



A look at
mass incarceration
in Alabama

A 10-part series from
The Alabama Baptist

Introduction

“In order to correct a problem, you must first admit there is a problem. In Alabama we have a problem. Our problem is our state’s corrections system.” — Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey, Feb. 12, 2019

In December 2018, *The Alabama Baptist (TAB)* began a 10-part series called “A look at mass incarceration in Alabama.” Week after week *TAB* shared not only facts and figures about the state’s prison system but also the stories of countless individuals and organizations working throughout Alabama to help the families of the incarcerated, those who have been released from prison and those currently behind bars.

The series introduces readers to:

- ▶ Eddie Miller, a former inmate who now serves as a part-time chaplain at Fountain Correctional Facility in Atmore through the We Care Program.
- ▶ Mobile Circuit Court Judge Edmond Naman, who in 2012 helped begin NEST of Mobile, a mentoring program that matches teams of court-approved volunteers with at-risk youth and families to help break the cycle of crime and violence that leads many juveniles into the prison system
- ▶ Patrick Johnson, an inmate at Bibb County Correctional Facility who graduated from a 2-year seminary program coordinated by Birmingham Theological Seminary and now serves as a teaching assistant for other imprisoned seminarians.
- ▶ Laure Clemons, who founded Extended Family, an Alabama-based nonprofit that provides families with practical life skills and support, following the incarceration of her husband for vehicular manslaughter due to drunk driving.

Their stories and others shared in this series challenge people of faith to get involved in ministering to those affected by incarceration. According to Gov. Ivey, 95% of Alabama inmates, once they have completed their sentence and are eligible for release, will return to their communities. Will they find employers who will hire them? Friends who will teach them how to be responsible parents? Churches who will accept them and mentor them in the faith?

Those and many other issues are explored in this series. We hope you are challenged and inspired by what you read in these pages.

I was in prison and you came to visit me ... I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”
(Matthew 25:36, 40)

Culture of mass incarceration

From family members of the imprisoned to taxpayers, no one is unaffected

For a freedom-loving country, the United States locks up more people than any other nation in the world. More than 2 million people are confined in American prisons, jails, juvenile detention centers and other types of correctional facilities. Nearly half a million of them haven't even been convicted, yet they are sitting in local jails awaiting trial, many of them too poor to raise bail.

The federal Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reported in April that the adult incarceration rate fell in 2016 to its lowest level in 20 years. According to BJS, the American adult incarceration rate has steadily declined since 2009 and is now at its lowest rate since 1996. That decline, while encouraging, does not change the fact that the United States incarcerates a higher percentage of its own population than any other country in the world.



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When you include the number of people behind bars with the number on parole, probation and community supervision, the current adult correctional population in America reaches nearly 6.5 million. According to the non-profit, nonpartisan Prison Policy Initiative, the United States has about 2.3 million people in prisons, jails and juvenile detention centers. That translates into a U.S. incarceration rate of 655 people per 100,000 population. The nations with the next highest rates of imprisonment, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, are:

- ▶ El Salvador, with 614 per 100,000
- ▶ Turkmenistan, 583 per 100,000
- ▶ Cuba, 510 per 100,000
- ▶ Rwanda, 434 per 100,000
- ▶ Russia, 413 per 100,000

BJS and the World Prison Brief note that a lack of available data may mean some countries, such as China, are not fairly represented among the national incarceration rankings. Nevertheless, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine reports that close to a quarter of all the world's prisoners are held in American prisons. "The U.S. rate of incarceration," the National Academies reported, "with nearly 1 of every 100 adults in prison or jail, is 5 to 10 times higher than rates in Western Europe and other democracies."

Some states' incarceration rates are even more stunning, according to the Prison Policy Initiative. Oklahoma currently tops the list by locking up 1,079 out of every 100,000 of its citizens, followed by Louisiana, 1,052; Mississippi, 1,039; Georgia, 970; and Alabama — perennially among the highest-incarceration states — 946.

Looked at another way, Alabama's incarceration rate of 946 per 100,000 population means that about one out of every 100 men, women and youth we encounter every day — at church, in school, at the mall — will be locked up

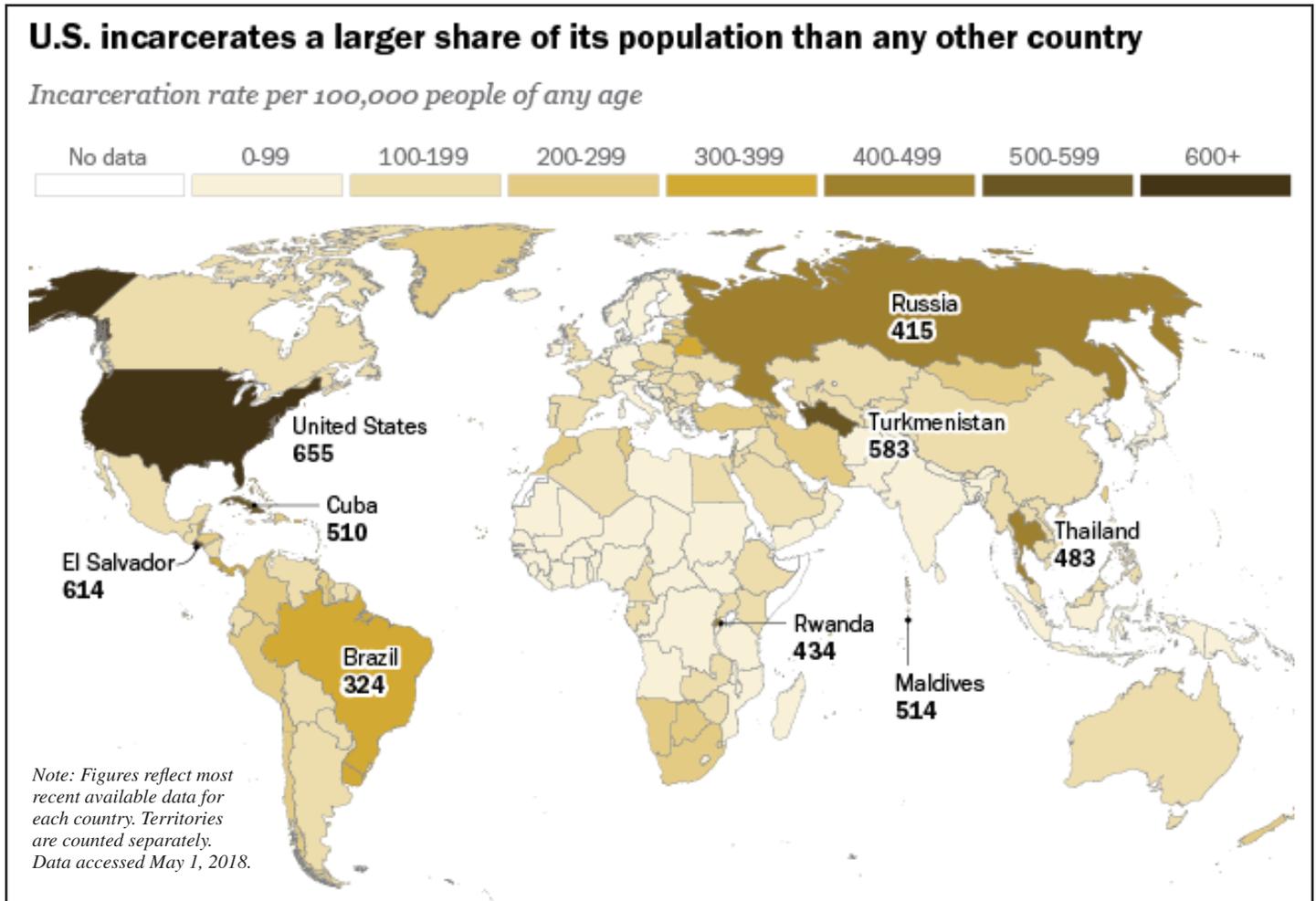
at one time or another. Extrapolate that to the number of family members with an incarcerated loved one, and the impact of mass incarceration comes into clearer view.

Children of imprisoned parents are especially at risk in the U.S., according to the National Institute of Justice, a federal research agency. They are six times more likely to eventually be incarcerated themselves, perpetuating the cycle. They are more likely to become depressed, aggressive and antisocial, and they are often trapped in severe poverty. Families of formerly incarcerated parents often wind up homeless, unable to overcome the barriers to finding jobs and housing. With no way to make a living, many ex-offenders return to crime.

Economic burden

Taxpayers pay dearly for mass incarceration: \$80 billion annually on jails, prisons, juvenile detention centers and other forms of incarceration. But that’s just the tip of the iceberg, according to a study published in 2016 by Washington University in St. Louis. Researchers found that mass incarceration in the United States actually costs taxpayers \$1 trillion annually, or about 6% of gross domestic product. “This is because corrections spending ignores costs borne by incarcerated persons, families, children and communities,” researchers said in their report.

“Examples of these social costs are the foregone wages of incarcerated persons, increased infant mortality and increased criminality of children with incarcerated parents. While these costs do not appear on government budgets, they reduce the aggregate welfare of society and should be considered when creating public policy. For every dollar in corrections costs, incarceration generates an additional \$10 in social costs,” researchers said. “More than half of the costs are borne by families, children and community members who have committed no crime. Even if one were to exclude the cost of jail, the aggregate burden of incarceration would still exceed \$500 million annually.”



Every election season, candidates mention it. “Tough on crime,” “war on drugs” and “mandatory minimum sentences” make for good campaign slogans. As a premise for laws and policies, however, being too “tough” may make for unreasonably high rates of incarceration.

The Sentencing Project and Institute for Prison Ministries, a program of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, reports a 500 percent increase in incarceration during the last 40 years, resulting in overcrowding at prisons and spiraling costs to states.

How we got here

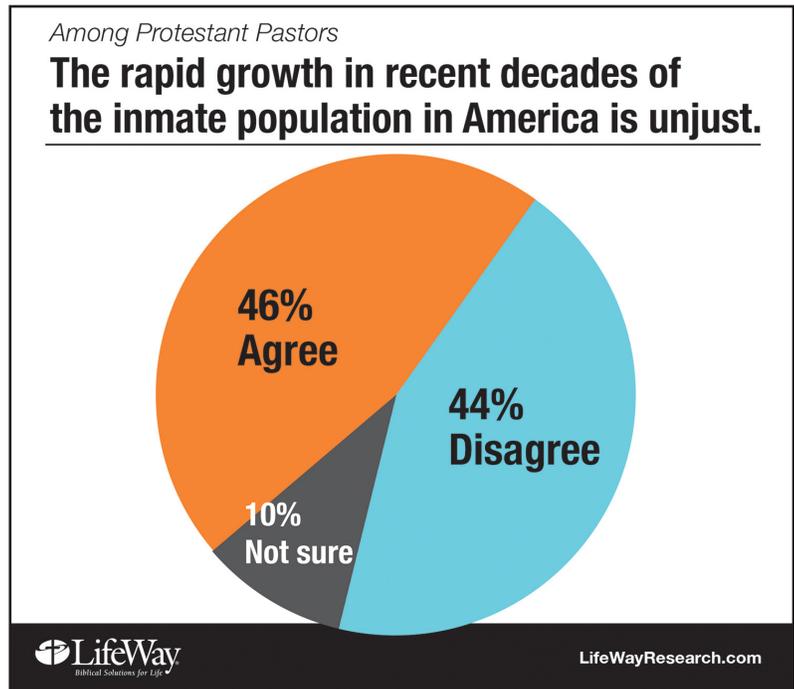
“Changes in law and policy, not changes in crime rates, explain most of this increase,” researchers report. “Since the official beginning of the war on drugs in 1982, the number of people incarcerated for drug offenses in the U.S. skyrocketed from 41,000 in 1980 to nearly half a million in 2014. Today more people are behind bars for a drug offense than the number of people who were in prison or jail for any crime in 1980. The number of people sentenced to prison for property and violent crimes has also increased, even during periods when crime rates have declined,” according to the report.

Moreover, Billy Graham Institute researchers say offenders are being sentenced to prison for much longer terms: “Harsh sentencing laws like mandatory minimums, combined with cutbacks in parole release, keep people in prison for longer periods of time. The National Research Council reported that half of the 222 percent growth in the state prison population between 1980 and 2010 was due to an increase of time served in prison for all offenses.”

It might be worth it, some would say, if there were proof that putting so many people behind bars made an appreciable difference in public safety.

However, the National Research Council, an arm of the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, reports, “The increase in incarceration may have caused a decrease in crime, but the magnitude is highly uncertain and the results of most studies suggest it was unlikely to have been large.” How do we get our arms around this problem — spending a trillion bucks a year to be the number one incarceration nation in the world and for unprovable and probably negligible results? How do we make the right kind of changes? Why should a Christian community of faith get involved? What would Jesus have us do?

EDITOR’S NOTE — This article, written by Martha Simmons, originally appeared in the Dec. 6, 2018, issue of The Alabama Baptist on pages 6–7.



Reaching inmates

Training, funding top barriers to productive prison ministry

While most Protestant pastors visit correctional facilities and want to help prisoners and their families, their churches often lack the training or finances for effective prison ministry. Those are among the findings of a recent LifeWay Research phone survey of 1,000 Protestant senior pastors.

