

**An Iron-Barred Mission Field**

**Andre Melvin, Speaker**

**The Columbia Metro Connection Podcast 005**

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 Hosts for this week's episode are JayWill Wilson, teaching pastor at Generation Church, urban missionary, and radio host at Urban City Radio. And myself Chris Reinolds, lead pastor at Killian Baptist Church, and founder of [Chrisreinolds.com](http://www.chrisreinolds.com). Joining us this week is Andre Melvin, pastor at Temple Zion Baptist Church, and executive director of the Columbia International University Prison Program.

Andre Melvin: Yeah.

JayWill Wilson: You see this, right?

Andre Melvin: Yeah, yeah.

Chris Reinolds: Wow.

 Well, Pastor Andre, welcome to the podcast. It's good to have you here.

Andre Melvin: Good to be here.

JayWill Wilson: Alright, so Andre, tell us a little about yourself and how God brought you to where you are today.

Andre Melvin: Oh wow ... Well, I'm born and raised in Washington D.C. It wasn't until I was an adult that I committed my life to Christ. I was baptized at age nine but didn't understand what it meant to have relationship with Jesus Christ. So I think during that time I was just searching for purpose, direction ... It was when I was in my early 20's that the Lord really helped me understand I needed him. So that set me on a journey to pursue what he wanted to do with my life, and then he revealed to me that he was calling me into the ministry. And I didn't understand what that meant. I had no clue, but I did understand through advisors and counselors and I believe the Spirit of God helped me understand that the call to preach is a call to prepare. So I began to pray about that.

 The Lord sent me down to Atlanta, Georgia, for my undergrad to a school called Carver Bible College. I was there in '99, and God opened the door for me to, while I was in my studies, to assume my first youth pastorate. I was a youth pastor for four years. Then got married to my fiancé, who I left in D.C., because I was really trying to figure out God's will for us. We got married and brought her down. So we studied there and I graduated from Carver, and I began to seek the Lord again about what's next, and he says, "Alright. Keep going. Go to seminary."

 So I began to pray about that and the Lord led me to come to Columbia International University. That's what led me to Columbia, South Carolina. We got here in 2003. Still trying to figure out what God was calling me to do specifically. I knew he called me to preach. I was a youth pastor, but it felt like he was saying more ... at a higher level of ministry. So looking at the pastorate, but at the same time I was looking at mission work, because I was exposed to missions as well as I was courted to go into the mission field when I went to CIU. My reason for coming to CIU was to kind of explore my heart because CIU is a strong mission school. So I really came here to really seek the Lord as to what he wanted me to do. He made it very clear to me that he was calling me to pastor in the states but with a heart for missions.

 So that opened the door, and I kept kind of serving the Lord in that capacity. I met Dr. Andre Rogers when I came in 2004, while I was a student. I served under him for about four years as his associate minister. God used Andre Rogers to groom me towards a pulpit and helped me to really understand what it means to be a senior pastor.

Chris Reinolds: I think Pastor Andre has grown a lot of guys towards a pulpit.

Andre Melvin: Yes he has. He has a way of kicking you in the pants and helping you to see what this thing really is all about. So that opened the door for me to not only ... And Dr. Rogers, God used him, not only to help me understand what it means to be a pastor and even gave me opportunity to do so, to serve in that capacity, but he was used to help me to work at CIU. I started working as grader at CIU. Then that led to me working in another department called The Field Ed department which at that time, it was designed to train students to do practical ministry. They get credit for it.

 So I did that, and served in ministry. Then God again opened other doors. Both at CIU as well as in the community, where in August 2008, the opportunity for pastorate opened up at Temple Zion Baptist church. It was Dr. Rogers who asked me if I would consider putting my name in the hat. I said no, because the church at the time was ... It was a large-sized church. It would be my first pastorate. I said, "No, I think I want a small church." So if I messed up, there wouldn't be too many people ... But he encouraged me to do it, and I did. God, by his grace, we became Pastor of Temple Zion.

