

The Church's Responsibility to Prisoners

Understanding that the United States has the world's highest rate of incarceration among industrialized nations with some 1.6 million Americans currently incarcerated, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) recognizes the necessity of the biblical mandate to minister to those in prison and to family members impacted by incarceration.

We therefore affirm the Church's need to share the gospel with those in prison, to support and encourage - and be supported and encouraged by - believers who are the "church-behind-the-walls," and to support and encourage families impacted by incarceration and ex-prisoners as they complete their incarceration and re-enter society.

NAE acknowledges that the people of God - whether in prison or free in society - are equal in the sight of our Lord Jesus Christ as we have been saved only by His grace through faith. The teaching of Jesus Christ in Matthew 25 to "visit those in prison" is tantamount to doing so for Christ Himself. Both those who are incarcerated, and those family members who remain on the outside, represent individuals for whom Christ died, who need to hear the message of salvation, and who may, because of the trauma occurring in their lives, be particularly open to the message of the Gospel and to committing their Lives to Christ. Prisoners and their families represent one segment of the "harvest field" referred to in Matthew 9:36-38.

Incarcerated believers who make up the "church-behind-the-walls" have the same need as believers in the "outside world" for instruction, for living by example, and for being equipped to do ministry. Local churches can play an important role not only in sharing the gospel with incarcerated non-believers, but also in supporting, teaching and equipping saints in the incarcerated church for ministry in their environment. Building strong believers in the "church-behind-the-walls" will become even more important as prison overcrowding, changing architecture of prison facilities, and political pressure to reduce recreational and educational programming for prisoners decreases opportunities for "outsiders" to effectively minister within the prison walls.

Further, the "church-behind-the-walls" can teach and effectively model for Christians in the outside world biblically directed care for one another, transformation of the mind and personality through a relationship to Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and racial, cultural, and economic reconciliation.

And finally, to reduce the current tragic recidivism rate of roughly 75 percent of prisoners re-entering society, the local church must extend itself to effectively support and nurture those re-entering society after a period of incarceration (Rom. 12:13). The church must mentor prisoners and families through the difficult post-prison adjustments by helping to secure housing, employment, transportation and clothing, and by providing spiritual and moral support to ex-prisoners who genuinely seek to be more Christ-like in all they are and do.

A resolution adopted by the National Association of Evangelicals March 4, 1997

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The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) is a voluntary association of individuals, denominations, churches, schools and organizations comprised of approximately 42,500 congregations nationwide from 48 member denominations and individual congregations from an additional 27 denominations, as well as several hundred independent churches. The membership of the association includes 245 parachurch ministries and educational institutions. Through the cooperative ministry of these members, NAE directly and indirectly benefits over 27 million people. The association maintains its national offices in Carol Stream, Ill., and an office for governmental affairs in the nation's capital.

NBEA National Black Evangelical Association

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1997 National Black Evangelical Association P.O. Box 17122 Portland. OR 97217

NBEA is a cross-denominational umbrella organization, dedicated to bringing hope and empowerment to the Black community under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. **To Provide:** Life enriching Fellowship, **To Promote:** Networking of Ministries and Organizations World-wide, **To Encourage:** Holistic, Endeavors in the Black Community, **To Engender:** Racial Reconciliation.