Researchers found widespread support among pastors for the idea of prison ministry. Eighty-three percent of pastors have visited a correctional facility and nearly all believe churches should help families of those incarcerated (97%) and provide care for those getting out of jail (95%).

However, many pastors have little contact with those who have been incarcerated. Half of pastors say no one from their congregation has been jailed in the past three years. But nearly half also say one or more people from their church have been jailed.

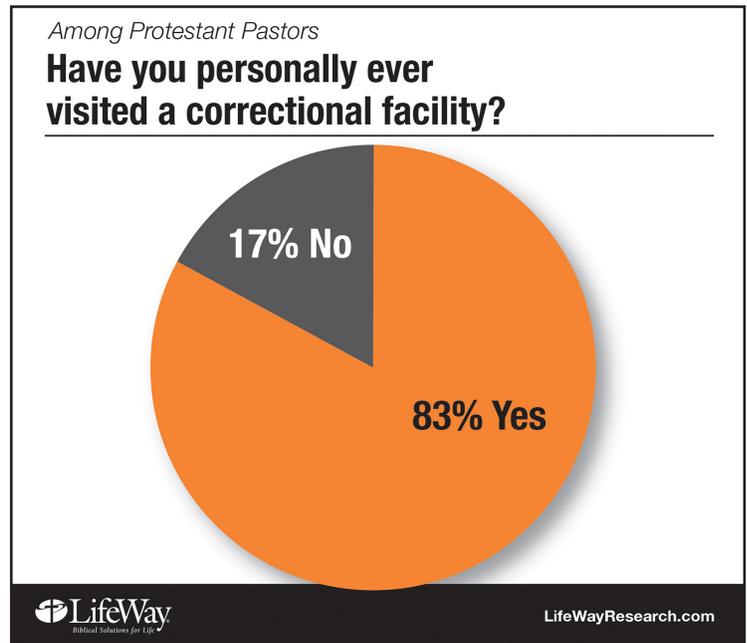
Record levels

Overall few pastors have contact with inmates or former inmates as a normal part of ministry, said Scott McConnell, vice president of LifeWay Research. So prison ministry isn't "on their ministry radar," McConnell said. The report comes at a time when incarceration rates in the United States remain at record levels. More than 2.2 million Americans are held in state and federal prisons or local jails, according to the Institute for Criminal Policy Research. That's more than in any other nation in the world.

More than a third (36%) of inmates in state and federal prisons are African-American, according to the Department of Justice. Those statistics have led to concerns about the high number of inmates and charges of racial disparity. LifeWay Research found pastors are split on those two questions.

Five in 10 pastors say the racial disparity among inmates is unjust. Four in 10 disagree. One in 10 is not sure. Just under half say the rapid growth of the inmate population is unjust. A similar number disagree. Ten percent are not sure. African-American pastors (78%) are most likely to say the rapid growth in the overall number of inmates is unjust. Most Methodist (67%) and Presbyterian/Reformed pastors (72%) agree. Fewer Baptist (31%), Pentecostal (34%), Christian/Church of Christ (39%) and Lutheran (45%) pastors hold that view. African-American pastors (88%) are also most likely to see racial disparities among inmates as unjust. Most Methodist (73%) and Presbyterian/Reformed (75%) pastors agree. Fewer Baptist (34%), Pentecostal (43%), Church of Christ/Christian (40%) and Lutheran (56%) pastors agree.

Karen Swanson, director of the Institute for Prison Ministries at Wheaton College, said pastors often don't know how to start ministering to inmates. Ministering to inmates and their families is difficult, she said, requiring special training and often long-term commitments from volunteers.



About two-thirds of pastors cite a lack of training or volunteers as barriers to their church helping inmates and their families. Forty percent say they do not know where to start. About 20% don't see a need for such ministry. Money is an issue as well. Half of pastors say a lack of finances is a barrier to ministry. Swanson hopes more pastors will consider getting their churches involved in prison ministry. They may be surprised, she noted, to find the ministry hits close to home.

"The missions field is in your backyard," she said. "Almost every county has a jail. And almost all prisoners are going to return home." McConnell said churches will be challenged by prison ministries.

Biblical faithfulness

"These are messy, long-term ministries," he said. "You really have to demonstrate biblical faithfulness to be involved with them. It's a lot easier to pick a ministry where there are quick rewards, but you would miss out on the opportunity to impact families and communities." The study was sponsored by the Institute for Prison Ministries, Billy Graham Center for Evangelism, Wheaton College; Correctional Ministries and Chaplains Association, Assemblies of God; and the Crossroad Bible Institute.

EDITOR'S NOTE — This article, from Baptist Press, originally appeared in the Dec. 6, 2018, issue of The Alabama Baptist on page 7.

Alabama behind bars

Per-inmate spending has increased, but staffing remains low and conditions are poor

On any given day in Alabama nearly 106,000 men, women and children are either incarcerated or under some sort of active probation, parole or other community supervision.

Using 2016 statistics the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics and the nonprofit, nonpartisan Prison Policy Initiative break it down this way:

- ▶ 40,900 in an Alabama state prison or jail
- ▶ 3,500 in federal prison in Alabama
- ▶ 870 juveniles in custody
- ▶ 60,700 on probation or parole

If Alabama were a country instead of a state, its incarceration rate of 946 per 100,000 population would be the fifth-highest in the world, preceded only by four other U.S. states:

1. Oklahoma
2. Louisiana
3. Mississippi
4. Georgia

Alabama’s incarceration rate is significantly higher than the United States as a whole, which holds the dubious distinction of being the No. 1 incarceration nation in the world.

Varying costs

Keeping that many people behind bars carries a big price tag. Local jail costs vary from one county to another and depend on how local officials manage their own jails. For instance some Alabama sheriffs have been found to be pocketing for their personal use state funds left over from feeding prisoners. It’s legal: The state pays sheriffs \$1.75 per state inmate per day for food, and Alabama law allows sheriffs to keep any leftover money. One Alabama sheriff made headlines this year for saving enough “extra” food fund money to buy a beach house. Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey has taken steps to stop the controversial practice and change the Depression-era law.

Alabama State Prison System by the Numbers

Costs

- ▶ Expenditures — \$460,200,691
- ▶ Average daily cost per inmate — \$52.07

End-of-year offender populations

- ▶ Total under DOC jurisdictional control — 27,803
- ▶ Demographics:
 - ▶ Male — 25,342
 - ▶ Female — 2,461
 - ▶ Black — 15,034
 - ▶ White — 12,628
 - ▶ Other — 141

System at a glance

- ▶ Major correctional facilities — 16
- ▶ Community-based facilities — 12
- ▶ Contracted prison beds at year end — 350
- ▶ Total staff at year end — 3,192
- ▶ Security staff at year end — 2,146
- ▶ Inmate-to-correctional officer ratio — 14.3:1
- ▶ Average monthly in-house inmate population — 22,146
- ▶ Overall recidivism rate — 31.5 percent

Source: Alabama Department of Corrections FY2017 Annual Report

A clearer picture of incarceration costs at the state prison level is accessible in the system's annual report. In fiscal year 2017 the Alabama Department of Corrections reported state prison system expenditures of more than \$460 million. That's an average price of \$52.07 per inmate per day, or about \$19,000 per year. While low compared with the rest of the nation the 2017 spending is significantly higher than a couple of years earlier. In its "The Price of Prisons" report, the Vera Institute of Justice reported the national cost per inmate averaged \$33,274 in 2015, with Alabama the lowest at \$14,780 and New York the highest at \$69,355.

More troubling, twice as many inmates are in Alabama's adult prisons than they were built for, and not nearly enough correctional officers to keep things under control. As a consequence Alabama's correctional facilities are overcrowded, understaffed and dangerous:

- ▶ Alabama's prison homicide rate is more than 30 per 100,000 — six times the national average and twice that of the next-highest state.
- ▶ Alabama's prison suicide rate is 37 per 100,000, more than twice the national rate.

These conditions have sparked national headlines, investigations and court rulings:

- ▶ In 2016 the U.S. Department of Justice opened an investigation into widespread violence and sexual abuse in the men's prisons.
- ▶ In 2017 a federal district court judge cited Alabama state prisons with providing inmates "horrendously inadequate" mental health care.
- ▶ In 2018 the Alabama Department of Corrections filed court documents asserting the need for twice as many correctional officers as are currently employed to address safety concerns.

Citizens who think these problems remain safely locked behind bars are ignoring reality. At least 95% of all state prisoners will be released from prison at some point, according to the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics.

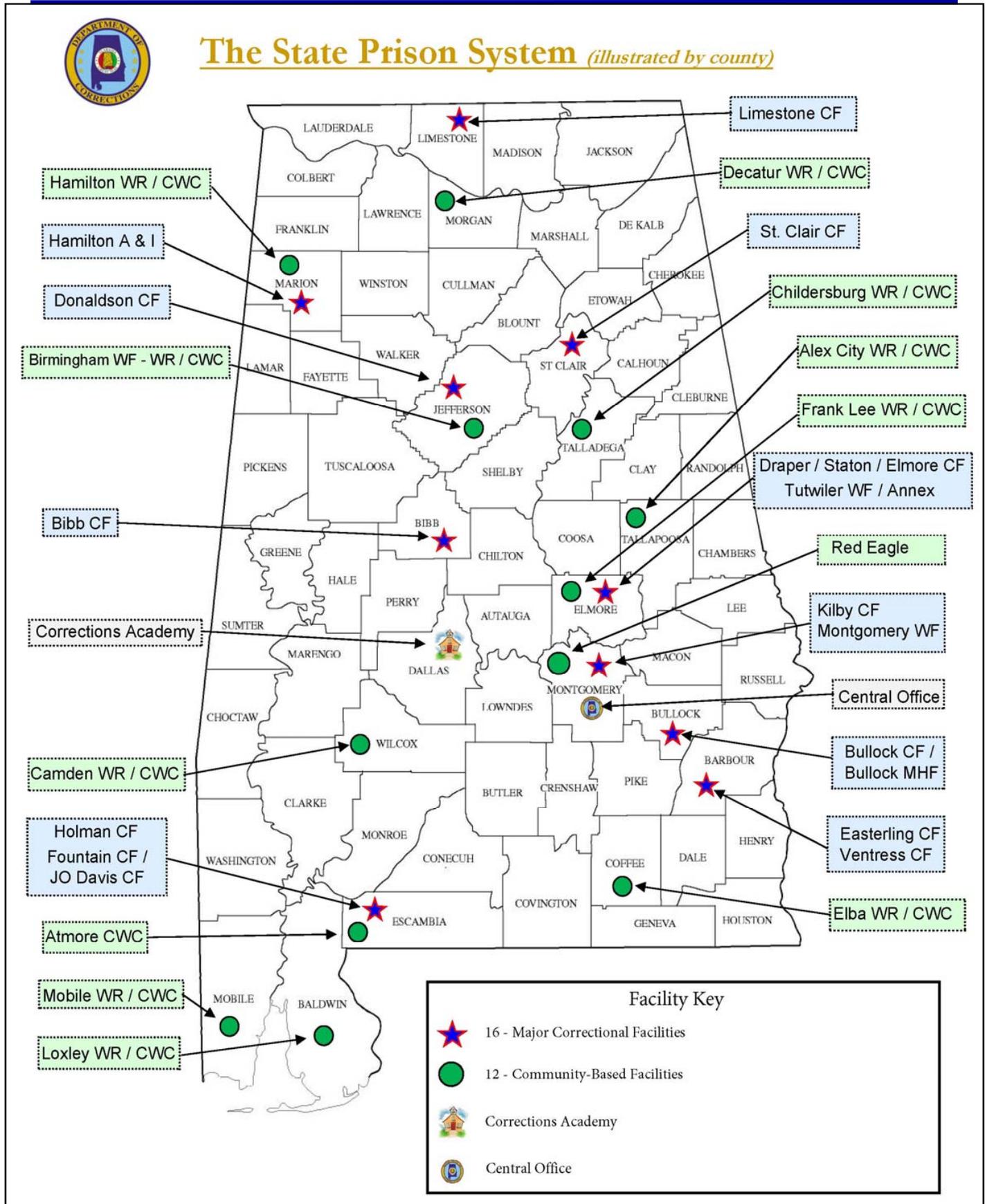
Cycling out

In Alabama about half of the total state prison population is cycling out of correctional facilities each year and that many more new inmates are taking their place. Some 14,200 inmates were released from Alabama prisons in fiscal year 2017, many of them bringing along the emotional baggage of years spent in an underfunded, overcrowded and violent environment.

Some will have supportive family, church and community members to embrace them upon their return. Perhaps they learned a trade in prison that makes them more employable. They have support systems in place that allow them to be hopeful and earn their place in society.

But for many others it's a different story. Some newly released prisoners are just as mentally ill or drug-addicted as they were before entering prison, if not more so. Many will face problems finding jobs or affordable housing, rendering them and their families homeless. Some ex-offenders return to the free world having lost everything, including the love of their families. For about a third of the inmates released from Alabama state prisons, the challenges and temptations prove insurmountable. They will most likely return to old ways and eventually go back to prison, perpetuating the cycle.