 Then at CIU, I was kind of moving through the Field Ed department. I shifted from CIU and began to work full time as a pastor of the church. Then in 2004 I was asked to check out a program in Angola. It was a warden Burl Cain down there had opened up the prison. Angola is the Louisiana State Penitentiary. He opened up the prison to local seminary for Bible classes and so forth. It revolutionized the whole institution. I was asked to go down to look at that in my capacity in the Field Ed department. That started the Prison Initiative Program in 2007.

 So I've been with the prison initiative since it began. About six years ago they asked me to be the director of the Prison Initiative Program. So presently I'm the senior pastor at Temple Zion, and I'm also director of the Prison Initiative Program for CIU.

Chris Reinolds: Do you need anything else to do?

Andre Melvin: I seem to find other things. I don't seek it, it just ... God just puts it in my lap. I run from it and he says, "No, this is what I want you to do."

Chris Reinolds: Now, what are sort of the objectives of the prison program? What are y'all seeking to accomplish, really?

Andre Melvin: The Prison Initiative Program, the whole goal of it is to train the inmates. We provide them an associate Degree. It's an accredited degree that they receive. A two-year program where we send out applications throughout the state of South Carolina, and inmates apply for the program—similar to a student applying to CIU's main campus. We have a rigorous vetting process where we read their applications, they have to have a high school diploma or GED. They have to be discipline-free for at least a year, as far as their disciplinary stuff. They have to have references and they have to write an essay sharing their salvation experience. We read all that and then out of all those applications—we typically get on average 50 or 60 applications in the course of a year—we read through that and dwindle it down to 32. Those 32, we move them towards interview status. So every year we have interviews of 32 applicants, where we have a face to face interview with four or five applicants at a time. On the other side of the table is a panel which includes CIU staff as well as SCDC staff, South Carolina Department of Corrections. Wardens, associate wardens, chaplains and so forth. We interview them for two days. After those two days we decide through prayer who will be the 15 students that we would include in the next cohort.

 They come from all over the state. They actually travel from those institutions where they're staying, and they stay at Kirkland Correctional Institution here in Columbia, South Carolina. They stay for two years and they go through our program. It's their full time job from Monday through Friday from eight to five, eight to four. They're in the library with us, either taking classes or they're studying or working on computer work, working on papers and so forth. They do that for two years, and after two years they receive, right now, 63 credits and an associate degree. When they graduate, and we have a graduation every December, it's pomp and circumstance. They cap and gown, their family is there. There's not a dry eye in the house. They receive their degree.

 Once they receive their degree, we place them at the institutions around the state. We choose where they're going to go and serve. They serve underneath a chaplain at that institution. Their role is to minister to the other inmates.

JayWill Wilson: Now those are amazing stories. I could tell that there's a life change taking place. Are there any stories that particularly stand out to you? Do you know any stories by name or any of the inmates by name and know where they are now?

Andre Melvin: Well yeah. We kind of keep track of them. Just to tell you, we have graduated 145 students.

JayWill Wilson: Wow.

Chris Reinolds: That's great.

Andre Melvin: Nine cohorts. They're stationed in 20 institutions around the state. We also have two graduates who are in Alabama Department of Corrections. They saw our program and they wanted to create a program similar to ours. So they asked for a couple of our students to help them with that. So two of our graduates decided to. They prayed about it and felt led to go leave the state, leave their family's support and go all the way to Alabama and help them start their program.

 We call them Red and Green because one of our graduates, his last name is Mr. Green, and the other graduate, his nickname is Red. So we call them Red and Green. So they've been serving in Alabama for almost two years now. It's a difficult institution. Not all of the maybe comfort that they might receive here in South Carolina, but they're doing well and helping the students there to matriculate through.

