

PAT NOLAN* & LAWRENCE STIRLING**

“I Was in Prison and You Visited Me”:

Prison Fellowship Volunteers Help Inmates Embrace Good Behavior

“Nothing works.” It’s a phrase that is frequently used to cut off discussions about ways prisons can be revamped so that inmates leave prison better than they enter. The nothing works mantra is a cynical excuse for allowing prisons to remain merely human warehouses. Yet, doing nothing puts the public at risk because, after those prisoners who have been idle, warehoused, and leave, they return to their communities—and over 95% of inmates are eventually released—with neither their hearts nor habits changed.

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** Judge Lawrence Stirling graduated from San Diego State University in 1964. He enlisted in the US Army in 1965, was selected for Officer Candidate School, and in 1966 was commissioned. He served 20 years as an Infantry officer including a year in command of a large Army company in Korea in 1967-8. He then served 16 years in the reserve including 12 years with the 12th Special Forces (green berets) and the final four years in the Pentagon working for the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel. Upon relief from active duty, Judge Stirling worked for the San Diego City Manager as an administrative analyst and subsequently for the San Diego Chief of Police as an operations analyst which resulted in a major overhaul of the SDPD. After serving four years as the first finance director for the San Diego Association of Governments, Judge Stirling was elected to the San Diego City Council in 1977. He was then elected to four terms in the State Assembly, and was chair of the Committee on Public Safety. In 1988, he was elected to the State Senate where he served until appointed to the Municipal Court by Governor George Deukmejian. He was later elevated to the Superior Court where he served to retirement in 2012. He is now the senior partner of the law firm of Adams Stirling, the largest home owners association law firm in California.

We think the naysayers are wrong. The authors have witnessed criminals whose lives were transformed in prison—who have returned to be contributing members of their communities as well as good neighbors. We reached that conclusion through our extensive experience with criminal law, in state courts or in the California Legislature.

In this paper, we explore how one Christian ministry, Prison Fellowship,¹ has worked inside and outside America’s prisons for nearly half a century to help transform the lives of offenders and their families. It has also worked with governors, legislators, prison officials, and judges to improve prison conditions, establish non-prison alternatives for non-violent offenders, aid the victims of crime and their families, and better equip the criminal justice system to mitigate the harm caused by crime—and thus better serve offenders and their families, victims and their families, and our nation’s people.

Chuck Colson Finds Prison Fellowship

In 1976, Chuck Colson founded Prison Fellowship, which is now the world’s largest Christian outreach to prisoners, former prisoners, and their families, as well as a leading advocate for criminal justice reform. Prison Fellowship began with volunteers working in a tiny two-room office, arranging for small groups of inmates to come to the Washington, D.C. area on furlough for a couple of days to study Christianity and to learn how to live out their faith while imprisoned and after.

The road that brought Colson to found the ministry is a remarkable story of transformation. He had been a man driven by a desire to excel. He graduated with honors from prestigious Brown University, went on to become the youngest captain in the U.S. Marines Corps, and then earned his law degree from George Washington University with honors. Colson quickly became a highly successful lawyer representing some of the largest corporations in the United States.

In 1969, President Richard Nixon appointed him to be White House Counsel. At just 38 years of age, Colson became one of the most powerful people in the country. But then it all came crashing down during the Watergate scandal. For someone who had risen fast in the world of law and politics, he suffered an even quicker fall. He went from the office next to the Oval Office to a bunk at Maxwell federal prison in Alabama—Inmate 22326.

During his years of success in law and politics, Colson had been a nominal Christian. His life showed no evidence of faith. He was called President Nixon’s hatchet man, and for good reason. He once said he would “run over

¹ Prison Fellowship, <https://www.prisonfellowship.org>.

his grandmother for Nixon.”

Nothing in his life prepared him for this fall from grace. Colson later recounted, “I was in the depths of deep despair over Watergate, watching the president I had helped for four years flounder in office. I’d also heard that I might become a target of the investigation as well. In short, my world was collapsing.”²

He went to visit Tom Phillips, a long-time friend and former client. Colson described the visit, “That night he read to me from *Mere Christianity*, by C. S. Lewis, particularly a chapter about the great sin that is pride. A proud man is always walking through life looking down on other people and other things, said Lewis. As a result, he cannot see something above himself immeasurably superior—God.”

Phillips offered to pray with Colson, but Colson felt uncomfortable. He demurred and quickly departed. Colson later explained, “But when I got in the car that night, I couldn’t drive it out of the driveway; ex-Marine captain, White House tough guy, I was crying too hard, calling out to God. I did not even know the right words. I simply knew that I wanted Him.”

A small group of Christian politicians took Colson under their wing to teach him the basic tenets of Christianity and help him apply them to his life. They counseled him through his indictment and his hard decision to plead guilty to obstruction of justice in the Daniel Ellsberg case. And they supported him during his imprisonment.

Colson’s conversion story began almost a year before he ever saw the inside of Maxwell federal prison. In fact, his conversion is what led him to drop his claim of innocence and plead guilty, knowing it meant he would be sent to prison.

Colson, who had been on top of the world, now found himself at the bottom—deprived of his freedom and separated from his family. He thought his life was over. That being labeled a “convict” would kill his chances of doing anything meaningful with his life.

Colson’s time in prison was difficult. His father died while he was there and his son, Chris, was arrested for possession of marijuana. But it was also a time of spiritual growth. He formed a fellowship with other Christian inmates similar to the group that had nurtured him in his faith.

Colson is released from prison

The day finally arrived for Colson to be released. As he was packing his few belongings, a large prisoner named Archie confronted him.

² *Breakpoint*: Chuck Colson’s Conversion, <https://breakpoint.org/breakpoint-chuck-colsons-conversion>.

“Hey, Colson,” he snarled, “You’ll be out of here soon. What are you going to do for us?”

Colson told Archie, “I’ll help in some way. I’ll never forget you guys or this stinking place.”

“Bull!” Archie yelled back, “I’ve seen big shots like you come and go. They all say the same things while they’re inside. Then they get out and forget us fast. There ain’t nobody cares about us. Nobody!”³

Contrary to Archie’s prediction, Colson kept his word. He emerged from prison with a new mission: mobilizing the Christian church to minister to prisoners. In his memoir, *Born Again*, Colson wrote about the promise he made to his bunkmates at Maxwell federal prison, “I found myself increasingly drawn to the idea that God had put me in prison for a purpose and that I should do something for those I had left behind.”

The creation story of the world’s largest prison ministry

Though certain of God’s call on his life, Colson was uncertain how he could accomplish it. He envisioned bringing inmates out of prisons for a weekend of deep study of their Christian faith. Colson met with everyone he could think of who might be able to help him in this new task. Weeks and weeks passed, and he got nowhere. Doors seemed to be closed.

Colson turned to the small group that had counseled him before prison. Senator Harold Hughes, a Democrat from Iowa, was part of that group. A burly former long haul truck driver, Hughes was a man of action. When Colson suggested going to Norm Carlson, Director of Prisons, Senator Hughes blurted, “Nothing to lose,” turned to his secretary, told her to call Carlson and set up a meeting for Colson. They got their meeting—the very next day.

When Senator Hughes and Colson were ushered into Carlson’s office, he greeted them, “Hiya, fellas. Come on in.” Colson told Carlson that his prisons weren’t working; they failed to rehabilitate. In some places, Colson observed, the recidivism rate was 80 percent. There was only one person in the world, he declared, who had the power to remake lives, who could break the desperate cycle of habit, and deprivation that led many prisoners, after their release from custody, to quickly re-offend. That was Jesus Christ.