EDITOR'S NOTE — This article, written by Martha Simmons, originally appeared in the Dec. 13, 2018, issue of The Alabama Baptist on page 6.



Note — For purposes of this graphic, Tutwiler / Annex, Fountain / JO Davis and Bullock / Bullock MHF are each considered one facility

Historical data

A look at racial makeup of prison populations throughout history

When Alabama's first state prison opened in Wetumpka in 1841, 99% of the inmates were white immigrants. They were forced to build by hand the buggies, wagons, saddles, harnesses, shoes and rope that would be sold to free customers in the outside world. Slaves, not having any legal rights to a trial, were left to their owners to punish, so they were not among those imprisoned by the state.

During the Civil War all but the most hardened convicts were released to serve in the Confederate Army. During Reconstruction and afterwards Alabama laws were changed to allow convicts to be leased outside the prison facilities, a scheme that proved more profitable as inmate labor was put to work rebuilding the railroad system destroyed by war. However, the post-Civil War inmate population was 90% black, and many recently freed slaves once again found themselves in captivity and working without compensation.

Throughout the ensuing decades inmate labor was employed in such private industries as brick-making, cotton mills, coal mines, sawmills and turpentine stills, as well as a sprawling prison farm and cattle ranch. While today's inmate population is more racially balanced, many civil rights organizations still view mass incarceration, inmate leasing and the over-representation of African-Americans in the criminal justice system as another form of slavery. The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) traces that narrative in its recently opened exhibit in Montgomery, "The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration." (For more information, visit <https://eji.org/legacy-museum>.)



Source: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/2018.html>

The EJI was founded by Bryan Stevenson, whose best-selling 2014 book, “Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption,” details the story of Walter McMillian, a Monroeville black man held on death row for six years for a crime he didn’t commit, the murder of a young white woman. With Stevenson’s help in navigating the appeals process, McMillian was released from prison in 1993.

Eerily similar to the fictional classic novel “To Kill a Mockingbird,” also set in Monroeville, Stevenson’s non-fiction account is being made into a movie starring Michael B. Jordan, Jamie Foxx and Brie Larson. Filming on “Just Mercy” began in Montgomery this summer and is set for release in early 2020.

EDITOR’S NOTE — This article, written by TAB, originally appeared in the Dec. 13, 2018, issue of The Alabama Baptist on page 7.

Still an image bearer

It is vital to remember people behind bars also were made in God's image

The Bible is pretty clear when it comes to reminding the faithful to seek justice, love others and minister to prisoners. But for the average churchgoer, mass incarceration might seem a foreign concept, something far removed from everyday life.

However, those who study the human and social consequences of imprisonment and apply biblical perspectives to those issues say mass incarceration reverberates throughout American society with staggering human and social costs. It is, they contend, the key civil rights struggle of our time.

Some stunning statistics — gathered by the Billy Graham Center's Sentencing Project and Institute for Prison Ministries — drive that concept home. Because of American mass incarceration practices, it's becoming more and more common for someone you know — or even yourself — to wind up behind bars. If you were born in 2001, according to their study, the likelihood of being imprisoned at some point in your life breaks out this way:

- ▶ 1 in 9 of all men, but ...
 - 1 in 3 if you're black
 - 1 in 6 if you're Latino
 - 1 in 17 if you're white

- ▶ 1 in 56 of all women, but ...
 - 1 in 18 if you're black
 - 1 in 45 if you're Latina
 - 1 in 111 if you're white

People of color make up 37% of the U.S. population but 67% of the prison population, the Institute for Prison Ministries reports. Studies show that African Americans are much more likely to be arrested and convicted than whites, and face much stiffer sentences for the same crimes. Poverty and lack of education found in non-white communities also contribute to the problem.

Disproportionate burden

Although nonwhites bear a disproportionate burden of incarceration, mass incarceration cuts across all demographics. The United States' overall incarceration rate has increased 500% over the past 40 years, according to the



123rf.com

institute, driven primarily by new “tough on crime” laws and policies. Drug offenses represent the vast majority of prison population increases. “Today there are more people behind bars for a drug offense than the number of people who were in prison or jail for any crime in 1980,” the institute’s researchers report.

That holds true in Alabama as well. The Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) reports that the top two convictions landing inmates in state prisons are for: 1. Possession of a controlled substance, and 2. Drug manufacturing, trafficking and distribution. More than 4,300 new inmates were admitted to state prisons in 2017 on those charges alone. Not surprisingly some 75–80% of Alabama’s 21,000 custodial prisoners also have a documented history of substance abuse. In response ADOC has implemented what it calls “the largest substance abuse program in the State of Alabama,” but the program is able to address only a fraction of addicted inmates with various treatment and aftercare programs.

Also contributing to the ballooning prison population are harsh sentencing laws such as mandatory minimum sentences and “three strikes” laws that mandate a life sentence for anyone convicted of a third felony, even if they were nonviolent property offenses. Judges are meting out longer sentences overall, and there’s been a historic increase in life sentences. Combined with cutbacks to parole, people are staying in prison longer.

Together, these factors form a perfect storm of overcrowded and often violent prisons warehousing people with untreated drug problems and mental illness, while inmates’ families languish at home in poverty and without hope or community support.

It’s these overarching social justice issues that the Institute for Prison Ministries wants people of faith to consider when they think of prison ministries, not just visiting inmates behind bars. The institute is calling on evangelical Christians to lead a human rights movement to end what they term “epidemic” mass incarceration. To that end the institute joined forces with The Gospel Coalition, a network of evangelical churches, to offer a free online course entitled “The Gospel and Mass Incarceration” (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/mass-incarceration/#what-is-mass-incarceration>). In it a prison missions-minded participant can get a crash course on the causes and effects of mass incarceration and how they can serve.

So why should Christians be concerned not only with prisoners, but also the myriad social justice issues caused by mass incarceration? First and foremost is because the Bible says so.

“If Christians want to take the entirety of the Bible seriously, then you can’t avoid matters of justice,” said Vince Bacote, director of the Center for Applied Christian Ethics at Wheaton College, where the Billy Graham Center is based. “It’s easy to think about matters of justice in terms of thinking about law and order, but if you’re really going to be thinking about law and order all the way down, that also needs to include how are we stewarding things like the way that we go about justice, when people are arrested and go all the way through to deciding whether people

are in prison, how long they’re in prison, what the conditions are like for them in prison, the fact that they are human beings, irrespective of whether they’ve committed crimes or not. If we’re really committed to justice all the way down, to me, it seems unavoidable.”

Ultimately one of the biggest challenges is to remember that a person behind bars — whether a hapless addict caught with an illegal substance or a serial murderer — is created in the image of God, Bacote said.

What does the Bible say?

The Bible has plenty to say related to prison ministries. Here’s a sampling of Scripture provided by Prison Fellowship, which trains and inspires churches and communities — inside and outside of prison — to support the restoration of those affected by incarceration. (For a more comprehensive selection, go to <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/training-resources/in-prison/ministry-basics/what-bible-says-about-prison-ministry/>.)

Following in Jesus’ footsteps

- ▶ Matthew 25:34–40
- ▶ Hebrews 13:1–3

Sharing spiritual freedom

- ▶ Isaiah 42:6–7
- ▶ Isaiah 61:1–3
- ▶ Luke 4:17–19

Transformation

- ▶ Psalm 66:10–12
- ▶ Psalm 68:5–7
- ▶ Psalm 69:33

(Source: Martha Simmons)

“If you really believe this Bible, nowhere does it say that people have forfeited their being an image bearer for anything. You know, whether you’re thinking about someone like John Wayne Gacy or whether you’re thinking about a kid who took a piece of candy, there’s not a forfeiture of them being an image bearer and the fundamental dignity that people have,” Bacote said.

He added: “Do you take Matthew 25 seriously? If you take Matthew 25 seriously, you cannot avoid this issue.”

EDITOR’S NOTE — This article, written by Martha Simmons, originally appeared in the Dec. 20, 2018, issue of The Alabama Baptist on page 7.

'Soul fight'

Youth in the correctional system are sign of family, community problems

Still wearing his black robe, weary Circuit Court Judge Edmond Naman sits at a massive desk piled high with files and paperwork associated with the largest and busiest juvenile court district in Alabama. It's early but Naman's already been on the bench for several hours, and a long day of hearings and meetings and phone calls stretches before him.

While the uninitiated might think of a juvenile detention facility as something of a kiddie jail, the James T. Strickland Youth Center — known simply as "Strickland" to Mobile residents — is much more than that. It is the place where splintered families, society's neglect and institutional failures intersect on the daily docket.

In many ways Strickland represents ground zero of the life-and-death struggle for the soul of the community, Naman said. "It's a soul fight, is what it is." Strickland has three facilities located on a 15-acre campus: the juvenile court; a juvenile detention center equipped to house 71 boys and 24 girls ages 12 through 17; and a 12-bed crisis center for children in need of supervision (known as CHINS).

Juveniles are defined as children up to age 17 and are generally covered under laws that take their ages and stages of development under consideration. Under Alabama law children age 16 and above who are charged with a violent crime are automatically transferred to the adult jail and tried as adults.

Variety of complaints

As the juvenile court's presiding judge, Naman is assisted by two court referees and a district judge. Together they handle more than 8,900 complaints each year relating to juvenile delinquency, truancy, children in need of supervision, child custody, child support, involuntary commitments and contributing to the delinquency of minors.

A somber parade passes through Strickland's metal detectors each day. Panicked or drug-addicted parents, violent or neglected children, uniformed law enforcement and detention officers, sparring prosecutors and attorneys and harried social workers fill the waiting area and courtrooms. Counselors and other social service providers meet with families in an effort to address the circumstances contributing to children's involvement with the justice system. Juvenile probation officers in the circuit's jurisdiction monitor the progress of an average 1,700 youth.



Photo by Martha Simmons

Juvenile Court Judge Edmond Naman daily sees the impact of splintered families, substance abuse, physical abuse and neglect, educational failure, abject poverty and hopelessness on children and youth in Alabama's penal system.

For all the government resources that are thrown at the issue of juvenile delinquency through Strickland's \$6.5 million per year operation and all its partner agencies, it simply isn't enough. The problem is too systemic, rooted deeply in splintered families, substance abuse, physical abuse and neglect, educational failure, abject poverty and, above all, hopelessness. "I see the bravery of these children," he said. "I would wilt after one day of living the way that they do, day in and day out."

A look at the numbers

The judge sifts through the stacks of paper and rifles through file drawers until he comes up with two sets of statistics. They are the numbers behind the faces he sees coming through his court each day. One set of stapled charts outlines the juvenile crimes that have churned through the Mobile County court system for the past decade — felonies such as burglary and murder, weapons charges and drug dealing as well as status offenses such as truancy and under-age drinking.

Such crime statistics are the predictable outcome of the data reflected in the second set of charts, the annual Kids Count report on the well-being of the nation's children, Naman indicated. That report traces the markers for children's health, safety, economic security and educational attainment. The numbers are discouraging. In 2017, Alabama ranked 44th among 50 states in overall child well-being. And in Naman's jurisdiction Mobile County ranked 39th of the state's 60 counties.

Being on the bottom rung of such statistics plays out every day in the court, Naman said, noting the overwhelming majority of the children he deals with live in poverty and are being raised by a single parent or grandparent. There's also significant homelessness.



Photo by Martha Simmons

A Strickland Youth Center inmate reads a Bible in his cell. The facility can house up to 119 juveniles who are detained for court proceedings, evaluation or awaiting placement in a treatment facility.

"These families are living in crisis," he said. "There's so much brokenness in these families — hopelessness, violence, drugs, abuse, neglect. There's so much we're battling. DHR is doing a good job but they're overwhelmed. The Mobile County Public School System's failing schools correspond exactly to where these kids are living. We're just not set up to deal with the social issues we're dealing with," Naman said. "We can only do so much and then at some point we can't do anymore. We're failing these kids. We're failing them because we don't have the resources. And when we fail you see it in the headlines."

The help must come from outside the taxpayer-funded agencies groaning under an ever-increasing caseload, many experienced in the work contend. And the faith community is a critical component in addressing unmet needs for children and families at the bottom of the social food chain.

Important interventions

For instance, Naman said, faith-based efforts like the Alabama Baptist Children's Homes & Family Ministries (ABCH), with locations throughout the state, provide important interventions for broken families. In Mobile the ABCH Family Care ministry provides struggling mothers and their children with transitional housing while the mothers gain employment, save money, receive counseling and learn life skills such as budgeting and parenting. The need for such resources far outpaces their availability. People of faith can make the difference, Naman said. "We can't fight this war alone."

“The statistics are horrible,” he noted as he sets the charts and graphs down on his cluttered desk. “But they don’t show the eyes behind the numbers, do they? They don’t show the hopelessness and fear and poverty. We need to look into the eyes of these children and see their souls. “We’ve got to take care of the least among us in this community,” said the judge. “If not for God, then for our own self-preservation.”

EDITOR’S NOTE — This article, written by Martha Simmons, originally appeared in the Jan. 3, 2019, issue of The Alabama Baptist on pages 6–7.

'That one important person'

NEST of Mobile partners with court to mentor families

One caring adult can change the whole trajectory of a child's life, asserts Edmond Naman, Mobile County's juvenile court judge.