 So that's an example of just the sacrifice, but the heart of our graduates. We had last year—let me give you a very specific example. Last year you may have heard on the news, there were four inmates that were killed. That was at our institution at Kirkland. Our students knew the four. As a matter of fact those four inmates, that Thursday, it happened on Friday, that Thursday they had a nightly service that they attended. All of them were believers. So some of our students were real close to them. They went back to their dorm, their dorm was kind of a mental health area. Of course the story is that two guys decided to one actually came up to our classroom and asked for our students to go down to actually minister to the other inmates. They were scared, they were hurt. That was just a devastating thing that happened. We had never had an opportunity to minister to that unit before. They asked for our guys to go down and minister, because ... it really is missiology. The whole goal is to train the locals so that they can minister in a way that we can't.

JayWill Wilson: Mm-hmm. Send indigenous people into the area, absolutely.

Andre Melvin: Absolutely. That's exactly what they did.

 So that opened the door. Even though that was a tragedy, it opened the door for ministry to flow to those guys where it had not before. God can take those tragedies and use that for his glory. So that was a powerful moment.

 So those are some cases. Some of our guys, when they graduate, they're stationed—they have different opportunities to serve. Some of our guys have the opportunity to serve what they call maximum security, where they kind of lock up. This is the prison within the prison. What happens is, those who are in that lock up area ... pretty rowdy inmates, so the officers have to wear stab vests and go in. If I can be a little candid, they'll throw waste at them, cuss them down and up and all that. That's why they wear the stab vests, so they can be protected. They asked some of our graduates to go in. They can't wear stab vests because they're inmates. So they'll go in and get cussed up one side and down the other. Some of our graduates have been spat on and stuff thrown at them on their uniform and so forth, but they take it and they pray with them and they're calm. What it does is it creates a calming effect, or has created a calming effect in those inmates who are there. It opens the door for them to pray with them.

 So our graduates have been used as peacemakers, when opportunities present themselves, on yards when it's a tough yard. Because again, they can relate better than the chaplains. Chaplains are still considered outsiders, but when you have a man in tan talking to another man in tan and they're sharing their stories and the man in tan says, "Man, I know what you're going through. Matter of fact, I have a life sentence where as you might be getting out in 20 years, but I'm here for life, but here's what the Lord has done for me."

JayWill Wilson: They become the houses of peace.

Andre Melvin: Absolutely.

 So those are some examples I can share, and many others, but we've been doing it for ten years now so it's just ... Every day, every week, every year is interesting and powerful.

Chris Reinolds: Being a part of this ministry, how has it really opened up your eyes to see life in a new way?

Andre Melvin: I think ... and again, this is one of those things I didn't ask for but the Lord just kind of moved me into. Prison ministry ... I think having gone through this experience of going there week in and week out, just life on life, talking and listening to these inmates, one of the things it really helps us understand is not to forget about those who are incarcerated. They've made some horrible mistakes and horrible crimes but when I begin to listen to some of their stories the only difference between them and us in some cases is they got caught and we didn't. I can see myself given certain circumstances, if I, at the wrong moment at the wrong time, I could've made-

JayWill Wilson: Made some of those choices.

Andre Melvin: Yeah, absolutely.

 But what I'm really excited about is to see how God is working within the prison. A lot of these guys, they would admit that this is where they found Christ. They were out in the world free physically but they were spiritually bound. When they find Christ, now they're free spiritually even though they're physically bound. So they have peace for the first time. They have joy for the first time. To see God use their incarceration to reach them, when the world has written them off and this is an opportunity for them to be used by the Lord, where nobody else would use them. It's an amazing thing.

JayWill Wilson: Providence.

Andre Melvin: Absolutely.

 So when people talk about going to prison and so forth, I really see that as that might be the bottom, the rock for people, so Christ can intervene and step in. I really thank God for that and I see him working mightily within those walls to reach people that the world just cannot reach. He uses that as an opportunity to reach them. To develop them, to disciple them, train them, teach them to love and serve. To see that transformation from when I first see them the first day of class to graduation day is phenomenal.

Chris Reinolds: What would you say about the too messy? What if someone said in your church or just in general conversation, "That's fine and well and all, but maybe those lives are just too messy for me to get involved in."