Colson later wrote that he was afraid that Carlson would not take their proposal seriously. Colson plunged ahead with his proposal: Would Carlson issue an order permitting Colson, Hughes, and their fellowship to select inmates to bring to Washington to teach them the principles of Christianity so

³ Prison Fellowship, *The Promise of Hope*, <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/2016/08/promise-hope>.

that they would return to their prisons to form prayer groups and Bible studies among their fellow inmates?

Recalling his own experience in forming the prayer group in Maxwell federal prison, Colson hoped to affect an inmate-led Christian revival throughout the entire federal prison system. A few little platoons of faith, propagating by the grace of God, were all that were needed. With the Lord’s blessing, he believed, “literally thousands of men could through this very limited concept and very simple technique be lifted out of the barren wasteland of despair in which they now live.”

“I’ll issue the order,” Carlson said. “Get together with my staff and work out the details.” Researcher Dr. Kendrick Oliver wrote, “It is the creation story of the world’s largest prison ministry.”

Prison Fellowship encounters some initial setbacks

Colson’s analysis of the failings of the prison system was right in line with the growing consensus among corrections professionals that it was ineffective to force inmates to participate in rehabilitative programs.

As researcher Kendrick Oliver noted:

The only successful rehabilitations were those for which inmates themselves volunteered. In particular, it was concluded, correctional institutions should try to involve local communities in their rehabilitation programs, increasing the variety of provision and offering inmates a meaningful prospect of support and assistance once they were released.

Significantly, correctional professionals were identifying a need to breach the walls that separated prisons from the world beyond at the very same moment that many organizations—religious groups prominent among them—were lining up on the other side of those walls expressing a similar intent.

The rise of Prison Fellowship, then, has been profoundly consequential. Since that first meeting in Carlson’s office, Prison Fellowship has pioneered techniques that have carried evangelical religion into almost every corner of the American prison system and declared the authenticity and necessity of faith-based social action within the precincts of the state.⁴

Colson said that prison rehabilitation programs failed because of one common flaw, “Most prisoners, simply trust no one who receives his monthly payment from the government.” If a program was to be effective, it had to be independent of the prison administration and “largely self-sustaining,” a product of its own participants’ determination to be transformed.

⁴ Kendrick Oliver, “‘Hi, Fellas. Come on in.’ Norman Carlson, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and the Rise of Prison Fellowship.” *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2013, pp. 740–57.

Carlson shared Colson's view that any inmate who wished to change, "must be given every opportunity to do so," but the role of the prison in this process was to facilitate, not coerce. In addition, Carlson was working a "quiet revolution" to increase interaction between each prison and the community outside its walls. He encouraged the local population to become involved with rehabilitation of inmates and established community-based programs like work-release programs and halfway houses.⁵ That was a good fit with Colson's efforts.

However, Prison Fellowship's Discipleship Seminars met strong resistance from federal wardens and chaplains. A Prison Fellowship staffer noted that many prison officials "do not like this program and want to find ways of ending it." Chaplains in particular felt the program threatened their jobs; they feared that they would become irrelevant if the inmates returned from the Discipleship Seminar and established Bible studies and classes independent of the chaplains.

And the Discipleship Seminars encountered some bumps along the way. The first seminar went very well, but in the second, a few of those selected turned out to be problems. Colson later commented that one was a "seductress" flirting with the other participants and wearing provocative clothes. Then matters got severely out of hand in the fourth seminar when one participant arranged for his girlfriend to come to Washington, D.C., and sometime during the seminar breaks got her pregnant.

Despite these unfortunate incidents, the Bureau of Prison Terms assessed the seminars were successful. The Bureau of Prisons report observed that the inmates from the first five training seminars had played an instrumental role in reviving religious programs within their prisons after they returned. Carlson said the seminars were "a model for quality community-based religious programming for prisons."

Notwithstanding Carlson's support for the Discipleship Seminars, the warden at the federal penitentiary in Oxford, Wisconsin, flatly refused to allow the inmates to travel to the District of Columbia for a seminar. Instead, he challenged Prison Fellowship to put on a workshop inside his prison.

This posed a dilemma for Prison Fellowship. The seminars were not structured to take place inside a prison. However, Colson accepted the challenge instead of going to Carlson to overrule the warden. Because he accepted the challenge, Prison Fellowship created a model for in-prison workshops. The workshop at Oxford was a success. Prison Fellowship decided to expand the in-prison program to other federal prisons.

⁵ Norman A. Carlson, "The Law and Corrections," *University of San Francisco Law Review* (October 1971): 77–86.

This expansion posed another challenge for Prison Fellowship. Where would the volunteers come from to follow up after the in-prison seminars? It turns out that they didn’t need to worry. Colson’s book, *Born Again*, published in 1977, quickly became a best seller, generating thousands of offers from Christians from across the nation to volunteer for Prison Fellowship.

This posed yet another challenge for Prison Fellowship. It had no program to train volunteers for in-prison ministry. Colson and his team faced this hurdle just like each problem before—they adapted. Prison Fellowship designed a training curriculum from scratch. Over time, it became the gold standard for prison volunteers, and it was much appreciated by prison officials. Soon, they conducted workshops in federal prisons in Minnesota, Kentucky, and Georgia. The nimbleness of the ministry in adapting to changed circumstances has been remarkable, and a credit to the team Colson attracted to Prison Fellowship’s work.

Colson and team weren’t done there, however. It soon occurred to them the same in-prison program they were taking into federal prisons would also be appropriate for state prisons as well. Colson saw this as important for the long-term future of the ministry: “We cannot have all of our eggs indefinitely in the federal basket.”



Prison Fellowship volunteers lead Bible studies and life skills workshops in prisons across the United States. Published here by permission from Prison Fellowship.

Expanding the ministry to state prisons required attracting thousands of new volunteers

This was a huge step for Prison Fellowship, because in state prisons they would reach seven times as many prisoners as in federal prisons. But where would Prison Fellowship find the thousands of new volunteers necessary for ministry in the states? Colson stepped up and traveled across the country giving speeches recruiting for Prison Fellowship. Colson had become a much sought after speaker as his book, *Born Again*, soared in sales. (Colson never took any revenue from any of his books or from the \$1 million Templeton Prize he received in 1993. Every penny in both instances went to Prison Fellowship.)

Colson spoke to countless gatherings and organizations, including chambers of commerce, prayer breakfasts, gatherings of legislators, and churches. In every speech, Colson made a pitch for volunteers to go into prison with the ministry. Up until Colson founded Prison Fellowship, most ministry in prisons was conducted by faithful souls from local churches or in yard events, such as former football great Bill Glass's Crusade or one-day evangelistic events featuring Maud Booth, the daughter of the founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth.

Those events were effective at giving the message of hope. What Prison Fellowship added to the yard events was their volunteers were there to continue to disciple those new converts on how to live a Christian life, even while in a dark place like prison.

Bringing Hope to the Hopeless

Colson and the Prison Fellowship volunteers brought a message of hope to the inmates. They told the inmates that they were children of God, made in His image, and that no matter what they had done, He loved them so much that He sent His son to die so that their sins would be forgiven; that if they accepted Jesus, were remorseful for the harm they had done, and lived according to His teachings, they could have eternal life with Him forever.

This message of hope was in stark contrast to what prisoners are often told by corrections officers. "You got nothin' comin'" is barked at them incessantly. Often, when being dropped off at the bus station after being released, officers tell them, "See you back in a few months." Prison Fellowship's message on the other hand, tells them they have hope and a future if they would amend their ways. Not all prisoners respond to this, but many thousand have turned their lives around, and they are living proof that the sceptics who say nothing works are mistaken.