"In a lot of cases there's not one real responsible person in these kids' lives," Naman said of the children he sees each day at James T. Strickland Youth Center. "There's nobody who's inspiring them or fighting for them. They need that one important person who says, 'I'm not going to let you fail.' A kid can walk around trouble if he has someplace to walk to and someone to walk with."

To connect these kids with adults who can be that "one important person," Naman joined forces with other faith and community leaders in the summer of 2012 to co-found the NEST of Mobile mentoring program. NEST takes its name from their effort to "nurture children, equip parents, strengthen families and transform communities."

NEST matches teams of two or more court-approved volunteers with at-risk youth and families, working with the Mobile County Juvenile Court, the Department of Human Resources and other partnering agencies to match teams with youth referrals. NEST volunteers help kids and families address basic needs ranging from employment to school supplies. The volunteers also mentor them on life skills such as budgeting and meal planning. While each team signs up to work with the family during the court probationary period of up to six months, the overarching goal is for the team and family to develop a lifetime relationship.

Although a relatively young organization NEST is delivering some good statistics of its own. A University of South Alabama study found that only 26% of probationary youth served by the NEST program re-offended. That's a significant accomplishment when compared with the statewide juvenile recidivism rate of 66%, and the national rate of 50–68%.

Ambitious goal

Currently NEST is fielding about 27 teams who are serving more than 30 youth and family members, but Naman hopes that number reaches at least 100. It's an ambitious goal but one that Naman insists must be achieved if Mobile County is ever going to rise above its poor ranking in child well-being and crime statistics.

And even more important, the judge said, is each individual reflected in those numbers.



Photo by Martha Simmons

NEST volunteer Mike O'Neill (left) and Thomas Haney credit God's wisdom for getting Haney out of harm's way and on track through NEST intervention. The program helps at-risk kids address basic needs and life skills.

Thomas Haney is one of those individuals. The 18-year-old Haney showed up at Strickland Youth Center last spring, hoping to help his mother maintain custody of his siblings. Haney, whose biological father was in prison, lived in a bus with his drug-addicted mother, her boyfriend and one of his siblings. At age 18, Haney had aged out of the services that could be provided through the juvenile court or social services, and Naman, who still had a couple dozen cases to hear that day, almost sent him away.

“I just didn’t know what to do. He was 18,” Naman said. “I felt I had failed God in letting him leave. There was nothing I could do ... except call him back.” After talking more with Haney and learning of his dire home situation, Naman connected the young man with Mike O’Neill, a NEST of Mobile contributor who owns an industrial supply business in Pensacola. O’Neill looked past Haney’s dire family situation and into the young man’s eyes. He offered Haney a full-time job at the warehouse and a studio apartment at the work site to live in.

“Not a week later,” Naman recalled, “Thomas’s mother and her boyfriend were arrested for drugs.” Had the young man still lived there, Naman said, he probably would have been swept up in the arrest too, “but God in His wisdom had already set things in motion.” As a result of the NEST intervention Haney was already out of harm’s way and looking toward a future that seemed unattainable only a few weeks earlier.

Giving God credit

He’s back on track to obtain his high school diploma in May, after which he hopes to join the U.S. Marine Corps and become a registered nurse. As for his family situation, Haney said he does not maintain any contact with his father but that his mother is “clean and working full time with benefits.” His 15-year-old sibling is now in foster care and the youngest, a five-year-old, is being cared for by his grandmother.

Like Naman, Haney gives God the credit for his life’s dramatic turnaround. “God has given me the ability to put down any outside influences, to think like an adult and to look to the future,” Haney said. As for Naman, O’Neill and the other NEST of Mobile volunteers, Haney said, “From the time I met them, all they’ve ever done is care. They are truly angels sent from God.”

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A day in the life of a prison chaplain

ADOC chaplains coordinate ‘reasonable opportunities’ for inmates to practice faith

Ever wondered what a typical day in the life of an Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) prison chaplain might look like? It’s certainly more extensive than merely organizing Bible studies and leading prayer times. Most often it looks like this:

- ▶ Tactfully arbitrate scheduling conflicts among 15 different religious groups ranging from Protestants to Pagans
- ▶ Fairly distribute limited supplies of donated items like shampoo and books
- ▶ Schedule ceremonial time for an inmate observing Native American Spirituality
- ▶ Vet, train and oversee dozens of faith-based and community volunteers working in the facility
- ▶ Search a worship site for contraband without violating religious principles or constitutional rights
- ▶ Provide a chapel service for death-row inmates
- ▶ Arrange for an inmate to go to a funeral home to privately view the body of a deceased family member

They don’t teach this stuff in seminary.

Tom Woodfin, pastoral programs supervisor for the ADOC, served as a state prison chaplain at the Elmore County Correctional Facility for 18 years prior to assuming responsibility for the state chaplain program. Now he travels from one end of the state to the other to supervise the work of 14 state-employed chaplains with the daunting task of meeting the spiritual and human needs of some 22,000 inmates and about 4,000 correctional officers and support staff.

Large workload

A typical ADOC chaplain must service an inmate population of 1,650 inmates, Woodfin said, more than 2.5 times the caseload recommended by the American Correctional Association (ACA). One Alabama chaplain handles 2,100 inmates, more than triple the ACA standard. Written into the law books shortly after the Civil War the state prisons’ Chaplain Services Corps has been working ever since to navigate the complicated landscape of constitutional rights, spiritual needs and prison regulations. To qualify as a state prison chaplain one must hold at least a four-year bachelor’s degree and be ordained or have an equivalent letter of endorsement from a religion.

ADOC chaplains plan, direct and coordinate all aspects of religious and faith- or character-based programs in the prisons. They approve and train all lay, community and cleric volunteers and, according to Alabama Administrative Regulation 462, “provide inmates of all ADOC recognized faith groups with reasonable opportunities to pursue their religious beliefs and practices consistent with institutional security, safety, health and orderliness.” To accomplish that chaplains must have a thorough understanding of the following state-recognized religions and reconcile their practices and prohibitions with prison rules:

- ▶ Catholicism
- ▶ Orthodox Islam
- ▶ Protestantism

- ▶ Hinduism
- ▶ Jehovah’s Witness
- ▶ Judaism
- ▶ Buddhism
- ▶ Kemeticism
- ▶ Nation of Islam
- ▶ Odinism/Asatru
- ▶ Nation of Gods and Earths
- ▶ Native American Spirituality
- ▶ Moorish Science Temple of America
- ▶ Rastafarianism
- ▶ Wiccan

That means approving activities on sacred days, special foods, creating and maintaining outdoor worship sites for “earth-based” (pagan) services and providing sweat lodges for Native American rituals. It also means determining religion-based exceptions for inmate facial hair rules and monitoring the possession or storage of approved religious items ranging from St. Christopher medals and crosses to gongs, incense and feathers. That’s just to name a few.

Chaplains schedule 150–200 religious services per month in each institution — with some groups meeting daily — and mediate conflicts among different religions competing for the same space. They are also in charge of the “Faith Dorms,” or as they are officially named the “Faith/Character-Based Residential Housing Unit.” In those quarters chaplains oversee interpersonal relationships and ensure inmates living in them are progressing in their spiritual and/or personal goals.

Variety of duties

Regardless of an inmate’s religious belief system, or lack thereof, he is likely to come into contact with the prison chaplain in a number of different ways on any given day. Chaplains are the ones tasked with notifying inmates if a family member dies, providing grief counseling and, if the inmate is willing to pay the cost of transportation, arranging the trip to and from the funeral home so the inmate can have a one-hour private visit with a deceased loved one. Likewise the chaplain notifies next-of-kin when an inmate dies. Woodfin said he averaged 10 notifications every month when he served at Elmore County Correctional Facility.



Photo by Martha Simmons
Eddie Miller Jr. (right), part-time assistant chaplain and former inmate, prays during We Care staff devotional at Fountain Correction Facility in Atmore.

They visit inmates in the prison infirmary and if needed assist with funeral arrangements.

A chaplain is one of the last people to visit an inmate scheduled for execution and also provides chapel services for inmates living on death row. “I didn’t know how to minister on death row,” recalled Woodfin. “But I did know how to disciple for Christ.”

Chaplains provide inmates with family counseling, spiritual counseling and even pre-marital counseling, as well as classes in biblical instruction. And since 93% of inmates are male and about that same percentage of inmates will eventually be released from prison, chaplains also offer re-entry counseling and classes on topics such as fatherhood and biblical manhood, Woodfin said.

Then there's attending to spiritual needs of staff: performing a wedding ceremony or a funeral, visiting them in the hospital, fielding their scriptural questions, providing one-on-one counseling and offering prayers before staff meetings and events. "We practice the ministry of presence by just being there," Woodfin said. "People come in and blow off steam because it's a safe place."

Each prison is different, and chaplains adapt to the circumstances. Some give lonely inmates cards for birthdays, Christmas and holidays. Others distribute books and toiletries donated by local faith-based and charitable organizations. With all the different administrative hats that a state prison chaplain wears every day, it's not possible for him or her to also provide all the worship services, counseling and instruction needed at each prison.

That's where volunteers come in, Woodfin noted, citing a Buddhist volunteer who drives from Atlanta to serve one Alabama prison. The faith-based We Care Program is especially "invaluable," he said, providing dozens of full-time and part-time chaplains to the prisons all over the state at no cost to taxpayers.

Woodfin said most prisons maintain a full schedule of worship services — especially in the mainstream religions — but there are still plenty of opportunities for people of faith to become involved in helping the incarcerated. There's a need for mentors, discipleship studies, small group studies and Sunday School classes, for instance.

Local prison needs

To find out what your local prison needs, Woodfin said, call the switchboard and ask to speak to the chaplain. In all likelihood the chaplain can guide volunteers to just the right place to offer their services.

"There's a place for everybody in the faith community to contribute in this process," he said. Helping prisoners doesn't mean you have to do so behind clanging steel doors and razor wire. "Behind-the-fence ministry isn't for everybody," Woodfin said. "The first and most obvious place is through prayer support. There's always a need for monetary or other donations. And you can provide logistical support for existing prison ministries like grading papers or providing financial or other support. You can just dovetail with someone already doing prison ministry to improve what they're doing, rather than reinventing the wheel."

EDITOR'S NOTE — This article, written by Martha Simmons, originally appeared in the Jan. 10, 2019, issue of The Alabama Baptist on page 6.

Planting hope

‘Nothing more powerful’ than the gospel to stop the revolving door of recidivism

He prayed with every step as he approached the prison, much as he had the first time he saw it many years before. But this time, Eddie Miller Jr. was a free man. Miller, now a part-time chaplain for the We Care Program of prison ministries, arrived at Fountain Correctional Facility to deliver on his earlier promise to return and share the word of God that had unchained him spiritually long before his release.

“You didn’t forget us!” said an inmate with whom Miller had served time, wrapping him in a bear hug.

“How could I forget you?” Miller responded. “God hasn’t forgotten you.” Miller described a triumphant air to his return visit to Fountain. “They saw the walk I had been on.”



MILLER

Miller was raised in a good neighborhood in Mobile with loving, hardworking parents who served as his role models. “I was raised up according to the Bible, to be respectful, to say, ‘Yes, ma’am’ and ‘No, sir.’” He was an altar boy in the Lutheran church and attended a Lutheran school through the 5th grade. He lived a sheltered life.

Exposed to drugs

He entered public school in the sixth grade and took up sports. When he was 14 he found other kids in his neighborhood who had been exposed to things he hadn’t encountered before — like marijuana. The neighborhood kids convinced the boy that he should try it, and he stole \$5 from his mother’s purse — “something I’d never done before in my life” — to purchase some. Long story short: He came home high and his mother figured it out and called his daddy home from work. “We got down on our knees and prayed,” Miller said. “I was sort of scared straight for a while.”

A way to take action

Ministries such as Eddie Miller’s rely on donated financial support. Miller’s own church, for instance, helps out with his gas money.

We Care President Don Metzler said correspondence for the program or chaplains may be sent to: We Care Program, 3493 Hwy. 21, Atmore, AL 36502.

The faith-based, nonprofit We Care Program relies on gifts from interested individuals, churches and businesses for a majority of its income.

Additional resources are generated through three thrift stores. We Care Program accepts no local, state or federal funds.

For more information on We Care Program, visit www.wecareprogram.org. (Martha Simmons)

Miller walked the straight and narrow until he was a senior in high school, when he resumed smoking pot and started drinking. He continued for years but was always a good worker, ambitious and self-reliant. He got a truck-driving job, married and had children.

In 1985, Miller landed the coveted job of driving a truck hauling chemicals. This position, however, required passing drug tests. Miller quit smoking pot, and on one long trip in 1987 he listened to a spiritual tape that his grandmother had given him. It launched him on an even longer journey to redemption. “I repented and turned myself over to God,” he said of that moment. “I had a vision of me preaching one day. I had a black Bible.”

Eventually though his resolve dissolved. He tried cocaine and then crack cocaine. By around 1990, Miller said, “I started going down. Eventually I hit rock bottom.” Miller got arrested for theft of property. Because he had no prior record he was allowed to go through drug court, which defers court action while a defendant complies with various probationary and drug-testing requirements.

