



Testimony of Jesse Wiese
Justice Fellowship | Prison Fellowship Ministries
Before the Charles Colson Task Force on Federal Corrections
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What you find in prisons will shock you: inefficiency, low morale, prison overcrowding, revolving door release, indifference at every turn. It's a system on the brink of incoherence. Not even those who run it defend it. It is a joke to criminals, a mystery to victims, [and] a scandal to taxpayers.¹

Chuck Colson

Dear Chairman Watts, Vice Chair Mollohan, and distinguished members of the Colson Task Force, thank you for your commitment to decreasing prison growth, ensuring personal accountability, and reducing recidivism within the federal correctional system.

Faith-based programming has been proven to be an effective method of countering anti-normative prison culture and reducing recidivism. Taxpayers and victims and survivors of crime expect a constructive return on society's large investment in the criminal justice system and allowing proven faith-based approaches for addressing criminogenic needs can provide a positive fiscal and social return.

Chuck Colson realized the importance that faith plays in restoring those in our criminal justice system and was an avid proponent for faith-based programs. Colson was correct in stating that “[w]ithout individual virtue, we cannot achieve a virtuous culture.”² Indeed faith-based programs are primary catalysts for instilling such virtue.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

My life has been dramatically changed for the better because of my participation in a faith-based program in the Iowa penal system. When I was twenty-one years old, I robbed a bank at gunpoint and was sentenced to fifteen years in the Iowa penal system. My actions were a result of personal despair and hopelessness and caused great harm to my victim, myself, the community, and my family and friends. Through some providential relationships and participating in a faith-based program, I began to find purpose, value, and hope and quickly realized that actions do not take place in a vacuum and that crime harms people, breaks relationships, and has lifelong consequences. I deeply regretted my actions and looked forward to satisfying the debt that I owed.

During my incarceration, I did my best to make amends and prepare for my opportunity at a second chance. I had confronted my actions, reconciled with my victim, obtained an undergraduate degree and graduated with honors, helped other men in prison obtain their GED, participated in and volunteered with a values-based reentry program, spent time speaking with

young men on the verge of entering the system, and spent the last three months of my sentence studying for the law school admission test.

I walked out of the Iowa prison system thinking two things: I wasn't the same man walking out that I was walking in, and I wanted to make a positive difference. I deeply wanted to expiate my guilt and prove to society that I could once again be a trusted and valued citizen.

When I was released, I began to put into practice what I had been taught. I sought out mentors, attended a local church, developed a new social network, got a job, and encouraged others to do the same. Those practices and relationships led to other opportunities. I was accepted to law school, interned with a state juvenile court judge, served as president of the Honor Council, drafted statutory reforms to eradicate domestic child-sex trafficking, graduated *magna cum laude*, passed the Virginia bar exam, and joined Justice Fellowship, the advocacy program of Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship, to work with state legislators across the country on criminal justice reforms, including the importance of creating a "constructive culture" within America's prisons.

FAITH-BASED PROGRAMS AND CREATING A CONSTRUCTIVE PRISON CULTURE

Earning back the public's trust after committing a crime should not be an easy task, but it must be a realistic and attainable one if we want to increase public safety and maximize the human potential locked within our prisons and jails. President Bush recognized this in his 2004 State of the Union address when he stated, "America is the land of second chance[s], and when the gates of the prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life."³ While this statement is true, the path inside our prisons must also lead to a better life. Unfortunately, our prisons today teach people how to become good prisoners, not good citizens. The billions of taxpayer dollars poured into rehabilitation programs every year amount to nothing more than a colossal waste, if we as a society don't allow the men and women to practice the rehabilitation we are preaching. Many faith-based programs provide the moral incentive to change criminal behavior and, more importantly, provide opportunities to put good citizenship to practice within a community context.

Perhaps one of the most tangible ways that faith-based programs can positively affect the prison culture is the reduction of disciplinary infractions. Faith-based programs have proven to reduce the number of disciplinary reports and increase the overall safety of the institutions in which they are housed.⁴ This research coincides with my personal experience within the Iowa prison system. In fact, it was openly discussed between correctional officers that it was "boring" to work in the faith-based unit because the most serious infractions were similar to forgetting to pick up one's laundry in a timely fashion. Additionally, the warden would regularly state to visitors of the program that that the number of disciplinary infractions in the prison significantly dropped since the inception of the program.

