

# Church Behind Bars

**The church must remember Jesus' mandate to show compassion toward those in prison.**

I believe one of the most disturbing biblical passages is Matthew 25:41-46. In it, Jesus promises eternal punishment for those who do not serve Him by reaching out to those who are foreign, hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, impoverished and even incarcerated.

For many of us, it is easy to show compassion to those who by no fault of their own find themselves in need. It's harder to find sympathy for the thieves, rapists, murderers and drug dealers in correctional facilities across the nation.

Fortunately, Christ puts no limitation on His grace. And that truth begs a question, Don't we as the church have a responsibility to advocate that prisons become places that offer opportunity for salvation and personal transformation?

In 2004 approximately 10 million people were released from city and county jails. Another 600,000 were released from state and federal prisons—that's roughly the same number of people living in the District of Columbia.

Time in prison does not always have a healing, restorative effect. Too often, inmates spend their time improving their criminal prowess. And in many cases inmates don't find freedom from the underlying drug addiction that research shows influenced some 84 percent of those incarcerated to commit their crimes.

While restorative justice is not a new concept, it received a

renewed thrust in December 2003 when Florida Gov. Jeb Bush dedicated the nation's first "faith-based prison," which houses some 800 inmates from 26 different faiths. As one might imagine, the efforts at Lawtey prison have drawn sharp criticism.

However, the facts show that Jesus makes a difference in the lives of inmates. A 1997 study by the University of Pennsylvania Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society found that graduates of Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship were less likely to return to crime.

Providing spiritual counseling, job training and mentoring to inmates nearing the end of their sentences, the Prison Fellowship program produced graduates who were half as likely to be reincarcerated as other ex-prisoners studied.

"We're not asking the secular world to accept the faith, which is a matter of an individual relationship with God," Colson said in response to critics. "What we're asking them to do, however, is accept the consequences of that faith, which is something that can no longer be denied."

As Christians, we already know the "consequences" of our faith, which is why I believe we should support efforts that offer inmates a second chance.

In January, President Bush proposed a new prisoner re-entry initiative that would expand job training and placement services, and provide transitional housing. Last June, a bipartisan group of legislators introduced the Second Chance Act, which would allocate \$113 million to help ex-offenders with "a continuum of housing, education, health, employment

and mentoring services.”

This is a great beginning, though \$113 million would not go far enough to correct all the problems we face. Government is only part of the solution for curbing crime. There must be prevention before incarceration, ministry within prisons and aftercare upon release.

We also need overarching policies that will help bring social renewal. To this end, I recently crafted the Black Contract With America on Moral Values, which addresses six important areas: family reconstruction, wealth creation, education reform, prison reform, health-care reform and African relief.

The High Impact Leadership Coalition, which introduced the contract in February, is seeking 1 million signatures in support of the document to present before elected officials. This will let them know there is broad support for prioritizing initiatives with a biblical base and forging greater partnership with faith-based groups.

We are asking Christians of every ethnicity to sign, which can be done by visiting or checking out our ad in this issue.

Whether in this way or through some other method, we must show Christ’s compassion to “the least of these,” including those in prison.

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