He didn't finish the program, so he was re-arrested on the theft charge, convicted and sentenced to five years behind bars. "I got out and did good for a while. Then I got arrested again."

This time, the charge was manslaughter. There had been an argument. Miller had been angry. Miller finally awakened to the consequences of his behavior.

Convicted

"I got arrested in my mother's home," Miller said. "I looked into my mother's eyes. She was crying. This was not the child my mother and father had raised," Miller said. "I began to pray."

While in Mobile Metro Jail awaiting his trial Miller experienced a conviction of another kind: spiritual. He prayed every day — and soon his prayers were answered. "I heard God say one day, 'Son, I'm here.'"

He began to share God's word and pray with others at the jail. Sentenced to 20 years, Miller packed up his faith and brought it with him to Fountain, a sprawling medium security prison facility situated on 8,200 acres in Atmore. "When I got to prison the We Care prison ministry was there," he said. Miller was assigned to Fountain's Faith Dorm. "The Faith Dorm is for men who want to better themselves," Miller said. "They have spiritual programs to help you re-enter productive society." Miller became a dorm leader and a spiritual leader for fellow inmates and would often open services for the We Care chaplains. "God was preparing me," he said. One Sunday, Miller preached a service conducted by In and Out Ministry. Afterward Miller heard God again.

"God said, 'You remember that vision I sent you? That vision came to pass.' That blew me away," Miller said. "When I had seen that vision of me preaching, I had no idea that it would be in prison," he said. "But God did." The years rolled on. Miller's faith and spiritual leadership grew behind bars. "One day I was in the North Yard at Fountain. I saw another vision. This time I was coming back to prison preaching the word of God."

Throughout the years Miller took Bible courses and other faith-based classes, teaching some of them himself, and worked for a prison chaplain. He also took workforce training classes and underwent an intensive six-month drug rehabilitation program.

Miller learned patience in prison. "I prayed, 'Lord, I don't want to come back to prison to do time. Until You know I'm ready, don't open those doors and let me come out. God, I'm not serving You just to get out of prison. I'm serving You because You're worthy of serving. Lord, cause Your word to take root in my heart.'" By Miller's third parole hearing he said, "I felt that this was my time. One day I came back from work, threw down my jacket and felt the spirit of the Lord strong on me. I heard God's audible voice say, 'You're ready.'" After 15 years in prison, Miller said, "God brought me out."

Chaplains and other kind souls helped him get his feet back on the ground. He and his wife began a small residential property rental business.



Photo by Martha Simmons

Eddie Miller Jr. (fourth from left) is now a part-time assistant chaplain and participates in weekly We Care devotionals with inmates at Fountain Correctional Facility in Atmore, where he served 15 years on a manslaughter charge.

A changed man

By 2017, Miller was sharing his testimony at the prison. In January of this year he became a part-time assistant chaplain for the We Care Program. He spends one-on-one time with Fountain inmates — praying, sharing Scriptures and giving his testimony. He also was recently approved to serve as a chaplain at Mobile Metro Jail, another familiar place. Miller's wife, Velesia, also is involved in ministries, visiting female inmates at Mobile Metro Jail and working with recovering addicts in a local drug rehab program. With both partners involved in similar ministries, they are more effective, Miller said. "We are one."

Prison ministries, Miller suggested, are an effective remedy to the revolving door of recidivism. "There are a lot of programs in prison that are a blessing," Miller said. "But the greatest need is the gospel. There's nothing more powerful. I tell people that you cannot get out of prison with the same mind you went into prison with. You have to have a renewed mind." Miller knows — he's been there.

"I use my testimony to plant hope in people's lives through Jesus Christ," Miller said. "I tell them, the same thing He did for me, He will do for you."

EDITOR'S NOTE — This article, written by Martha Simmons, originally appeared in the Jan. 10, 2019, issue of The Alabama Baptist on page 7.

‘Fundamental to justice’

‘First step’ federal criminal justice reform a move for society’s common good

Criminal justice reform backed by both conservatives and liberals in the U.S. Congress has become a reality in federal law. The First Step Act to promote the rehabilitation and societal re-entry of prisoners while maintaining public safety was signed by President Donald Trump on Dec. 21. The measure provides training for inmates and reforms some sentencing requirements, including certain drug offenses.

Trump’s action followed the House of Representatives’ passage of the bill Dec. 20 in a 358–36 roll call. The Senate approved the legislation Dec. 18 with an 87–12 vote. The new law, which applies only to federal prisons, is an initial effort in what reform advocates hope will be an overhaul of the justice system in what has been described as the world’s most incarcerated country.

Faith community support

The bill — which models state reforms — seeks to correct disproportionate sentencing while establishing risk-assessment programs for prisoners and enabling low- and minimum-risk inmates to earn time credits so they can potentially serve 12 months or less of their sentences in pre-release custody. Prison Fellowship — the ministry started by the late Charles Colson — helped lead the effort to enact the First Step Act, which clarifies that faith-based organizations may provide training in prison. “This legislation will increase the access of faith-based and nonprofit organizations, like Prison Fellowship, to provide desperately needed programming in the federal prison system and help reduce recidivism,” Prison Fellowship President James Ackerman said in a written statement. “From our work in many states across the country, we can say without hesitation that these programs restore lives ... and eventually reduce crime.”

The Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) — which made criminal justice reform one of its legislative priorities in 2018 — also was part of the diverse body of First Step Act supporters that included liberals and conservatives both inside and outside Congress. The endorsing organizations extended from the American Civil Liberties Union and Center for American Progress on the left to a host of conservative groups, including the ERLC, Prison Fellowship and other evangelical entities, as well as Koch Industries, Heritage Action, The American Conservative Union and FreedomWorks.

ERLC President Russell Moore described the success of the First Step Act as a “tremendous victory” for criminal justice reform and cooperation across dividing lines for the common good. “I can’t find very many people who would argue that our criminal justice system is working fine as it is,” Moore said in written comments. “Over the past several years many of us, across the ideological spectrum, have realized that we share, on this, some common concerns.

“Monumental challenges remain on seeing to it that our country deals with ensuring justice for victims while at the same time giving offenders, where possible, the opportunity for a second chance to reform and to contribute to society,” Moore said. “May we see forward momentum toward a justice system that is truer to its name.”

Rep. Doug Collins (R-Georgia) — a Southern Baptist who introduced the justice reform bill in the House with Rep. Hakeem Jeffries (D-New York) — said the First Step Act “shows us that reverence for human life is fundamental to justice.”

“The First Step Act invests in what Americans value most fiercely — people,” Collins said in a written statement. “We know that lives can be redirected and redeemed, and we’re committing to doing that with tools that

are proven to work.” Collins, who holds a master’s degree from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, served as a pastor for 11 years in Gainesville, Georgia, before his election to Congress. He is a member of Lakewood Baptist Church, Gainesville.

Dangerous offenders exempt

Some Republican senators and outside organizations expressed concerns the First Step Act would threaten public safety by weakening mandatory minimum sentencing and not preventing some dangerous inmates from release back into society. The final Senate version sought to address at least some concerns by, among other provisions, barring firearm offenders and fentanyl traffickers from earning time credits. The bill also disqualifies from earned time credits offenses such as smuggling foreigners into the country for prostitution, assaulting a law enforcement officer with a deadly weapon, failure to register as a sex offender and trafficking in heroin or methamphetamine.

Statistics demonstrate the need for change in the justice system, reform advocates contend. According to Prison Fellowship:

- ▶ About 65 million Americans, or one-fourth of the adult population, have a criminal record.
- ▶ 2.2 million men and women are incarcerated in the United States.
- ▶ Nearly 700,000 prisoners return to their communities each year.
- ▶ Two-thirds of prisoners who are released are arrested again.
- ▶ 2.7 million children have a parent in prison.

EDITOR’S NOTE — This article, from Baptist Press, originally appeared in the Jan. 17, 2019, issue of The Alabama Baptist on page 6.



More opportunities

Expanded employment options part of latest state reform efforts

Alabama's state prison system has for decades needed fixing. Recent reform efforts are gaining traction and making headway, said Alabama Sen. Cam Ward (R-District 14). State prisons have substantially reduced their populations in the past five years. "At the same time there has not been an increase in the overall crime rate," Ward noted.

As chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee and the state Prison Reform Task Force, Ward is at the forefront of prison reform efforts in Alabama. In 2014 he testified about the challenges faced by Alabama's "failed corrections system" at a congressional prison reform meeting of the House Judiciary Committee.

Breaking the cycle

Criminal justice reforms enacted in Alabama in 2013 and 2015 reduced sentences for many nonviolent offenders, Ward said. "There are certain violent offenders you want to keep locked away and keep society safe from," he said. "But for those nonviolent offenders we've got programs to help them get out of the cycle they're in."

Propelled by court orders and lawsuits, Alabama prisons struggle to provide the training and services needed to improve inmates' ability to become productive citizens once they re-enter society. Some 14,200 inmates were released from Alabama prisons in the 2017 fiscal year. Often they leave life behind bars only to find themselves shackled by unemployment. It's not unusual for ex-offenders — and their families — to wind up homeless. It's a recipe for recidivism, with about 31% of inmates eventually reoffending and returning to prison.

Ward's latest reform effort is aimed at giving former inmates more opportunities to get a job once they leave prison. He is sponsoring a bill that would allow inmates to apply for hundreds of jobs, licenses and certifications currently prohibited under Alabama law. Currently, there are 783 sections of the Code of Alabama barring formerly incarcerated people from all manner of professions and jobs, including some that inmates trained for while they were in prison.

"Here's a typical, ridiculous example," Ward said. "Someone who served their time for a simple drug possession and did everything they were supposed to do can't get a license to be an interior designer or a cosmetologist. We're telling people we expect them to do right, yet we put all those barriers in place. What we're really doing is setting them up to fail." If the bill is passed a former state inmate would be able to submit an application to a judge who would decide whether the individual should be granted a waiver and allowed to apply for certain jobs, licenses or certifications currently prohibited to ex-offenders.

Ward said this proposed legislation is the result of many meetings with judges, prosecutors and other criminal justice and community leaders. Faith leaders have been particularly receptive to the plan, said Ward, who spoke to a group of Baptist pastors last summer and found them to be supportive of such reforms.

"We should care about our fellow man," Ward said. "The Bible doesn't teach us to love just those who have done good. We should want people to be successful and lead a good, happy life. It's about the power of forgiveness and what we're going to do to help them."

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Going forward

Donations, time help inmates see a future after prison

Tuscaloosa resident Eddie Smith, now retired, remembers with gratitude his 10 years as chaplain at the Bibb County Correctional Facility (BCCF) in Brent. “I had been in corrections for a number of years when I became the first chaplain in the new prison,” he said. “The facility opened in 1997 and I began working there in 1998. We built the whole ministry program from the ground up.” Smith said the original chapel facility was small and he began raising money for a new worship center. The current facility was dedicated after his retirement.

Smith said a unique program he began was the hygiene ministry. “We had inmates with no income from outside sources, so we began to stock basic personal care items like bar soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes and stick deodorant,” he said. “We’d do a financial check to be sure there was a need, of course, and we solicited donations from interested people to help us get these items.”

Chapel library

Smith said he also had the idea for the chapel library. “Inmates have a lot of time so I began to think about a ministry of Christian books and reference materials for them,” he said. “One day a businessman came with his church to volunteer, and he got interested in my idea. He built shelves for us to get started. Another man, a retired Methodist pastor, asked me to come and take his entire library, so this helped us get started in a major way. When I left, we had about 9,000 volumes.”

Current Bibb assistant chaplain Kervin Jones of Greensboro said the prison has continued both ministries. “One large church brought hygiene packages for all our inmates, and this was great,” Jones said. “But most of the time we never have enough items for the needy. When the shelves go empty we begin to publicize the need.”

BCCF was built for 900 inmates and now houses about 1,800.

Siluria Baptist Church, Alabaster, donated its church library to the prison about three years ago. The church also collects hygiene items each February. When employees of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions moved from downtown Montgomery to Prattville in 2018 many had extra books to store or give away. State missionary Keith Hinson learned of the need at Bibb and drove a van filled with books to Brent.



Photo by Michael J. Brooks

Clark Boyd (left) and Tim Storey (right) of Siluria Baptist Church, Alabaster, deliver boxes of books to assistant chaplain Kervin Jones at the Bibb County Correctional Facility.



Photo by Michael J. Brooks

Jim Lee (left) of Siluria Baptist Church, Alabaster, delivers hygiene items to Chaplain Bysheen Tomlin at the Bibb prison.

Chaplain Bysheen Tomlin has been at BCCF for two years. He said the prison is always looking for ministry volunteers. “The Birmingham Theological Seminary has been with us for some time, and we have men enrolled in this program earning seminary degrees,” Tomlin said. “They’ll become ministers here at Bibb or in other state prisons.”

Tomlin said when volunteers invest their time, it reduces crime and violence. “This investment also empowers our men to go forward with new skills and new encouragement,” he said. The holidays are especially hard at the prison, Tomlin said, and the institution was on suicide watch during Christmas. “Many inmates have no family or friends who care about them, and they struggle with depression,” he said. “Knowing someone cares is important.”