Andre Melvin: Well I would say that in prison or any other ministry context, people in general are messy. We're all messy. I think that's why we don't want to engage. The reality is all of us are messy. When we're really talking about loving God, following him, I often hear people saying ... and I've used it too in the past, "Ministry would be great if not for the people." The reality is ministry is people. So you can't avoid it.

Chris Reinolds: Jesus got involved in messy.

Andre Melvin: Absolutely. He ... knee deep in the mess of life.

Chris Reinolds: He was perfect and he got into our mess.

Andre Melvin: That's right. So that's the example that we have. He has called us to serve. He has called us to roll up our sleeves and not be dirty, be holy, but allow ourselves to get dirty. Walk amongst them, live incarnational with them so that we can reach them, so that we can share Christ's love with them. Not that we're perfect, but even sharing some of our failures and flaws.

 It is a messy job, because it requires time. It requires our resources. It requires us to love beyond just lip service. That's always messy. When talking about Jesus, I love it that when you see in scripture that God loves us, it’s always attached to an action. God so loved that he gave. It's always ... it's not just lip service. So when we're talking about loving people, there has to be action attached to it. There has to be sacrifice. Love is always sacrificial. It's giving something away versus lust which is always taking something from somebody else.

JayWill Wilson: I have a question. I think this is something that a lot of pastors need to know. As a pastor who thinks as a missionary and who has learned to engage prison culture, how do you think pastors can be better at engaging a culture they might not understand at one time?

Andre Melvin: Like we do for helping people, considering the mission field. Take a vision trip. I think a lot of times when it comes to prison we all have our preconceived ideas of what it's like. That's not for me, we won't ever go. What I'm trying to do now is really get more pastors involved and expose them to prison ministry. At least our ministry. I've talked to a lot of pastors who have some connections to prison ministry. I'm not saying they don't, but I think it's ... Prison is just another mission field. It's a different culture, one that you want to step out and say, let me just go and see. See what it's like.

 When I first went through the doors closing, all of that ... You've got the officers there, you've got the inmates walking around. It's kind of intimidating, but as you go in you begin to see these are men. On the women's side, we've worked with the women for four years. These are women. They need the love of Christ.

 I think just first of all, invite them to come in and take a look, and to see what the Lord is doing with our students and how the Lord is working there. Sharing that information with them, inviting them to come to do that. I think that opens the door, just like if we leave the comforts of America and go to a mission field somewhere else. God uses that to really open our understanding and our eyes. We see God in a bigger light. We also see how sheltered and how comfortable we are, and sometimes the materialistic ways that we have, we can't see it until we step away from it. People are living with a fraction of what we have but still have joy. We come away, come back there being very grateful and very humbled. So I think that's the starting place that I like to share with other pastors.

Chris Reinolds: Now, say there was an individual that was looking to get into this sort of ministry based on their particular context. I actually had a conversation with somebody this past week who is beginning to contemplate this as a possibility for his life and ministry direction. Where would they go to get more information about it? To find out, would they contact you? How can people connect with you?

Andre Melvin: Pretty easy. Just you can give me a call. You can come to CIU's campus or you can call me. You can contact me. What I would do if there's an interest there, I'll have my assistant Grace get their information so that can be processed. They need to get approved to go into the prison. That takes a couple of weeks. Once that's done then I'll meet them and we'll go into the prison together.

 We have chapels three times a week like any other Bible college, Monday Wednesday and Fridays. I think that would be the first stop, invite them to chapel. They don't have to do anything. If they want to preach, they can. We can put them on the docket to speak in chapel, but just come to visit. I think that'd be the first thing. Very minimal involvement, just come to see it. We can talk about it later and see what interests they would continue to share about the Lord is doing there. I think that's the first thing that I would do. Allow them access to the prison, walk them in and walk them out. I'll make sure you leave.

Chris Reinolds: Well pastor Andre we want to thank you so much for joining with us today.

Andre Melvin: My pleasure.

Chris Reinolds: If you're interesting in connecting with Pastor Andre or hearing more about what it is that he is doing with the prison program, please be sure to check out the show notes from today's episode. All of the applicable links will be there for you to be able to connect with him.

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