Some Corrections Officials Welcome Volunteers

As we noted earlier, some prison officials resisted Prison Fellowship bringing programs in their prisons. This happened in both federal and state prisons. However, other officials were glad to welcome Prison Fellowship programs. At the same time, Board of Prison Director Norm Carlson was encouraging his “quite revolution” to increase interaction between federal prisons and the community, some state officials were doing the same.

One outstanding example of such leadership is Jeanne Woodford, the warden of San Quentin State Prison in California. Woodford believed that inmates can turn their lives around if given opportunities, even though some don’t take advantage of the programs. A *New York Times* profile of Woodford, “The Good Jailer,”⁶ described the yard at San Quentin, “The prison was bustling with purposeful activity. In the education building, inmates studied for their high-school equivalency examinations and college degrees. In factories, they learned to operate computer-controlled lathes, printing presses and milling machines. Two men pruned a Monterey Cypress tree in the chapel.”

Woodford developed and implemented programs for prisoners such as, “The Success Dorm,” the first reentry program in a California prison. The *Times* article continued, “With little money, Woodford created programs at San Quentin by relying almost entirely on nonprofit agencies and about 3,000 volunteers a month—a number unsurpassed in any other U.S. prison. Volunteers conduct a gospel choir, lead group-therapy sessions, coach sports, instruct classes in art and comparative literature, and teach ‘positive parenting’ courses.”

“‘The Success Dorm,’ includes up to 200 inmates who attend three self-help groups a week and work on a community project inside the prison. The men chronicle their progress in journals and talk about it in discussion groups. It’s a rigorous schedule that begins with a 4:30 a.m. wake-up call and continues until, on many nights, lights out at 10 p.m. A quarter of the prison’s general population is in some kind of program—more if you include sports—but she wants all, excluding those on death row, to participate.”⁷

Good wardens welcome volunteers because they know that if inmates are involved in productive programs that interest them, they are much less likely to get in trouble. Prison Fellowship’s volunteers found the environment in San

⁶ David Sheff, “The Good Jailer,” *New York Times* (March 14, 2004), <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/14/magazine/the-good-jailer.html>.

⁷ Id.; and such an exclusion of death row inmates is no longer apropos, Anita Chabria, “Gavin Newsom’s huge achievement: Closing death row. But does it play in 2024?” *Los Angeles Times* (April 24, 2024), <https://www.latimes.com/politics/newsletter/2024-04-04/the-last-days-of-californias-death-row-and-what-it-means-for-newsom-politics>.

Quentin Prison under Warden Woodford quite welcoming and their programs flourished. Woodford and Justice Fellowship’s Director, Pat Nolan, served together on Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Rehabilitation Strike Team. (Justice Fellowship will be discussed in greater detail below.) Following her stint at San Quentin, Woodford was named Director of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Colson Visits a Troubled Prison

Colson was asked by a group of Christian inmates at Walla Walla prison in Washington State to bring his message to them. He agreed and arranged to visit them while he was in Washington to recruit volunteers at a showing of the movie, *Born Again*. However, when the Prison Fellowship team contacted the prison to make final arrangements for the visit, they were told that Colson would not be allowed inside the prison because his life would be in danger, and they could not guarantee his safety.

Colson’s visit couldn’t have come at a worse time. A guard at the Walla Walla prison had died when he was stabbed when trying to break up a fight in the “Big Yard.” The warden immediately imposed a total lockdown of the prison. He went further for the inmates who lived in the same housing unit, whether or not they took part in the fight. He forced all 230 men to be held outdoors in the yard. For over six weeks, they baked in the hot summer sun where temperatures frequently soared to over 100 degrees.

The inmates in the other units didn’t escape punishment either. They were put on 24-hour lockdown in 10’ x 5’ cells designed to hold two men, but which were now packed on top of each other, four men in a cell—with inadequate ventilation. They were kept locked down in those conditions for over one hundred days.

Worse, the prisoners were allowed out of their cells for only a few moments, once each week for a “shower on the run.” The inmates were forced to run down the corridor and back between two ranks of guards who beat them with their batons, and punched, kicked, spat upon, and maced. One prisoner slipped on the wet floor while running the gauntlet. An officer used his baton to repeatedly sodomize him. The inmate’s injuries were so bad that he was rushed to a hospital. In the handwritten notes, a doctor dryly commented the prisoner had been “worked over rather thoroughly” and was bleeding from his rectum due to lacerations on the inside of the anus.

The only reason the world outside the prison learned of these harsh punishments and beatings was because an inmate secretly made an audio tape of the brutality and convinced a prison chaplain to smuggle it out to a radio station.

That blew the lid off the abuse. The public outcry was immediate. State officials demanded an investigation. The report confirmed the prisoners “were beaten with batons, punched, kicked, maced, and generally roughed up.” The report made a finding the prison’s Tactical Squad used “unreasonable force,” and five officers were fired.

Despite the danger inside the prison, Colson felt he could not let the Christian inmates down. He said the inmates would feel he had abandoned them and didn’t care what had been done to them. Colson told the prison officials he had to keep his promise. They relented.

One of the inmates asked Colson if he would tell the world what had been done to the inmates in Walla Walla. Colson asked him what he would do if he agreed to speak out on the conditions inside. The inmate quickly said he would start a Bible study group. Colson readily agreed. The inmate was true to his word and organized such a group.

The day following his visit, Colson spoke at the Washington State Legislative Prayer Breakfast. He told those in attendance he was appalled at what had happened in the prison. He called it “the most dangerous prison in the country.” He told the assembled government officials, “I’m in favor of punishment, but not a punishment that makes a person worse.”

He was asked if he would help state officials reform their broken prison system. He said he would. While such an effort was outside Colson’s original vision of taking the message of hope into prisons, he thought the ministry should address the deficiencies and injustice that he observed while inside Walla Walla. He later remarked, if Prison Fellowship presented the Gospel to prisoners but did not also address the conditions in which they were held, inmates would question the sincerity of the ministry’s claims of caring about them.

Colson’s commitment to work with government officials added an entirely new dimension to the Prison Fellowship’s work. And just as the Fellowship had to stretch to rework the discipleship seminars so they could be held inside federal prisons, and later to expand them into state prisons, his commitment to assist legislators and governors to improve prisons would have to be built from the ground up. Once again, Colson’s incredible dedication and his team’s organizing abilities helped Prison Fellowship adapt to changing circumstances.

Addressing Injustice in the System

Colson turned to Dan Van Ness to help him develop an advocacy program based on Biblical principles of justice. Van Ness was a young lawyer working for Cabrini Green Legal Aid helping defend the poor residents of the large public housing project in Chicago.

Van Ness attended a meeting where Colson spoke. He was impressed with Colson’s honest assessment of the failures of the criminal justice system and his commitment to improving it. Colson recruited Van Ness on the spot.

Van Ness set to work helping several states establish task forces comprised of volunteer advocates who were experts on criminal law and prominent lawyers and lawmakers who were committed to improving the criminal justice. One of those task forces was in Washington State where Van Ness helped guide it as its volunteers followed through on Colson’s commitment to work with state officials to improve the state’s prisons.

As the task forces developed reform proposals, it was important that those proposals align with Biblical principles. Former business leader and author, Gordon Loux, who was then President of Prison Fellowship, asked Van Ness to study the scriptures and develop a Biblical vision of justice that would guide Prison Fellowship’s reform proposals.

All those involved in the criminal justice system dissatisfied with it

As Van Ness conducted his research, he said he wondered, “Why is it that everyone involved in criminal cases is dissatisfied?” The prosecutors, victims, and those accused all think the justice system is flawed. He resolved that there was an important role for religious leaders and their churches in seeking to restructure the system so that all parties felt they were respected and a just result would be reached.