Tomlin said volunteers can help in numerous ways other than collecting hygiene items and books. “Whatever life skills a volunteer has can be helpful,” he said. “It might be resumé-writing, financial planning, help for parenting or blended families or music and arts. Our men are eager to learn.” Tomlin said he dreams of having congregations sponsor each of the 18 living areas at the prison.

“This means they’d have a relationship with 100 men,” he said. “This ministry would be reclaiming and redirecting men who’ve stumbled along the way.”

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Criminalizing mental illness

Jails are now default mental health system because of lack of treatment programs

Think everyone behind bars deserves to be there? Let this statistic sink in: Now three times more mentally ill people are in jails and prisons than in hospitals.

“America’s jails and prisons have become our new mental hospitals,” researchers asserted in a 2010 report issued by the National Sheriffs’ Association and the Treatment Advocacy Center, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to eliminating barriers to the timely and effective treatment of severe mental illness.

Mentally ill prisoners are, according to the report, more likely to:

- ▶ Reoffend and recidivate
- ▶ Cost more to incarcerate
- ▶ Have longer sentences
- ▶ Be more difficult for correctional staff to manage
- ▶ Commit suicide
- ▶ Suffer abuse.

More than half of all prison and jail inmates are mentally ill, with local jails bearing the brunt of the problem.

The U.S. Department of Justice reported in 2006 that 45% of federal prisoners, 56% of state prisoners and 64% of local jail inmates were found to have a mental health problem. Female inmates are more likely to be mentally ill than the general population: 61% in federal prisons, 73% in state prisons and 75% in local jails.

The problem is arguably worse in Alabama, whose state prison system is mired in federal lawsuits and operating under a federal court order to fix “horrendously inadequate” prison psychiatric care in state institutions. In a 302-page opinion issued in 2017, U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson ruled that conditions for mentally ill state prisoners in Alabama were unconstitutional. In his ruling, Thompson referred to a mentally ill inmate who hanged himself just weeks after providing testimony in the case. “The case of Jamie Wallace is powerful



U.S. Air Force photo illustration/Steven White

evidence of the real, concrete and terribly permanent harms that woefully inadequate mental-health care inflicts on mentally ill prisoners in Alabama,” Thompson wrote.

The Treatment Advocacy Center gave Alabama a grade of D (no state received an A) for its treatment of mentally ill state prisoners, noting that the prison system had only 115 designated forensic (court-ordered) beds, and conducted mental health treatment at only one site in the entire state, the 144-bed Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility in Tuscaloosa. That same year the annual report of the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) reported that 75–80% of its more than 21,000 inmates in custody had a substance abuse problem.

While ADOC didn't specify how many mentally ill inmates it incarcerated, statistics show that substance abuse and mental illness are often co-occurring conditions. ADOC boasted in 2017 that it had implemented "the largest substance abuse program within the State of Alabama," citing 5,183 participants. That's still less than a third of the total number of inmates the system says are substance abusers.

While the Alabama Department of Corrections garners most of the headlines, it's important to remember that state prisons are just one slice of the correctional pie. The U.S. Department of Justice reports a total 40,900 behind bars in Alabama state and federal prisons or local jails and another 60,700 on probation or parole. That means that of the nearly 100,000 people under some form of correctional control in Alabama, more than half are mentally ill, and more than three-quarters are substance abusers.

Lack of programs

When they complete their sentences and are released, typically within one to five years, they are likely to find even fewer treatment resources available to them in the free world. The dearth of community-based mental health services has been decades in the making. In the early 1900s, social reformers were shocked at the treatment of the mentally ill who were warehoused in jails and prisons.

A movement launched by famous psychiatric reformer Dorothea Dix led to a generally accepted understanding that the mentally ill should be treated not punished and many new state mental hospitals subsequently were built. A move to deinstitutionalize mental patients in the 1960s and 1970s, however, resulted in the closing of many mental hospitals. The community-based services that were supposed to take the place of those institutions never really materialized, and mental health funding has continued to contract.

No place else to go

As a result prisons and jails became de facto mental institutions as there is often no place else to hold people who are a danger to the community or themselves. "In historical terms, we have returned to the early 19th century, when mentally ill persons filled our jails and prisons," Treatment Advocacy Center researchers reported. "In 1955 there was one psychiatric bed for every 300 Americans. In 2005 there was one psychiatric bed for every 3,000 Americans," researchers said. They also noted that most of the modern-day psychiatric beds are designated only for court-ordered patients.

In its 2016 book "People with Mental Illness in the Criminal Justice System: Answering a Cry for Help," the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry called for compassionate change and advocacy for the mentally ill. "There is something terribly wrong with a society," the book's authors wrote, "that is willing to spend more money to incarcerate people with mental illnesses than to treat them."

EDITOR'S NOTE — This article, written by Martha Simmons, originally appeared in the Jan. 24, 2019, issue of The Alabama Baptist on page 6.

Last resort

Local jails have few resources to help inmates who are mentally ill or addicted

If the Mayberry jail were a modern-day reality Otis would probably be bipolar and drug-addicted, sharing a cell with three other mentally ill substance abusers, and Sheriff Andy would be asking the town council for money for more personnel and jail cells.

In real life, local jails largely serve as warehouses for the mentally ill and addicted, the last resort for communities that have no place else for them and insufficient resources to treat them or to help their families cope.

While more than half of all prisoners in U.S. correctional institutions suffer from mental illness, the problem is much worse in the nation's local jails, where 64% of the inmates are mentally ill.



Pixabay.com

Much worse in Alabama

That problem is compounded in Alabama, according to a survey published by the American Jail Association, because “Alabama has virtually no jail diversion programs and is among the states spending the least on public psychiatric treatment programs.”

As an example of the problems faced by local law enforcement officials, researchers highlighted Tuscaloosa County: “In the Tuscaloosa County Jail, 40% of the inmates ‘receive some form of psychiatric care.’ The county sheriff stated ‘the jail is the worst place for someone with a mental illness. ... The problem is someone [with mental illness] gets off their meds and a family member doesn’t know what to do, so they call the sheriff’s office. The [person] may end up in jail for 30 to 60 days or even six months for a \$300 misdemeanor most people would get out on in a day.’”

Addiction compounds the problem. A 2002 study cited by the American Jail Association showed that three-fourths of mentally ill jail inmates were either addicted to or abused alcohol or drugs, compared with half of inmates who had no mental health problems. Such studies and statistics ring true for Baldwin County Sheriff Huey “Hoss” Mack, who has served as the county’s chief law enforcement officer since 2007. “The Baldwin County Sheriff’s Office has definitely seen an increase in the number of individuals who come to us with drug issues and mental health issues,” Mack said.

Greatest impact

“It’s hard to say how many of them are actually addicted, but I can say that a majority of them are at least users coming in. Right now our numbers appear to be somewhere around the 65 to 70% mark of those that come to us having drug or substance abuse issues. Meth and opiates are the number one drugs that we are combatting.

“We have also seen an increase in those individuals coming to us in mental crisis and are suffering from drug-induced mental illness. This is typically manifested in the form of paranoia as well as depression,” Mack

said. Incarceration of the mentally ill carries a high price tag. “We have had to expand our medical services and increase the amount of mental health observations that we offer in the corrections center over the past couple years,” the sheriff said.

“One of the greatest areas that impacts us is the cost of various medications, as well as any counseling we may have to do within the facility. We currently work with the Baldwin County Drug Court, Baldwin County Mental Health and AltaPointe Health’s hospital in addressing these issues,” Mack said. Many of the Baldwin County inmates are awaiting trial while those who have been convicted of less serious crimes are serving sentences of anywhere from a few days to less than one year.

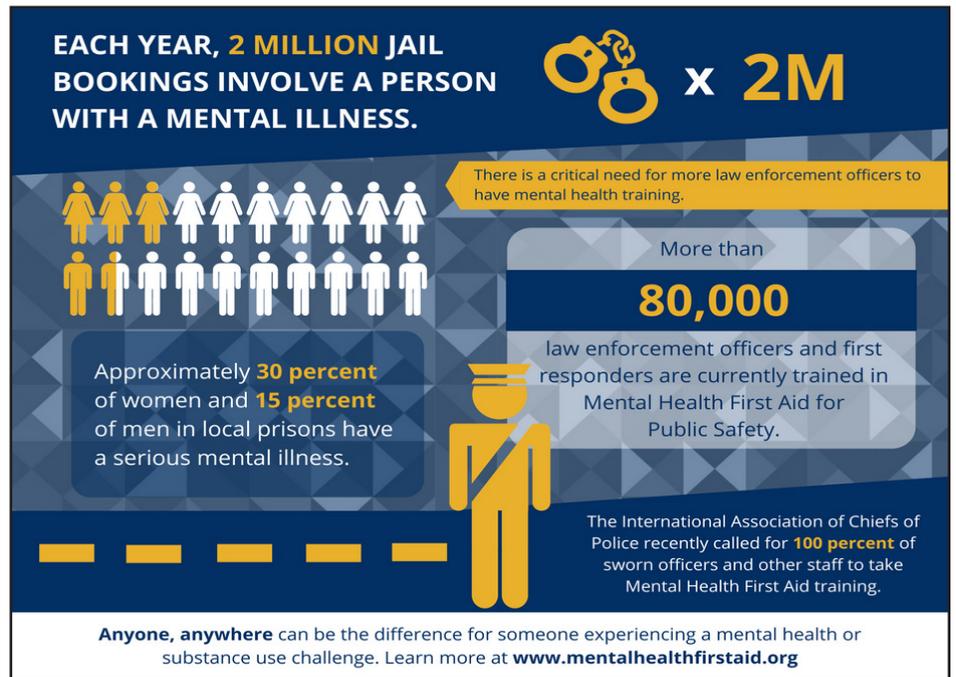
Baldwin County Jail also houses prisoners convicted of more serious crimes who await transfer to state or federal institutions. With all that churning of the jail population it takes a lot of manpower and flexibility to address the mental health and substance problems among the inmates.

“Our medical unit — which is staffed by registered nurses and licensed practical nurses along with physicians — may have upwards of 200 medical calls or observations a day,” Mack said. “Our numbers have also increased with working with the probate court on involuntary commitments which usually result in a 72-hour observation and evaluation before those individuals are released on medication.”

No changes in sight

Sheriff Mack doesn’t expect such challenges to change any time soon. “The lack of treatment facilities is definitely contributing to the revolving door of acute mental illness,” he said. “Until the state builds, or allows to be built, long-term in-house mental health facilities that will be able to treat these individuals, I am not optimistic of any lasting, positive change.”

EDITOR’S NOTE — This article, written by Martha Simmons, originally appeared in the Jan. 24, 2019, issue of The Alabama Baptist on page 7.



‘Doing prison’

One family’s experience with prison inspires a program to help others

Before the accident Laure and Jerry Clemons had a pretty good life. They had been married for six years and were raising a blended family of three girls. A recovering alcoholic, Jerry relied on his higher power — God — and had been sober for nine years. Faith was a central element in their lives. “We’re both Christians,” Laure Clemons said, “and we were walking with God.”

But one day in 2001, Jerry Clemons strayed off the path. He got blackout drunk, put his keys in the ignition and drove his car straight into an oncoming vehicle, killing one person and seriously injuring another. He was so badly hurt that he was initially pronounced dead at the scene, but after being airlifted to a local hospital he eventually healed. He started over in his recovery from alcohol addiction. Two years later he pleaded guilty to manslaughter and assault and began serving a 25-year split sentence of six years in prison followed by 19 years on probation.

‘Inevitable outcome’

During those two years leading up to the sentence — the first with police investigating the accident and the second with Jerry being charged, bonded out and finally standing before the judge — the couple worked through issues of anger and guilt and doubled down on their relationship with God. While Jerry seemed resigned to the consequences of his actions, Laure still couldn’t come to grips with the inevitable outcome.

“I was in denial that he was going to go to prison,” Laure said. “It was unthinkable. I didn’t know anybody who had gone to prison. I wasn’t raised that way. You could have knocked me over with a feather. He went straight from court to the county jail and then the state prison. Immediately our prison experience began for our family. I knew that we would stay married and we would stay a family,” Laure recalled. “I just didn’t know how. I had never done prison before.”

She quickly learned that “doing prison” doesn’t come with a user’s manual, especially for families of the incarcerated. A communications professional by trade, Laure was distressed at the dearth of how-to information that would help her learn how to navigate prison rules or explain to children why their daddy was behind bars. She didn’t know how to take care of herself financially and emotionally while her husband was gone nor what it would be like when Jerry was finally released.

What began as an effort to educate herself soon turned into her own personal mission to establish a support system for families of prisoners. In 2003, “Extended Family” was born. The Alabama-based nonprofit offers a wide array



Photo courtesy of Laure Clemons

During an Extended Family for Kids (EFK) Leader Training Workshop, Laure Clemons (right) has participants imagine their lives in 10 years to begin a conversation about goals and necessary steps.

of resources for families struggling to deal with the incarceration of a loved one, which Clemons likens to a death in the family. Extended Family's website — www.extendedfamilyhelp.org — features a database listing 236 agencies, services and faith-based organizations offering all kinds of help that might be needed by families of prisoners, such as food pantries, job placement, mental health counseling and re-entry help.