Based on the success of some faith-based programs, states have begun to create "character and faith-based" prisons and dorms.⁵ In fact, states with the largest prison populations including Florida⁶ and Georgia,⁷ among others, have led the way in providing opportunities for men and

women who are incarcerated to learn to live within a pro-social community—something, which quite frankly, just makes sense. The proven record for faith-based programming to instill positive social values and modify deviant behavior makes faith-based programming a viable and cost effective option for corrections.⁸

FAITH-BASED PROGRAMS AND REDUCING RECIDIVISM

Religious programs for men and women in prison are among the oldest and most common rehabilitative programs within correctional institutions. There is collective evidence that religious participation can reduce the risks of delinquent behavior, including criminal conduct.⁹ A literature review of approximately 40 studies concentrating on the relationship between religion and delinquency determined that most of the studies reported that a decrease in delinquency was related to an increase in religious activity.¹⁰ Additionally, the largest and most rigorous literature review to date on studies of religion and crime reviewed 243 studies and, consistent with previous literature reviews, determined an inverse relationship between religion and crime or delinquency.¹¹ In fact, 90 percent of the studies reported a beneficial relationship between religion and crime. Similar to earlier literature reviews, this review also noted that the findings were more pronounced among the studies with stronger methodologies.¹² Simply speaking, a large majority of the research on religion and crime shows that a faith-based approach can have a direct impact on recidivism.¹³

Particular faith-based programs have shown significant reductions in recidivism. A Prison Fellowship program in Minnesota, for example, has shown a 26 percent decrease for re-arrest, 35 percent decrease for reconvictions, and a 40 percent decrease for re-incarcerations for a new crime.¹⁴ A tax payer cost savings of \$8,291 per program participant was later calculated.¹⁵ Additionally, faith-based programs have begun to adopt holistic approaches by actively addressing criminogenic needs and risks through evidence based practices, which has increased their overall efficacy in reducing recidivism.¹⁶

Prison Fellowship currently runs rehabilitative programs in 38 federal prisons and 127 federal prisons participate in Angel Tree, a program providing Christmas presents to children on behalf of their incarcerated parent. These programs are largely made possible through volunteers. I would be remiss not to mention the role and responsibility the community has in establishing a pro-social expectation within our prisons. States have begun to increasingly include faith-based programs as part of their correctional practice and highlighting this trend within the Federal Bureau of Prisons would increase public safety both within and beyond our prison gates.

Respectfully submitted,

Jesse B. Wiese

¹ Charles Colson & Daniel Van Ess, *Convicted* 29 (1989).

² Charles Colson, *Justice that Restores* 105 (2001).

³ George W. Bush, President, Address Before a Joint Session of the Cong. on the State of the Union (Jan. 20, 2004).

⁴ E.g., Thomas P. O'Connor & Michael Perryclear, *Prison Religion in Action and Its Influence on Offender Rehabilitation*, 35 J. OFFENDER REHAB. 11 (2002) (finding that disciplinary infractions decreased with increased religious activity).

⁵ E.g., FOXNEWS.COM, *Faith Based Prisons Multiply Across the U.S.*, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2007/10/13/faith-based-prisons-multiply-across-us/> (stating that Texas officials opened a dozen faith-based dorms as a result of the success of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative Program, a faith-based program in a prison outside of Houston).

⁶ *Faith- and Character-Based Residential Programs*, FLA. DEP'T OF CORRECTIONS, <http://www.dc.state.fl.us/oth/faith/index.html> (last visited Mar. 8, 2015).

⁷ *Faith and Character*, GA. DEP'T OF CORRECTIONS, <http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/NewsRoom/Publications/FCBI.html> (last visited Mar. 8, 2015).

⁸ E.g., Bolko Zimmer, *The Effect of Faith-Based Programs in Reducing Recidivism and Substance Abuse of Ex-Offenders*, 14 J. COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS 7 (2005).

⁹ David Evans, et al., *Religion, Social Bonds, and Delinquency*, 17 DEVIANT BEHAVIOR 43 (1996).

¹⁰ Byron Johnson, et al., *Religion and Delinquency: A Systematic Review of the Literature*. 16 J. CONTEMP. CRIM. JUST. 32 (2000). Johnson et al also determined that among the studies with the most rigorous methodologies, there was an increased likelihood that religious activity resulted in decreased delinquency. *Id.*

¹¹ Byron Johnson & Soon Joon Yang, *Religion and Crime: Assessing the Role of the Faith Factor*. Contemporary Issues in Criminological Theory and Research: The Role of Social Institutions (2012) at 117, available at http://www.baylorisr.org/wp-content/uploads/Jang-and-Johnson_Religion-and-Crime1.pdf.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Contra Alexander Volokh, *Do Faith-Based Prisons Work?* 63 ALA. L. REV. 43 (2011) (stating that faith-based programs cannot be effectively measured because of the voluntary nature of these programs and the “self-selection problem”).

¹⁴ Minnesota Department of Corrections, AN OUTCOME EVALUATION OF THE INNERCHANGE FREEDOM INITIATIVE IN MINNESOTA (2012), available at http://www.baylorisr.org/wp-content/uploads/benefits_faith-based_correctional_program.pdf.

¹⁵ Grant Duwe & Byron Johnson, *Estimating the Benefits of a Faith-Based Correctional Program*, 2 INT’L J. CRIM. SOCIOLOGY 227 (2013), available at http://www.baylorisr.org/wp-content/uploads/benefits_faith-based_correctional_program.pdf.

¹⁶ *Supra* note 14 at 11.