Following a period of research, Van Ness wrote a book, *Crime and Its Victims*, in 1986, to provide practical advice on how Biblical principles could be applied to make the justice system more just for all. The book quickly became the “go-to” reference for lawmakers, pastors, corrections leaders, and Prison Fellowship volunteers interested in trying to reform the criminal justice system.

In his book, Van Ness pointed out an important weak point in the current criminal justice system: It is largely focused on only two parties, the state and the accused, as exhibited by the way criminal cases are titled: People vs. John Doe. However, there is another real party in interest that is missing—the victim.

In *Crime and Its Victims*, Van Ness proposed this problem might be fixed by placing victims of crime and their families at the center of criminal proceedings, focusing on the harm caused by criminals by the crime(s) they commit, providing each party a voice in addressing that harm(s), and seeking potential options by which convicted criminals may begin to make amends by trying to do right for their victims and their families. From this perspective, we should think of crime as more than law breaking—it is also victim harming.

Van Ness and Prison Fellowship recruited volunteers to offer ideas and advocate for criminal justice reform at the federal level and in the states. Soon after *Crime and Its Victims* was published, the restorative justice movement, which embodies the concepts Van Ness advocated in his book, gained supporters across the country, including state legislators. With the concept of restorative justice, the task forces were able to put forward a coherent explanation of the reforms Prison Fellowship advocated.

In 1983, the Prison Fellowship Board decided the justice reform effort was so important that they should establish a separate affiliated corporation, Justice Fellowship to expand the work of the state task forces.

Justice Fellowship advocated for probation reform, restored voting rights for felons, revised sentences proportional to the harm caused by felons, and sentences for non-violent felons focused on community service programs so they may remain in their communities, retain their jobs, and be with their families. As Colson commented, putting non-violent offenders in prison with violent offenders doesn't make sense. “They are not dangerous when you put them in there, but they may be when they come out.”

In recent years, the term “restorative justice” has been coopted by groups whose policies are not restorative at all. They oppose holding felons accountable for the harm done to their victims and to the families of their victims. In fact, some of these groups call for abolishing prisons altogether. While these groups do not speak for the restorative justice community, they have made it much more difficult to convince legislators and the public to support reasonable criminal justice reforms. Despite this new challenge, Prison Fellowship continues to meet success at both the state and federal levels in enacting proven restorative justice programs.

Protecting Prisoners' Access to Religious Programs

In 1996, Senator Harry Reid proposed excluding prisoners from the protections of the First Amendment. Senator Reid's proposal would have restricted access by prisoners to religious programs, including Prison Fellowship as well as ministries of all faiths. Colson and the Prison Fellowship Board called on Justice Fellowship to engage with Congress on this issue.

Justice Fellowship recruited respected leaders from both parties in both houses of Congress. One particularly deft move involved organizing a press conference in front of the Capitol during which Senators Teddy Kennedy and John Ashcroft, often political adversaries, joined hands and spoke eloquently of the importance of providing prisoners access to religious services.



Chuck Colson and Pat Nolan testify before the House Judiciary Committee in opposition to proposals to limit prisoners' access to religious programs. Published here by permission from Prison Fellowship.

Prison Fellowship organized its volunteers, donors, and churches to write their federal legislative representatives and ask them to oppose Senator Reid's proposal. The response was overwhelming. Justice Fellowship delivered piles of letters to every congressional office. Seeing that his proposal had no chance of passing, Senator Reid abandoned it.

The efforts by Prison Fellowship and Justice Fellowship brought a strong backlash from some prison officials. For instance, the Pennsylvania Commissioner of Corrections, Martin Horn, complained to Colson, "A prisoner alone in his cell can pray to God. That is all the religious freedom I have to provide him." Colson politely responded that for Christians worshipping together is important; noting that Jesus said, "Where two or more are gathered in my name, there I will also be."⁸ Horn was not alone in venting his ire.

However, the effort to defeat the Reid amendment brought an unexpected boost to Prison Fellowship and Justice Fellowship. Legislators who previously knew little about Prison Fellowship's ministry to prisoners learned about the impact religious programs have in transforming the lives of prisoners. In addition, they became aware of the sensible reforms Justice Fellowship advocated to improve

⁸ *Mathew* 18:20

the justice system. From that point on, dozens of respected leaders of both parties in Congress were supportive of the work of Prison Fellowship and became key sponsors for Justice Fellowship’s proposed reforms.

Over the next decades, Justice Fellowship and Prison Fellowship succeeded in passing several important reforms, including the Religious Land Use And Institutionalized Persons Act which set religious liberty for prisoners firmly into federal law; the Second Chance Act,⁹ which provided incentives to state prisons to concentrate on preparing inmates to be good neighbors when they are released; the Prison Rape Elimination Act; and the First Step Act, the most comprehensive reform of federal criminal law in over two decades.

Justice Fellowship was frequently asked to provide expert testimony before Congressional and state legislative committees, the U.S. Sentencing Commission, and other federal and state boards and commissions. Former California state legislator, Pat Nolan, who headed the Justice Fellowship team beginning in 1996, served as a commissioner on the seven-member National Prison Rape Elimination Commission, and was a member of the National Commission on Safety and Abuse in American Prisons, chaired by former Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach.

Over the next several years, Justice Fellowship continued its efforts to protect prisoners’ religious rights, organizing the filing of several amicus briefs before the U.S. Supreme Court and state appellate courts to combat continued attempts to circumscribe the First Amendment rights of prisoners.

The Genesis of the First Step Act

Occasionally, Prison Fellowship’s ministry to individual prisoners and their families opened doors that led to improvements to the criminal justice system. One example occurred when Nolan received a call asking him to meet with members of a family whose father had just been sent to prison. Nolan didn’t know the family, but he agreed to meet with them at Dulles Airport.

Nolan opened with a prayer and then the wife and children explained why they were quite distraught. They were Orthodox Jews and worried their father would not be able to keep kosher nor form a minyan in prison.¹⁰

⁹ Related, see “A [Presidential] Proclamation on Second Chance Month, 2024,” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2024/03/29/a-proclamation-on-second-chance-month-2024>.

¹⁰ In Hebrew, “kosher” means fit or proper. Kosher food is any food fit for consumption by Jewish people. The laws of kosher define which foods a person can and cannot eat, and also how they should produce and handle certain foods. The laws also state which combinations of foods people should avoid. A minyan is the quorum required for Jewish communal worship that consists of ten male adults in Orthodox Judaism.

Nolan explained, because of the good relationships Prison Fellowship had with members of Congress, the ministry was in a good position to enlist help from several federal legislators if their father ran into difficulties practicing his faith while imprisoned. Nolan also explained the complicated bureaucratic process for sending their father a box for Passover.¹¹

Nolan didn't think about that meeting again until ten years later, in 2016, when he was watching a televised press conference being held at Trump Tower where Donald Trump announced that his son-in-law would be joining his presidential campaign. Nolan was stunned. The man standing next to Trump, the new member of the campaign team, was one of the sons he had met with at Dulles Airport—Jared Kushner.

In Kushner's book, *Breaking History: A White House Memoir*, published in 2022, he recounts that first meeting, "During my father's imprisonment in 2005, a friend suggested that we meet [Pat] Nolan. So, my mom and I flew to Washington, D.C., and met in a conference room at the airport. Nolan greeted us warmly and asked if he could begin our meeting with a prayer. As he prayed, he recounted a story from the Old Testament about Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his own brothers, but whom the Lord lifted out of bondage and placed at the Pharaoh's right hand to help guide Egypt through a famine and save his family from starvation. What had been intended for Joseph's evil, the Lord had used for his good. Nolan's prayer filled me with hope when I needed it most.