Resources for families

Many of the resources are in Alabama, but Extended Family has helped families of prisoners elsewhere in America and in other countries, so there are links to resources outside the state as well.

“Family members of people in prison have needs in every area of life,” Laure said. “Physical, financial, emotional, mental and spiritual. For some people, they might need to know where they can get groceries to feed their families. Others might need a job to make ends meet when the primary wage-earner goes to prison. They need to know how to deal with the mental duress, the stress, what they're allowed to wear while visiting their loved one in prison, where to find local counselors or even daycare.”

The emotional toll on the family is often the hardest part to handle. “It's almost as if someone in your family died, but they didn't die. Bam! They're gone. But they're not,” Laure said.

Laure Clemons likes to refer to former inmates not as ex-cons, but as “returning citizens,” because that's the goal: Get the formerly incarcerated acclimated to living productively in the free world and stop the revolving door of recidivism. To that end, Extended Family conducts “Going Home” workshops in Alabama prisons for soon-to-be released inmates. “The Going Home workshop is based on our first year of going home,” Laure said of her husband's 2009 release from prison.

Compared with a lot of newly released inmates, she said, Jerry had many advantages: He was a sober Christian, had a supportive family and had remained married throughout the ordeal. He had a house and a car and was able to find a job.

Life after prison

To help people of faith understand how to help, Extended Family offers a “Going Home Outside” workshop for churches. The organization also created a curriculum for children of the incarcerated, “Extended Family for Kids,” which teaches coping skills to youth who have parents or other close family in prison. Extended Family primarily relies on local government grants, private foundations and individual donations to support its work.

The Clemons don't charge the Alabama Department of Corrections for the prison-based “Going Home” workshops, which have trained more than a thousand inmates over the past nine years. There's no set fee for church workshops either. After more than 15 years in existence, this informal arrangement still seems to be working for Extended Families. “We do a lot of ‘trust in God’ around here,” Clemons said.

EDITOR'S NOTE — This article, written by Martha Simmons, originally appeared in the Jan. 31, 2019, issue of The Alabama Baptist on page 6.

‘Christians go to jail too’

How Church can help those affected by financial, social strains of prison

When the judge bangs the final gavel and a convicted felon is led away, the prisoner isn’t the only one who will serve a sentence. His — or her — family will also pay the price.

In the 2015 study titled “Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families,” a team of researchers from three organizations — Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Forward Together and Research Action Design — noted that the United States spends \$80 billion annually to incarcerate more people than any other nation in the world.

But it’s the families that pay the most, both in real dollars and in less tangible costs. Among their findings:

- ▶ 48–58% of families couldn’t afford to pay the fees, fines and other costs associated with a conviction.
- ▶ 68% of formerly incarcerated individuals were still unemployed or underemployed five years after their release.
- ▶ 65% of families with an incarcerated member couldn’t meet their basic needs, with 49% unable to afford sufficient food.
- ▶ 34% of families went into debt to pay for prison phone calls and visits alone.

Researchers in a separate study released in 2016, “The Economic Burden of Incarceration in the U.S.,” asserted that the actual cost of incarceration in the United States is closer to \$1 trillion. “For every dollar in corrections costs, incarceration generates an additional ten dollars in social costs,” concluded the researchers from the Concordance Institute for Advancing Social Justice, Washington University in St. Louis.

With few community resources available to help get them back on their feet, former prisoners all too often wind up back in jail. A study issued in the summer of 2018 by the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that as many as five out of six state prisoners were arrested at least once during the nine years after their release. In Alabama about 31% of released state prisoners return to prison.

How can people of faith make a difference in such a huge social problem? “There’s more ways that you can help than you realize,” said Laure Clemons, founder and executive director of Extended Family, a support system for families of prisoners and former prisoners.

“Treat that person whose loved one just went to prison as you would some-



one who is grieving a loss through death,” Clemons suggested. “Take them a meal. Give them a gift of stamps, so they can write to the prisoner. Ask about the person who is incarcerated and how the visits went.

Welcome them back

“Invite them into your social life. Invite their kids to the birthday parties and make sure they’re on the field trips. Listen to them. And you can always pray for them.” It’s important to welcome the formerly incarcerated person into church, Clemons added, and to accept that they may have problems adapting to being out of prison.

Clemons also said people in the free world shouldn’t cynically assume that inmates’ professions of faith are mere jailhouse religion. “Christians can make some terrible choices,” Clemons said. “Christians do go to prison. And many of the people behind bars spend more hours praying and studying the Bible than any of us do.”

EDITOR’S NOTE — This article, written by Martha Simmons, originally appeared in the Jan. 31, 2019, issue of The Alabama Baptist on page 7.

Congregations interested in hosting a Going Home Outside workshop are encouraged to contact Laure Clemons at 256-927-7997, or by email at laure@extendedfamilyhelp.org.

‘Free indeed’

Inmate seminary program brings Christ behind prison walls in Bibb County

There’s a God Squad living behind bars and concertina wire at Bibb County Correctional Facility. Wearing starched prison whites stenciled with their surnames are 10 men who recently graduated from Alabama’s first prison seminary program — the Birmingham Theological Seminary (BTS) Prison Initiative — and another 11 students enrolled in the second class.

Their goal is simple: To bring Christ behind the walls of cinderblock and steel and to offer His healing touch to the broken men serving time there. Depending on whether they enter the course with a qualifying bachelor’s degree, inmates successfully completing their 2-year studies can earn either a master of arts or a certificate in biblical studies, said Thad James Jr., BTS vice president. Those achieving a master’s degree do about twice the work that the certificate students do, but the 2-year program is rigorous for both, taught by the same BTS professors who instruct free-world seminarians.

The seminary credentials don’t make a whit of difference in how long the inmates’ sentences are, however. “They won’t get something put into their jacket that will help them be considered for early parole,” James said. Rather, they want to study the word of God in order to set their own souls free and be trained to minister to others. “He who has the Son is free indeed,” James said, referencing John 8:36.



Photo by Martha Simmons

Birmingham Theological Seminary professor Richard Trucks teaches the New Testament to students in Cohort 2, the second prison seminary class at Bibb County Correctional Facility.

In fact, inmates accepted into the program must have at least 7 years left to serve on their sentences in order to complete the 2-year seminary program and serve another 5 years in ministry. Some of them even plan to return to prison ministry once they have completed their sentences.

James expressed deep gratitude to Alabama Department of Corrections Commissioner Jeff Dunn for initiating the program and remaining supportive. The program receives no state dollars, however. It is funded entirely through faith-based donations, with Briarwood Presbyterian Church, which serves as BTS headquarters, contributing substantially to the \$50,000 per year cost to equip students and classrooms with books, computers and the like, and to pay the adjunct professors who teach the inmates each weekday in the prison chapel.



Photo by Martha Simmons

Marvin Hancock (foreground) hopes to extend God's reach by taking what he's learned in seminary out to thousands of other prisoners.

Plans are in the works to expand the program's reach beyond Bibb County Correctional. Each seminary graduate has drawn a partner and there are plans to "send them out two by two," James said, transferring them into other state prisons so they can minister to inmates there. But such things take time. Meanwhile, their ministry bears fruit behind the walls of the Brent prison.

In addition to serving as teaching assistants and mentoring to current BTS students, the graduates minister to the general population by providing Bible studies, doing open-air preaching in the prison yard and providing one-on-one discipleship opportunities with other inmates. They have rescued fellow inmates from violence, sat up with inmates overdosing on drugs and even paid off a debt owed by one prisoner to another, telling the debtor, "Like Christ paid the ransom for us, we paid the ransom for you," James said.

Being the first such class comes with extra responsibility, the inmates recognize. "All eyes are on us," said Michael Morgan, emphasizing that the seminary students and graduates must demonstrate fundamental transformation of themselves if they are to be believed and emulated by others. "If you don't change, you're doomed to repeat. You have to heal from within. You have to want it in here," he said, placing his hand on his heart. "It's got to be real."

HOW TO HELP

Volunteers and donations from other churches and denominations are needed to support and expand the BTS Prison Initiative. Anyone interested in donating or becoming involved may contact James at tjames@briarwood.org or 205-776-5386.

Learning to trust

Trust comes slowly, especially in prison, but both fellow inmates and prison officials are coming to trust that the seminary graduates are, as teaching assistant Russell Booth said, "living for and as Christ." Their influence is felt in the peaceful environment in their dorms, and their positive influence on other inmates.

John Tolbert was, he said, "tore up from the floor up" when he started doing time. However, at some point he

decided it was time for him to start serving others. “I thank God for using us to minister to the people in this campus and to eventually go out into other campuses,” he said.

Tolbert said seminary taught him four keys to successful living that he wants to share with his fellow inmates:

1. Reject passivity
2. Accept responsibility
3. Lead courageously
4. Invest eternally

“That’s what we’ve been really called to do,” Tolbert said. “Pour into them what was poured into us in the seminary.”

EDITOR’S NOTE — This article, written by Martha Simmons, originally appeared in the Feb. 7, 2019, issue of The Alabama Baptist on pages 6–7.

In their own words

Inmate seminary students talk about their spiritual journeys

Here's what the inmates in the Birmingham Theological Seminary Prison Initiative at Bibb County Correctional have to say about their walk with God while behind bars and what they want people in the free world to know.

Why they study the Word

“When I first came to prison I didn't know myself. The gospel of Jesus Christ saved my life. I now have a burning desire to become a minister.”

—Victor Allen

“I've known Jesus Christ as my personal savior since childhood. But I had a lot of questions. I wanted a deeper understanding. I'm seeking a higher theology so that I can lead others in the right direction and have the knowledge to do that with as little error as possible.”

— Ben McCool

“I wanted to change myself to help others younger than me to do the right thing. I've influenced younger guys to do the wrong thing. Now is my chance to change that.”

— Cornell Nobles

“I was a believer in the street, but I wasn't rooted in God. This is my opportunity to get rooted, to get grounded in the faith. This prison environment ... whew! It's difficult. But it's not impossible in Christ.”

— Herbert Oliphant

“I know we've hurt people on the outside but we're hurting too. Those hurts need to be healed. We need that restoration.”

— Unis Parker

What people of faith should know

“I want to be a positive leader in my community and give back to my neighborhood. When we get out a lot of us will have to mend relationships. These guys here in the seminary program are my brothers. We're going to need that (same kind of brotherhood) when we get out.”

— Patrick Johnson

“I had a solid faith before I got here, but I let Christ down. Prison can be a pretty hopeless place. I want to be someone people could look to for a solid hope in Christ.”

— Emmanuel Yarbrough



Photo by Martha Simmons

Birmingham Theological Seminary Vice President Thad James Jr. chats with inmate Patrick Johnson, a graduate of the first seminary class who now serves as a teaching assistant for the second class.

“Love and compassion are things I never saw on the street or when I was a prisoner in jail. Now I think of the song, ‘They know me by my number, but Jesus knows my name.’”

— Kenneth Skelton

“God created us to live in community. When you isolate us in prison, there’s a ripple effect in our families and in the community. Be patient. Real change takes time. Have hope for us.”

— Unis Parker

“I had to lose everything I had before God could touch me. I hope people can judge me in good faith and let me build up accountability and responsibility. All believers are called to have acceptance of people. In God and Christ all things are possible and people do change.”

— Michael Morgan

EDITOR’S NOTE — This article, written by Martha Simmons, originally appeared in the Feb. 7, 2019, issue of The Alabama Baptist on page 7.

Walking alongside inmates

Church and community involvement critical for inmates' successful re-entry

Thousands of inmates are released from jails and prisons each year in Alabama. Within two years of release, most will be back behind bars again, repeating a cycle that leaves their families destitute and rudderless, while taxpayers continue to pay for incarceration but nothing that approaches real “correction.”

What’s a law-abiding, church-going citizen to do? You could go to prison — there’s always a need for volunteers and mentors and teachers and chaplains. Or you could invite an ex-offender to your church supper or his kids to your child’s birthday party. Or you could take a chance on giving an ex-felon a job so he or she can earn an honest living and gain the self-respect and trust to stay on track and provide for his or her family.

Why should you?

If one-on-one interactions with people who have been convicted of serious crimes aren’t your thing, you can always donate supplies or books or Bibles or money to the organizations that face those issues and people head-on.

But why should you? Jesus mentions prisoners specifically when commanding people of faith to care for “the least of these” (Matthew 25). In purely pragmatic terms faith community involvement makes sense in the face of America’s (and especially Alabama’s) inordinately high rate of incarceration. The simple fact is that our society puts so many people in jail that in all likelihood you know somebody serving or likely to serve at least a few years in prison.

Ministers are certainly aware of the toll mass incarceration takes on their congregations and communities. In a 2016 study of 1,000 mainline and evangelical pastors conducted by LifeWay Research almost 60% of pastors said they had church attendees with incarcerated family members, and 50% said they had church attendees themselves who had been sent to prison in the previous three years.

Nearly all of those surveyed said churches have a responsibility to care for families of prisoners and to provide resources and support for youth and adults released from prison. However, only 1 in 5 churches is actually doing so. Moreover 38% of pastors admitted they have never even talked about the growing prison population in a sermon. Many of the churches that are talking about and engaged in prison ministries are not doing so in an organized fashion. Mostly efforts are limited to individual members who feel called to become personally involved.



