fact, one night he was in the home of one of his former gang buddies when the police raided with helicopters, squad cars, motorcycles, and heavily armed officers. He and most of the others were taken into custody. Even though he was a Christian now, he had at least 8 warrants out for his arrest.

Those 8 cases against him should have resulted in a sentence of at least 8, probably 12 years. Long story short: he was in jail for 38 months and got released miraculously on good behavior. To add the icing on top, that same day his mom showed up by surprise to visit him. Instead of delivering food to her son, she was able to take him home!

Tony is a credentialed minister with the Assemblies of God of Panamá.

The following are his ministry goals for a special project to reach homeless, addicts and delinquents on a "skid row" area of Balboa Avenue, called "*Centro Libertados*" (Center for the Liberated Ones):

- help the most needy and rejected by society
- lift the crushed self-esteem of homeless people
- establish feeding center – church – and temporary homeless shelter facilities (two particular properties are under negotiation, waiting funding)
- establish a shelter home for abused children
- strengthen the rehabilitation camp with food donations from the feeding center

Tony has been married 16 years to Eloisa and has four children: Elvita (15 years), Israel (13 years), Geraldine (11 years) and Saraí Noemi (8 years).