"A decade later I was sitting at my desk just down the hall from the Oval Office, with Nolan on the other end of the [telephone] line. He asked me to make long-overdue reforms to the federal criminal justice system that failed to pass during the Obama administration."

From that meeting, Nolan and Kushner developed broad bi-partisan support for what became the First Step Act. At each meeting in the White House Kushner asked Nolan to open with a prayer. Nolan's humble act of ministering to the family of an Orthodox Jewish federal prison inmate a decade earlier, bore an immense bounty of fruit in the passage of the First Step Act which benefited

¹¹ Passover is an April religious occasion. "The festival of Passover has its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures: the ancient Israelites were commanded to avoid all leavened foods—hametz—for the eight days of this holiday. Members of the various groupings Orthodox Jews begin preparing their homes one month in advance, right after the holiday of Purim, a festival celebrated annually to commemorate the salvation of the Jewish people in ancient Persia from Haman's plot "to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, infants and women, in a single day." Not only are Orthodox Jews forbidden to eat hametz, they must work to ensure they do not have even the minutest speck of it in their homes." Lynn Davidman, "An Orthodox Passover," *OUPBlog* (April 2, 2015), <https://blog.oup.com/2015/04/orthodox-judaism-passover>.

thousands of prisoners and their families all over the United States.¹²

Reaching the Children of Prisoners

As Prison Fellowship’s work in prisons expanded, a new way to assist those impacted by crime arose in a way only God could bring about.

Mary Kay Beard was serving a 22-year sentence in an Alabama prison where she began participating in Prison Fellowship’s programs. Beard was no ordinary prisoner. By the age of 27 she had established herself as one of the most notorious criminals in the country. She and her husband were wanted in four states for a string of bank robberies and were the target of a failed organized crime “hit” for double-crossing the mob on a diamond heist. She was on the FBI’s “Ten Most Wanted” list and had earned the reputation as “the Bonnie Parker of Alabama.”¹³ It seemed likely that Beard’s life would come to the same kind of violent end as that legendary bank robber.

Beard spent six Christmases in prison, while serving her sentence for burglary, grand larceny, and robbery. Each Christmas, local churches and charities would bring toiletries from women prisoners. She watched as those women gathered the soap, shampoo, and toothpaste, re-wrapped, and offered them as Christmas presents to their own children.

“Oh, that’s the heart of a mama,” she thought. “She might be a thief like me, or a drug addict, but she has the heart of a mama.” She vowed she would do something for children who have a parent in prison when she was released. Shortly after her release, Beard came up with the idea of Angel

¹² “President Trump signed into law bipartisan legislation today to reform the federal prison system. The First Step Act, which passed the U.S. Senate 87–12 and the House 358–36, will usher in significant changes to federal sentencing laws as well as improvements to programs that aim to reduce recidivism and provide support to people who are involved in the criminal justice system.” CSC Justice Center Staff, “President Trump Signs First Step Act into Law, Reauthorizing Second Chance Act,” Justice Center, The Council of State Governments (December 21, 2018), <https://csgjusticecenter.org/2018/12/21/president-trump-signs-first-step-act-into-law-reauthorizing-second-chance-act>.

¹³ The comparison was overdrawn: During the 1930s, largely in the southern U.S., Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow were small store, funeral home, and bank robbers, and multiple murderers. They ranged freely until, after one of the most extensive manhunts the nation had seen up to that time, they were ambushed by peace officers and shot to death near Sailes, Bienville Parish, Louisiana, on May 23, 1934. They are believed to have murdered at least nine police officers and four civilians. For more, see, “Bonnie and Clyde,” <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/bonnie-and-clyde>.

Tree.¹⁴ Collecting prisoners' gift wishes for their children, she placed them on little paper angels hung on a Christmas tree in a Birmingham shopping mall. Church volunteers would purchase and deliver the gifts to the children in the parents' name. The program was a smash success, and, in 1983, Prison Fellowship hired Beard as the director of Angel Tree.

This is an important part of Prison Fellowship's ministry because children of imprisoned parents are, on average, six times more likely to become imprisoned themselves. These children often feel abandoned, therefore knowing that their incarcerated parent cares about them and remembers them at Christmas helps strengthen the bonds between them. One Angel Tree recipient looked up at her mom after the volunteers had left and said, "I knew Daddy would remember." Those strengthened bonds benefit all of us, because having an intact family when released is one of the most important factors in helping prisoners make successful transitions from prison to home.

Angel Tree also began to help the children of prisoners apart from Christmas. Joe Avila, like Mary Kay Beard, was recruited to work for Prison Fellowship after he finished his prison sentence. As Prison Fellowship's director in California, Avila organized Angel Tree Camping in collaboration with camping organizations and local churches. The camping experience promoted healthy relationships among the children.¹⁵

Joe and William Anderson of Prison Fellowship also used their relationships and access to professional and college sports organizations to found Angel Tree Sports, which provides one-day sports camps across the country. The very first Angel Tree Sports Camp was held at Stanford University and was made possible by legendary coaches Bill Walsh and Jim Harbaugh. Since then, hundreds of sports camps have been held across the country. Since 2005, Angel Tree Sports has been helping kids.¹⁶

Prison Fellowship recently launched the First Chance Network, a group of nonprofit partners providing opportunities for Angel Tree children in

¹⁴ Prison Fellowship, Angel Tree, <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/about/angel-tree>. "Every child has a story. For 1.5 million American children, that story is filled with the abandonment, loneliness, and shame that come from having a mom or dad in prison. For many, it may also include following their parents down the same destructive road to incarceration. ¶ Prison Fellowship Angel Tree reaches out to the children of the incarcerated and their families with the love of Christ. It uniquely equips your church with the opportunity to restore and strengthen relationships between incarcerated parents and their families by helping to meet their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs." "Angel Tree Resources," <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/angel-tree>. More than a quarter million children received Christmas gifts through Angel Tree in 2023. *Prison Fellowship Annual Report FY2023*, p. 11, https://www.prisonfellowship.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/PF_AR_FY2023_Final_Digital-Version_10192023_Small.pdf.

¹⁵ *Angel Tree Camping*, <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/about/angel-tree/angel-tree-camping>.

¹⁶ Hamil R. Harris, "Angel Tree Sports Camp Offers Fun, Training for Children with Incarcerated Parents," *Washington Informer* (May 29, 2024), <https://www.washingtoninformer.com/prison-fellowship-sports-camp>.

their communities. Five cities were chosen to connect prisoners’ families to organizations that have the expertise in assisting families.¹⁷

A prison within a prison

Tom Pratt, who had been executive vice president at Herman Miller Furniture, left the corporate world to take the helm at Prison Fellowship as President. In 1992, at his suggestion, the Board agreed to establish an internal Research and Development Division with a portion of the \$1 million Templeton Prize money that Colson donated to the ministry. It was headed by Karen Heetderks Strong, Ph.D.

One of the projects assigned to Strong and the Research and Development Division was to design a way to deliver Prison Fellowship programs in ways that would reduce recidivism. The high incidence of recidivism is a problem that has vexed lawmakers and corrections officials for decades. Reducing recidivism would mean fewer crimes, fewer victims, reduced need for prison beds, reduced cases clogging our courts, more families reunited, and more workers to ease the workforce crisis.

One problem that confronted the team immediately was the very limited amount of time Prison Fellowship volunteers were able to spend with prison inmates—at most a few hours per week. The remainder of the inmates’ time was spent in the chaotic corridors of their cell block—an environment that challenged them every day. Temptations were all around. The skills that inmates learn to survive inside prison put to the test everything they were being taught in Prison Fellowship’s classes.