Photo by Martha Simmons

A prison tattoo of a cross reminds inmate Kevin Caraway that he is the hands and feet of Christ. Caraway was one of two inmates transferred from the South Carolina prison system to assist in the startup of a prison seminary and the Jump Start Alabama re-entry program at Bibb County Correctional Facility.

Pitching in

Yet faith-based ministries and re-entry programs can provide critical turning points in the life of an incarcerated person. For instance the Christian-based Jump Start Alabama re-entry program in the Bibb County Correctional Facility is modeled after a highly successful program that has operated for more than a decade in South Carolina.

For now it's being run primarily by a minister from a nearby Brent church and an inmate who voluntarily transferred from South Carolina to help "plant" the Jump Start program in Alabama. The Jump Start Alabama pilot program is in its infancy, said Mitch Haubert, pastor of Brent Presbyterian Church and executive director of Jump Start Alabama. "Basically in Alabama it's just me and Kevin right now," he said of inmate Kevin Caraway. "He's working on the inside and I'm advocating on the outside."

Local churches such as Brent Baptist Church and Six Mile Baptist Church have been pitching in with bringing meals to share with Jump Start participants. A transition home in nearby Greensboro has been secured and is being renovated and furnished in anticipation of the participants. Helping a program like Jump Start can be as one-on-one as becoming a mentor or volunteer in the prison, or as long distance as prayer and financial donations. The program is expected to cost about \$60,000 per year to operate.

Jump Start Alabama makes four promises to participants when they leave prison:

1. A full-time job
2. Transitional housing
3. A community to embrace them
4. Structured accountability.

But Haubert said church and community help is needed to deliver on those promises. An individual willing to befriend and mentor a soon-to-be-released inmate can make the critical difference between successful re-entry and the failure of recidivism. "We need mentors to talk with these guys and tell them, 'Hey, I'm a father. Here's what Christian fatherhood looks like,'" Haubert said. "We need somebody to walk alongside of them."

EDITOR'S NOTE — This article, written by Martha Simmons, originally appeared in the Feb. 14, 2019, issue of The Alabama Baptist on page 6.

‘Mission from God’

Christian-based program helps inmates get jumpstart on life outside of prison

When Joliet Jake is released from prison in “The Blues Brothers” movie his release is portrayed as the classic cliché: He leaves wearing the same suit of clothes and harboring the same bad attitudes he had when he entered the place. In the movie, as in real life, it’s a recipe for recidivism.

In Bibb County Correctional Facility, in Brent, there’s a cadre of inmates who are “on a mission from God” long before they ever set foot outside the state prison. The Christian-based Jump Start Alabama program combines Bible teachings with discipleship and around-the-clock accountability in an effort to grow participants’ spirituality and prepare them for successful release and re-entry into law-abiding society. Alabama’s recently initiated pilot program is modeled after South Carolina’s Jump Start, which boasts tremendous success in reducing recidivism: a 5% reduction for program graduates versus national statistics showing 60% of inmates return to prison within the first two years.

Unlike South Carolina’s program Jump Start Alabama taps into another faith-based success story unfolding at Bibb County Correctional, the inmate seminary program operated under the Birmingham Theological Seminary (BTS) Prison Initiative. Ten inmates graduated from the two-year seminary program last summer, and another 11 inmates are studying in the second seminary cohort that began last fall. These students lead, minister to and live with nine teams of fellow inmates in the prison’s 106-man Character Based Housing Unit. Two South Carolina state inmates — Adam Green and Kevin Caraway — volunteered to be transferred to Bibb County Correctional to help launch both programs.

‘Daily surrender’

Mitch Haubert, pastor of Brent Presbyterian Church, serves as BTS Prison Initiative coordinator and executive director of Jump Start Alabama. One recent January morning in a small office down the hall from the prison chapel, Haubert was working with Caraway to put the final touches on a new website being developed to educate churches and communities about the program.

Jump Start Alabama is organized in three phases, Haubert said. Phase 1 is a 10-month, in-prison discipleship and character development program teaching inmates how to live successfully on the outside.



Photo courtesy of Jump Start Alabama

Inmate Kevin Caraway (left) and Pastor Mitch Haubert collaborate on a new brochure about Jump Start Alabama, a faith-based prison rehabilitation program designed to prevent recidivism.

In the year-long Phase 2 inmates who successfully complete Phase 1 will live in a transitional home in Greensboro. “It will be a structured environment intended to continue the Christian community, character and accountability fostered during the first ‘inside’ phase,” Haubert explained. “The structure will assist men who have been incarcerated to negotiate the greatly multiplied decisions and responsibilities of society.” In Phase 3 graduates of the program will transition to the local community of their choice.

Jump Start Alabama needs the faith community’s involvement now and as it grows. And, as the inmate who is helping to establish the program in Alabama points out, it’s in the churches’ and towns’ best interest to do so. “Ninety-five percent of us will get out of prison,” Caraway said. “I’m the guy who’s going to be your neighbor. Local churches, pour into us now. Build a genuine community with us. Be involved. Show us how to do life on the outside.”

While Caraway says inmates do “have to have that daily surrender to Christ,” he also points out that average church and community members can help inmates readjust to life outside of prison by helping them with surprisingly pragmatic things, such as how to:

- ▶ Get a job
- ▶ Be a good employee
- ▶ Run a household
- ▶ Operate a computer
- ▶ Use a smart phone.



Photo courtesy of Jump Start Alabama

Mitch Haubert (center), pastor of Brent Presbyterian Church and Birmingham Theological Seminary Prison Initiative coordinator, partnered with inmates Adam Green (left) and Kevin Caraway to start Jump Start Alabama at Bibb County Correctional Facility.

‘God’s way’

Perhaps the biggest thing that inmates need to know in order to stay out of prison, Caraway said, is how to have fun. Mentors help soon-to-be released prisoners realize that fun looks different in a Christian community, Caraway pointed out. In the South Carolina Jump Start program, now in its 12th year, newly released participants’ “night on the town” was often at a local church, Haubert said. “During a recent visit to the South Carolina Jump Start program, I saw them on a Friday night at the church, praying there, eating there, watching a movie together,” he said. “They were having fun God’s way.”

EDITOR’S NOTE — This article, written by Martha Simmons, originally appeared in the Feb. 14, 2019, issue of The Alabama Baptist on page 7.

Timely progress

U.S. Department of Justice gives Alabama 49 days to fix ‘broken,’ ‘inhumane’ prisons

Alabama’s state prison system — considered the nation’s deadliest — is “broken” and conditions are so inhumane they violate the Constitution’s ban on cruel and unusual punishment, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) asserted in a letter sent to Gov. Kay Ivey on April 2.

Chronic problems

Following a two-and-a-half-year investigation by the Civil Rights Division and Alabama U.S. Attorneys’ Offices, DOJ issued a scathing 62-page report giving the state 49 days to correct the overcrowding, understaffing and other unsafe conditions contributing to the high rates of prisoner-on-prisoner violence and sexual abuse at the state prisons for men.



Wikimedia Commons

The Department of Justice Civil Rights Division and Alabama U.S. Attorneys’ Offices carried out a two-and-a-half-year investigation into conditions in the Alabama prison system, which is considered the nation’s deadliest prison system.

Failure to make adequate and timely progress could result in a federal lawsuit, a circumstance with which Alabama prisons are far too familiar. Chronically overcrowded and understaffed, Alabama state prisons currently house about 16,000 male prisoners in varying custody levels and are frequently the subject of federal lawsuits and court orders.

“The Department of Justice’s Civil Rights Division and the U.S. Attorney’s Offices for the Northern, Middle and Southern Districts of Alabama ... concluded there is reasonable cause to believe that the conditions in Alabama’s prisons for men violate the Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution,” the DOJ stated in a news release. “The Department concluded that there is reasonable cause to believe that the men’s prisons fail to protect prisoners from prisoner-on-prisoner violence and prisoner-on-prisoner sexual abuse, and fail to provide prisoners with safe conditions.”

U.S. Attorney Richard Moore accused Alabama officials of “flagrant disregard” for the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution.

“The failure to respect the rule of law by providing humane treatment for inmates in Alabama prisons is a poor reflection on those of us who live and work in Alabama,” Moore said. “We are better than this. We do not need to tarry very long assessing blame, but rather commit to righting this wrong and spare our State further embarrassment.”

As an example of the systemic violence and conditions they found in Alabama’s state prisons, the DOJ report recounted an eight-day period in September 2017.

As horrific as the number of violent incidents reported that week were, DOJ investigators said the rate of violence throughout the system was in all likelihood much higher. DOJ accused the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) of routinely underreporting incidents and even attributing deaths by violence to “natural causes.”

‘Positive changes’

Ivey and ADOC responded in a news release April 3 noting that DOJ recognized in its report that Alabama “has begun to make some positive changes,” such as plans to build new prisons with enhanced security, better medical and mental health services and safer environments for inmates and staff.

“Our primary objective is to ensure each facility provides a humane, secure and safe environment for inmates, and that reforms already in place and proposed bring about positive, tangible changes throughout the prison system,” ADOC Commissioner Jeff Dunn said. “Efforts for the improved hiring and retention of correctional staff have been bolstered with the Legislature’s \$86 million funding appropriations in 2018 and 2019 for hiring additional correctional and health services staff.

“These efforts continue with a \$31 million request for ADOC’s proposed 2020 budget, which would help the department hire 500 new correctional officers and increase the pay scale for all security personnel,” Dunn said.

Too little, too late

Improvements at the prisons have come too little and too late, however, to save the lives of an extraordinarily high number of inmates who die behind bars as a result of murder, violence or suicide.

“The combination of ADOC’s overcrowding and understaffing results in prisons that are inadequately supervised with inappropriate and unsafe housing designations, creating an environment rife with violence, extortion, drugs and weapons,” DOJ investigators found. “Prisoner-on-prisoner homicide and sexual abuse is common. Prisoners who are seriously injured or stabbed must find their way to security staff elsewhere in the facility or bang on the door of the dormitory to gain the attention of correctional officers. Prisoners have been tied up for days by other prisoners while unnoticed by security staff. Prisoners are often found in unauthorized areas. Some prisoners sleep in dormitories to which they are not assigned in order to escape violence. Prisoners are being extorted by other prisoners without appropriate intervention of management. Contraband is rampant,” DOJ reported. “The totality of these conditions poses a substantial risk of serious harm both to prisoners and correctional officers.”

To read the DOJ report on Alabama prison conditions, go to <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1150276/download>.

EDITOR’S NOTE — This article, written by Martha Simmons, originally appeared in the April 18, 2019, issue of The Alabama Baptist on pages 10–11.



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In early April the Department of Justice, headquartered at the Robert F. Kennedy Building in Washington, issued a report on the ‘inhumane’ practices in Alabama prisons.

A week in Alabama prisons

FRIDAY

Bibb Correctional Facility, Brent: A prisoner is stabbed by two other inmates in an open dormitory and bleeds to death.

Staton Correctional Facility, Elmore: A prisoner is stabbed multiple times and taken by helicopter to a nearby hospital.

SATURDAY

Elmore Correctional Facility, Elmore: A prisoner is beaten and injured by four other prisoners.

Ventress Correctional Facility, Clayton: Officers pat down a prisoner and find 17 cigarettes laced with drugs, a plastic bag of methamphetamine and a bag filled with hallucinogenic drugs known as “cookie dough.”

SUNDAY

St. Clair Correctional Facility, Springville: A prisoner asleep in a dormitory reserved for inmates

with good behavior awakens when two prisoners start beating him with a sock filled with metal locks; he is injured so severely he has to be transported to an outside hospital for emergency treatment.

Ventress Correctional: A prisoner is punched so hard in the eye by another prisoner that he is sent to an outside hospital. Another prisoner is stabbed by two other prisoners with homemade knives. Yet another prisoner is punched so hard in the face by prisoners with shirts covering their faces that he is transported to an outside hospital for treatment.

Staton Correctional: A prisoner threatens a correctional officer with a seven-inch knife. Another prisoner reports he has been sexually assaulted.

TUESDAY

Fountain Correctional Facility, Atmore: A prisoner awakens when another inmate sets his blanket on fire and a fight ensues.

Ventress Correctional: Officers searching a dormitory find 12 plastic bags of an unknown substance, 79 cigarettes laced with drugs, two bags containing the “cookie dough” hallucinogen and a bag of methamphetamine.

WEDNESDAY

Easterling Correctional Facility, Clio: A prisoner is sexually assaulted inside of a segregation cell by an inmate; only four days earlier, this same prisoner had been forced at knifepoint to perform oral sex on two other prisoners.

THURSDAY

Ventress Correctional: An inmate is so severely assaulted by four other prisoners he has to be transported to an outside hospital. Another prisoner reports being sexually assaulted.

Bullock Correctional: A prisoner is found unresponsive on the floor by his bed and later dies of a drug overdose.

FRIDAY

Ventress Correctional: An officer finds an inmate bleeding from the shoulder due to a stab wound; the prisoner is transported to an outside hospital for treatment.

(Source: U.S. Department of Justice)

“The totality of these conditions poses a substantial risk of serious harm both to prisoners and correctional officers.”

Department of Justice report



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