The R&D team brainstormed how to create an atmosphere that would be conducive for inmates to live by the values they learn from the Prison Fellowship programs. They looked at Brazil’s APAC prisons (Association of Protection and Assistance to Convicts) for aspects that Prison Fellowship might replicate in the United States.

The extraordinary APAC prisons were described by Fr. Francesco Occhetta, S.J., “In the dark world of prisons, an experience exists in Brazil that is like a ray of light: there, prisoners are not numbers, rather they are referred to by name; they have tasks to carry out; they are imprisoned in places without bars and without guards; they do not wear uniforms. In these ‘alternative jails’ run by prisoners—called *recuperandi* (recovering people)—there have been no

¹⁷ In 2023, Walmart gave \$1,250,000 to support Prison Fellowship’s *First Chance Network*, which uplifts children with incarcerated parents. “The First Chance Network Receives Two-Year Grant to Build Holistic Support For Children With An Incarcerated Parent,” <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/2023/04/prison-fellowships-first-chance-network-receives-support-from-walmart-org-center-for-racial-equity>.

riots or cases of corruption, while recidivism has been reduced from 85 percent to 15 percent. It does not seem possible, yet experience, data and management costs prove it to be true: the latter have decreased by one third if compared to those run by the State.”¹⁸

Based on the success of Brazil’s APAC prisons, the Prison Fellowship innovators concluded the ideal setting would be a dorm, separate from the general prison populations. In the Prison Fellowship dorm, those in the program would live by the moral principles of Christianity. There would be no drinking, drugs, swearing, or fighting. The inmates would treat the corrections officers with respect. Prison officers would reciprocate that respect. Prison Fellowship innovators hit upon a name for the program, The InnerChange Freedom Initiative.

The Prison Fellowship team of innovators worked closely with Don Willett, who was Texas Governor George W. Bush’s Director of Research and Special Projects. (Judge Willett now sits on the U.S. Court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit.). Carol Vance served as chairman of the board, Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Vance and the Board together oversaw the Texas Prison System and they weighed in with strong support for the InnerChange Freedom Initiative. Willett submitted Prison Fellowship’s proposal to Governor Bush, who enthusiastically approved it.

The InnerChange Freedom Initiative opened at the Jester Prison Complex near Sugarland, Texas, in 1997. The first Director of the Jester Initiative was Jack Cowley. He had been a warden in the Oklahoma prison system for 24 years. The program was voluntary, and the inmates participated in classes to prepare them to live healthy, productive, law-abiding lives when they returned home from prison. Special emphasis was placed on preparing the men to re-enter the workplace, become involved in community life, participate in a local church, and strengthen their family and social relationships.

Though the classes were based on Christian values, the InnerChange Freedom Initiative was open to prisoners of all faiths or no faith. Initiative participants lived together in the same prison housing unit where they were taught values and life skills for up to 18 months. Initiative participants were each matched with a mentor. Mentors worked with prisoners in the months prior to their graduation and ultimate release, and after they walked out the gate. Initiative graduates were guided by their mentors and volunteers from local churches for at least 12 months after release.

¹⁸ For more, see, Fr. Francesco Occhetta, SJ, “Restorative Justice in Brazil: The Educational Method of APAC Prisons,” *La Civiltà Cattolica*, Reflecting the Mind of The Vatican since 1850 (December 13, 2018), <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/restorative-justice-in-brazil-the-educational-method-of-apac-prisons>.

Research Affirms the InnerChange Freedom Initiative Success in Reducing Recidivism

The goal of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative was to assist prisoners seeking a lasting, positive change of lifestyle by introducing them to a new value system. A study of Texas Initiative graduates by the University of Pennsylvania found they were much less likely to recidivate than non-Initiative participants. For example, InnerChange Freedom Initiative graduates were two-and-a-half times less likely to be re-incarcerated within two years of release. Only 8 percent of Initiative graduates recidivated, compared with 20.3 percent of the matched comparison group of non-Initiative prisoners. The recidivism rate was just 4 percent among those graduates who remained in contact with their mentors after their release.

The Warden of the Jester prison complex, Fred Becker, commented, “It’s up to us to determine what kind of shape they come back to the world in. If we can stop only 10 percent of those inmates from re-offending, it will mean thousands of citizens who never become victims of crime. InnerChange is a step in that direction.”

Becker also noted, while many of the Texas correctional officers were leery of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative at first, it soon became the most desired assignment at the Jester Complex.

A Mother Reconciles with the Man Who Killed Her Daughter

An important aspect of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative was Victim Awareness classes. It pressed the inmates to accept responsibility for their crimes and apologize to their victims.

One of the inmates in the Initiative was a convicted murderer, Ron Flowers. He was serving a 35-year sentence for shooting schoolteacher, Dee Dee Washington. Flowers was involved in a drug deal gone bad, and thinking Washington was part of an ambush, he shot her as she sat in her date’s car. Washington was simply an innocent bystander, but lost her life by the hand of Ron Flowers.

Washington’s family was consumed with grief and anger. Her parents were both schoolteachers. They were heartsick that their daughter, their pride and joy, had been killed in a senseless shooting. Her father was emotionally unable return to work, and soon died of a heart attack. Her brother got involved in drugs and died from an overdose. That left her mother, Mrs. Arna Washington, all alone.

After serving 14 years in Texas prisons, always denying responsibility for Washington's death, Flowers volunteered to enter the InnerChange Freedom Initiative. Colson wrote, "During one of IFI's Victim Awareness sessions, Ron finally admitted that he did commit the murder, and he prayed that his victim's family would forgive him. He wrote a letter to Dee Dee's mother, Mrs. Arna Washington, expressing his repentance and deep remorse.

"For her part, Mrs. Washington had written angry letters every year to the parole board, urging them to deny Ron parole. But when Ron confessed, Mrs. Washington felt an overwhelming conviction that she should meet the man who had killed her daughter.

"Prison Fellowship staff carefully prepared Mrs. Washington and Flowers for the meeting. Mrs. Washington finally could ask the questions that virtually every victim wants to ask: 'Why did you do it?' 'How did it happen?' Flowers reassured her that her daughter was not involved in the drug deal. As Washington told her about the day that he killed her daughter, Mrs. Washington took his hands in hers and said, 'I forgive you.'

"I was in Houston for Ron's graduation from IFI," Colson added. "As Ron crossed the stage to receive his diploma, Mrs. Washington rose from her seat and walked over to embrace Ron, the man who had murdered her daughter. She then told all of us in the audience, 'This young man is my adopted son.'"

After Flowers' release, Mrs. Washington invited him to sit in her pew at church. Every Sunday, he sat by her side, and then went to her home for dinner together. And Mrs. Washington even stood by him when he was married. To the world, such a reconciliation is impossible, but Prison Fellowship knows, with God, all things are possible.

Other States Invite Prison Fellowship to Establish InnerChange Freedom Initiatives

As word of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative's success at reducing recidivism spread among governors, legislators, and corrections officials, several states approached Prison Fellowship with invitations to establish similar Initiatives. New Initiatives were established in Iowa, Kansas, and Minnesota, and the results in those states were just as impressive as in Texas.

The Minnesota Department of Corrections evaluated the impact of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative and found Initiative participants who completed the program and maintained contact with their mentors had appreciably lower rates than the comparison group of non-Initiative prisoners and those who dropped out the program.

For instance, of those who completed the program less than 14.5 percent were convicted of another crime, while for the comparison group it was 34.2 percent, and for those who dropped out of the IFI program, 35.7 percent had another conviction.

The Minnesota Department of Corrections concluded the reasons for the difference in recidivism rates could be:

First, traditional or mainstream Christian doctrine promotes a pro-social, crime-free lifestyle, and existing research shows that religiosity is negatively associated with criminal offending.

Second, since 2004, the InnerChange Freedom Initiative has attempted to address the criminogenic needs of participants by introducing programming that focuses on issues such as education, criminal thinking, and chemical dependency.

Third, although the program does not specifically target high-risk offenders, it does not exclude them either, as having a sufficient length of stay in prison is the main eligibility criterion.

Fourth, similar to a therapeutic community, offenders participating in InnerChange live in one housing unit that is separated from the general prison population.

Fifth, InnerChange participants receive a ‘continuum of care’ insofar as the program lasts for at least months in the institution and then for the first 12 months following release when offenders are supported by a mentor and a faith community. Finally, by providing participants with mentors and connecting them with faith communities near their homes after their release from prison, InnerChange may expand the social support networks for offenders both during and after their confinement.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State Sues Prison Fellowship

In 1997, Iowa opened a new prison at Newton. The Iowa Department of Corrections was faced with overcrowding and a limited budget. As prisoners started arriving at the Newton Facility, treatment programs and classes were not yet fully staffed. The Department of Corrections reached out to Prison Fellowship and requested that it help fill out the programming at Newton with the InnerChange Freedom Initiative.

The state offered to fund the InnerChange Freedom Initiative for non-secular aspects of its programming, such as the cost of housing, food, correctional officers, medical, etc., just as they provided for inmates.

In 2003, Americans United for Separation of Church and State filed suit in federal court to shut down the program. The case was heard by Chief Judge Robert Pratt of the U.S. District Court of the Southern District of Iowa. Judge Pratt ordered Iowa to shut down the InnerChange Freedom Initiative and then took the unusual step of ordering Prison Fellowship to return all of the payments it had received under its contract with the state of Iowa. Judge Pratt imposed his order despite the state's payments had gone entirely for secular costs.

Judge Pratt opinion claimed that rehabilitative treatment was “a function traditionally reserved to the state.” He offered no citation for this statement. His statement is not only without any legal support, but as cited earlier in this commentary, it is historically inaccurate. Religious groups have provided services to needy citizens, including prisoners, inside prisons, and former prisoners, outside prisons, from the earliest days of our nation.

The History of Religious Volunteers in Prisons

The history of Christians volunteering in American prisons goes back to the founding of the Republic. In 1787, a group of Quakers met in the home of Benjamin Franklin to address the need for reform of prisons. They formed the *Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons*.

Their proposals led to the establishment of penitentiaries as alternatives to brutal and public corporal punishment for law breakers. They substituted imprisonment for corporal punishment and combined the idea of the prison with the workhouse, a reflection of the Quakers' belief that people can be reformed through reflection and remorse. These reforms began a world-wide movement for reform of prisons.

In addition to the Quakers, members of other Christian denominations send their members into prisons. For instance, Maud Ballington Booth, who was the daughter-in-law of William Booth who founded the Salvation Army, founded the Volunteers of America to take the Christian Gospel into prison.

The Catholic priest who founded the Knights of Columbus, made regular visits to the local jail to minister to the inmates. Jail and prison ministries are still key activities for the Knights.

Through several decades, prison agencies' names have changed—from penitentiaries, to reformatories, to corrections and rehabilitation. Yet, each of those titles, either implicitly or explicitly, includes transformation as an essential goal of imprisonment—an essential tenet of Christianity. In fact, Jesus specifically instructed his followers to visit those in prison, “I was in prison

and you visited me ... whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”¹⁹

Response to Judge Pratt’s Ruling

U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft wrote in defense of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative in Iowa, “This is the type of activity I sought to encourage when I sponsored the Charitable Choice Amendment in the Senate, which allows government agencies to contract with social service providers to tackle significant social problems—even if the provider is a religious organization. The IFI program follows the model of Charitable Choice: government funds are used only for non-sectarian purposes to fulfill a legitimate public need—reducing recidivism—while private donations pay for the religious portion of the program.”

Attorney General Ashcroft recalled an historic moment in the White House, “I saw the impact of the IFI program firsthand. I will never forget the moment in the Roosevelt Room in the White House when three IFI graduates presented President [George W.] Bush with the results of the University of Pennsylvania study that documented the program’s success in reducing inmate recidivism. These three men, once inmates in Texas prisons, were transformed and had become good neighbors. They enthusiastically embraced the duties of responsible fathers, employees, and citizens. Judge Pratt’s ruling would deny other men and women the opportunity to transform their lives through similar partnerships between corrections officials and the faith community.”

George Washington University law professors Ira C. Lupu and Robert W. Tuttle wrote about Judge Pratt’ decision, “It is unfortunate that Chief Judge [Robert W.] Pratt grounded his opinion in part in the language of ‘pervasive sectarianism.’ The concept that some religious entities are ‘pervasively sectarian,’ and therefore are ineligible for state financial support, has fallen into disrepute. Four Supreme Court Justices repudiated this idea in their plurality opinion in *Mitchell v. Helms* (2000) [530 U.S. 793], asserting that the idea is stained with anti-Catholic animus, and we think that the concept is not likely to reappear in the Supreme Court’s treatment of the Establishment Clause.”²⁰

Judge Pratt’s order, if replicated beyond Iowa, would prevent similar, faith-based programs elsewhere, just as it did in Iowa where he precluded Iowa corrections officials from implementing a Prison Fellowship program even though it has proven to reduce recidivism and make communities safer. Judge

¹⁹ *Matthew* 25:36, 40.

²⁰ Ira C. Lupu and Robert W. Tuttle, “Americans United for Separation of Church and State v. Prison Fellowship Ministries (and others) v. Prison Fellowship Ministries (and others),” *Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy*, Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, Albany, New York (2006).

Pratt's order also pushes away the helping hands of the religious volunteers who make such a difference in the lives of the returning inmates. Most tragic of all, it denies prison inmates the opportunity to participate in excellent programs with proven success.

Judge Pratt's order went even further. He ordered recoupment, that is, he ordered Prison Fellowship to repay the money Iowa had paid it for the non-religious programming, even though Iowa found Prison Fellowship's performance was in every way satisfactory to prison and state officials. Here again, Judge Pratt's order was extraordinary. In Lupu and Tuttle's commentary arising from their participating in the *Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy*, Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, the authors asserted, "The most controversial aspect of Chief Judge Pratt's opinion is the order that [Prison Fellowship Ministries] repay an amount in excess of \$1.5 million to the state of Iowa. In the absence of a contractual provision obligating a religious organization to make such a repayment if a program is held unlawful, no court (to our knowledge) has ever ordered a faith-based group to repay monies to the state or federal government after a finding that the payment was in violation of the Establishment Clause. Ordinarily, judges in such cases simply order the government to cease making unconstitutional payments in the future."

The impact of Judge Pratt's order on Prison Fellowship's budget would have been catastrophic. Prison Fellowship Ministries appealed. The U.S. Court of Appeals, Eighth Circuit, affirmed the trial court's order, except for recoupment. As to the latter, the Eighth Circuit concluded, "Given the totality of the circumstances, the district court abused its discretion in granting recoupment for services rendered before its order."²¹

Prison Fellowship Today

During Covid, the lockdowns forced Prison Fellowship to adapt to changing circumstances once again. With prisons closed to outsiders, the volunteers could not continue their in-prison programs. Rising to the need, Prison Fellowship developed Floodlight, a media platform that offered free inspirational and educational video content that corrections staff could download and share on prison television. Now that Covid is no longer a serious threat and access to prisons is largely restored, Prison Fellowship continues to produce Floodlight as a complementary, go-to resource, serving over 550,000 imprisoned viewers in forty-nine states.

²¹ *Americans United for Separation of Church and State v. Prison Fellowship Ministries* (2008) 509 F.3d 406, 428; for a more recent perspective on the freedom of religion, including the Establishment Clause, see, Ira C. Lupu and Robert W. Tuttle, "The Remains of the Establishment Clause," 74 *Hastings Law Journal* 1763 (2023); and for a related comment, Becket, Religious Freedom for All, <https://www.becketlaw.org/case/americans-united-separation-church-state-v-prison-fellowship-ministries>.



Prison Fellowship works to reverse the impact of parental imprisonment on their children through Angel Tree, because children of imprisoned parents are six times more likely to become imprisoned themselves. Angel Tree seeks to break this cycle of crime by strengthening the bonds between prisoners and their families, especially their children. Local churches provide Christmas gifts to the children in the name of their imprisoned parent. More than a quarter million children of prison inmates annually receive gifts “from” their imprisoned parent through the ingenuity of Prison Fellowship and the generosity of donors.

Since the closing of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative, Prison Fellowship developed the Prison Fellowship Academy, founded on the same principles. The Academies work to disestablish participants’ criminal thinking and behaviors with renewed purpose and Biblically-based life principles. Graduates complete the year-long program as change agents and good citizens both inside and outside of prison.

After graduating from the Prison Fellowship Academy, the inmates participate in Prison Fellowship Pathways, which is based on the belief that people in prison can not only change but contribute and lead. Through peer support and encouragement, Pathways helps Academy graduates become leaders to create positive change within their prisons. This is what Chuck Colson originally envisioned when he started the Discipleship Seminars decades earlier.

This year, Prison Fellowship sponsored yard events featuring inspirational speakers and musicians. These Hope Events were held at 319 prisons where 38,100 inmates were introduced to the hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Angel Tree continues to connect children with their incarcerated parents. Last year, 253,132 children received gifts in their parents' name through Angel Tree, 4,917 Angel Tree kids attended summer camp, and another 1,559 Angel Tree kids participated in sports camps.

Prison Fellowship publishes *Inside Journal*, a quarterly newspaper printed and distributed by correctional facilities across the country.²² Written specifically for imprisoned men and women, each issue explains the Gospel in a fresh way, offers encouragement and motivation, and shares practical advice for the daily struggles of prison life.

Prison Fellowship reaches out to wardens to help change prison culture. Prison Fellowship recognizes wardens determine the environment in each prison, so it developed the Warden Exchange to equip correctional leaders to create a safer, more restorative prison environment.²³

And Prison Fellowship continues to mobilize Christians to advocate for federal and state justice reforms that advance proportional punishment, constructive corrections culture, and second chances. Prison Fellowship, as noted above, played an active role in reaching out to the Trump Administration and the bi-partisan coalition of Senators and Congressmembers that pressed for and achieved passage of the First Step Act.

Easter in Prison

Throughout his decades leading Prison Fellowship, Colson visited hundreds of prisons. Each time Colson went into prisons, he was met by a line of dignitaries waiting to greet him—wardens, state officials, church leaders, and many from the press. Colson perfunctorily greeted them, then rushed to the gym or chapel where the events were held. He would wade into bleachers or into the rows of chairs to hug the prisoners who had been eagerly awaiting his arrival. After all, it was the prison inmates he came to see. He wanted them to hear his message of hope. He told them that their lives were not over, that they had value because God loved them and so did the Prison Fellowship

²² *Inside Journal* is published each summer and winter, in men's editions, women's editions, and Spanish editions, <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/inside-journal-archives>.

²³ "Throughout the seven- or nine-month programs, wardens convene with interdisciplinary thought leaders to exchange innovative ideas and practices for transformational leadership, the moral rehabilitation of prisoners, and community engagement. Program graduates emerge as part of a professional peer network reimagining prisons to create a prison culture that is safe, restorative, and prepares men and women in prison for the successful reentry into their communities." *Warden Exchange*, <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/about/warden-exchange>.

volunteers. Most of all, Colson wanted them to know that the Gospel could set them free.

“Chuck was never happier than when he took off his jacket and loosened his tie in a dingy prison chapel somewhere, facing rows of men in metal folding chairs who had big, thick Bibles in their hands. . . . He embraced as many as he could. He tried to learn their names and hear their stories. He tried to make a difference in there,” explained Michael Cromartie who was Colson’s first research assistant and aide after the creation of Prison Fellowship.

At the Bibb County Correctional Facility in Alabama one Sunday, the inmates enthusiastically greeted Colson. In fact, so many inmates wanted to attend that they could not fit into the newly constructed chapel.

Colson’s remarks were preceded by an unforgettably jubilant worship service which was designed and led by fifty-nine men of Bibb’s transformational ministry unit, run by Prison Fellowship field director, Deborah Daniels. Those fifty-nine men called themselves: “God’s Gang for Change.” They wrote their own mission statement, “We will console the weak in their weakness. We will give hope to the hopeless, faith to the faithless, and dreams to those who have no vision. We will provide leadership to the lost and Jesus to the unsaved.”

Colson set aside every Easter to visit prisons. Easter weekend is when Christians have always gathered to celebrate Christ’s triumph over impossible odds. In an editorial on patheos.com, Terry Mattingly described Colson’s Easter sermons. “It wasn’t the typical Bible text for an Easter sermon, but the preacher knew what this congregation needed to hear. Never forget what Jesus proclaimed in his first sermon: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed.’”²⁴

On Good Friday, 2011, Colson planned to return to Maxwell federal prison where he had served his sentence. In an ironic twist that harkened back to the opposition of some corrections officials to Prison Fellowship’s programs, the warden at Maxwell cancelled the service a few days before it was to take place. The Prison Fellowship team quickly swung into action contacting the Senators and Congressmen with whom they worked to defeat Senator Reid’s attempt to limit inmates’ religious rights. The legislators went to work and quickly the word came down that the Good Friday service would go ahead as planned. Naturally, the warden chose not to take his place among the dignitaries greeting Colson on that Good Friday.

²⁴ *Luke 4:18*

Despite the warden's interference, the return to Maxwell was deeply moving for Colson. As he walked the grounds where he was once imprisoned, he remembered the loneliness that prisoners experience. This Easter weekend, however, he was able to counter that hopelessness by presenting the life-changing message of hope, "In prison, you begin to feel that you're not worth anything, but that's not true. You guys are in a wonderful position, because you've been broken, and that's when you come face to face with Jesus Christ."



Chuck Colson, Founder of Prison Fellowship, enthusiastically greets prisoners. Published here by permission from Prison Fellowship.

Chuck Colson’s Legacy

Sadly, that visit to Maxwell was Colson’s last Easter visit to a prison. He passed away a little less than a year later, on April 21, 2012. He had fallen and hit his head. The doctors missed a large subdural hematoma. His unexpected death shocked the entire Prison Fellowship team. Words of condolence and respect poured in from religious and political leaders from around the world. His funeral at National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., was filled to capacity with dignitaries and well-wishers from across the country. However, the encomiums Colson would have valued the most were found in the messages of gratitude sent by prisoners who had been given hope by his ministry.

Colson often told those close to him that he didn’t want any memorials in his honor. He said that the men and women whose lives were transformed by Prison Fellowship would be “living monuments” to his work. Those living monuments number in the tens of thousands. That is a remarkable and lasting legacy. Well done, thou good and faithful servant.

