

# “I Was in Prison and You Came to Visit Me”

## A call to action to the faith community ...

On March 1, 2003, Beaches Chapel Church of Neptune Beach, Florida officially began a partnership with Lawtey Correctional Institution to establish the first all-volunteer faith-based dormitory in the state.

Florida Senate Bill 912 established funding for seven faith-based dorms in the state. This bill provides the resources to support a full-time chaplain and secretary for each faith-based dorm.

The distinction of the program at Lawtey Correctional Institution is that it is entirely funded, including curriculum, equipment, and operational staff, by volunteers from Beaches Chapel Church.

*“Of the bountiful joy we receive in doing this, one of the most valuable components in the program is mentoring. Twice per month, nearly 60 men travel to Lawtey to spend time one-on-one with the inmates. Even more amazing, more than 130 of our congregants volunteer to serve at the facility each week. “I Was in Prison and You Came to Visit Me” shares the passion and components of our ministry as well as our message of restorative justice.”*

– Steve McCoy, Senior Pastor, Beaches Chapel Church

“I Was in Prison and You Came to Visit Me” is a Bryan Hickox film produced by Beaches Chapel Church of Neptune Beach, Florida. The project is a collaborative initiative of Beaches Chapel Church and the National Alliance of Faith and Justice.

Film and companion publication editing of “I Was in Prison and You Came to Visit Me” were made possible by **The Annie E. Casey Foundation** as part of its support for the Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign.

Established in 2002, the Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign raises community awareness as well as facilitates discussion and decision making about solution-based prisoner reentry programs that foster public safety and support healthy communities.

Generously funded by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Reentry Campaign is part of the Making Connections Media Outreach Initiative (MCMOI). Introduced in February 2001, the MCMOI links public television stations to local stakeholders as a means to address Core Results for strong and connected neighborhoods for children and families.

Both the Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign and the Making Connections Media Outreach Initiative are designed and managed by Outreach Extensions, a national consulting firm that specializes in comprehensive, high profile educational and community outreach campaigns for media projects.

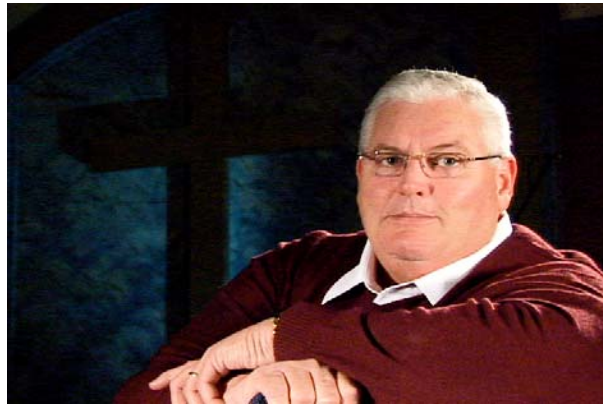
**The Annie E. Casey Foundation**  
[www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org)

**Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign**  
[www.reentrymediaoutreach.org](http://www.reentrymediaoutreach.org)

**Pastor to Pastor Message**



My message to you is from one pastor to another. In 28 years of pastoral ministry, I have never seen anything awaken our congregation and invoke God's blessings like giving to those who are incarcerated. We have approximately 130 volunteers who go to Lawtey in each two-week cycle. As a pastor, I have often wondered what I could do to mobilize the many good men who sit in services week after week – men who are good husbands



and fathers, business men, men with sound biblical knowledge. The 60 men who mentor at Lawtey have had life changing experiences. They have found a place to give freely to those who are hungry, and in many cases have never had a stable male authority figure in their lives. Anytime you have people excited about the Gospel, the entire atmosphere of your church changes. We have never sensed such an outpouring of God's blessings upon our congregation, and we directly attribute it to our mission at Lawtey Correctional Institution.

In our society, many advocate building more prisons and warehousing men and women for their crimes. The problem with this reasoning is that 97 percent of all those who are now incarcerated will eventually return to our communities. Of the over two million men and women now incarcerated at the federal and state levels, over 600,000 will be released each year. More than half of those released will commit a serious misdemeanor or felony within three years. Regardless of your philosophical point of view regarding restorative justice, I believe it is necessary for us to recognize this as a public safety issue for everyone. The truth is that families from each of our congregations will be victims of crime.

If you find yourself provoked as you view "I Was in Prison and You Came to Visit Me," please call upon us if you desire our assistance in any way.



Steve McCoy, Senior Pastor  
Beaches Chapel Church  
[www.beacheschapel.com](http://www.beacheschapel.com)

## **Prison Ministry and Restorative Justice**

In the mindset of many, and far too often, prison ministry is minimized and stereotyped as revival services and emotional enrichment sessions for inmates that seldom last once volunteers leave the institution. *This film is from us to you . . .*

Even those who commit non-violent or technical offenses find themselves deemed beyond redemption by a hostile society. *This film is from us to you . . .*

Some over-simplify prison ministry as weekly studies provided by diverse religious volunteers or weekend spiritual encounters conducted by affiliates of national organizations. *This film is from us to you . . .*

Many pastors and religious institutions look at prison ministry as the most expendable outreach within their churches and a service that is left to “the faithful few” to be led by clergy-in-training. These characterizations fail to convey the benefits prison ministry can fulfill in the lives of men, women, and youth who are incarcerated. *This film is from us to you . . .*

We realize there is better than a fifty percent chance that someone incarcerated will commit another crime within three years of his or her release. From our own experiences at Lawtey Correctional Institution in Florida, we know that prison ministry that helps those who are incarcerated prepare for all aspects of their lives in anticipation of their release becomes an invaluable asset in reducing these statistics.

We have discovered that an ideal example of prison ministry involves comprehensive programming. The joy felt after a stirring worship service fades quickly when individuals are faced with the pressures imposed by day-to-day incarceration and the realities of reentry without support or preparation. Prison ministry should involve faith, self-improvement training, life skills education, and transition support.

We encourage religious institutions and organizations like yours to find resources within your membership that can offer relief to one of society’s greatest problems. Within every congregation, multiple gifts and talents provide the kind of programming that will prepare men and women for a future without crime. Inside the walls of prisons and jails across the country, we have discovered, and so will you, that the lives of men, women, and youth might drastically change if given the opportunity to demonstrate their value and self-worth.

At this time in history and increasingly in the future, our church and yours must become key stakeholders in ensuring public safety. Groups of faith and places of worship are uniquely positioned to answer the call to the mission field of our own neighborhoods, communities, and cities. Ironically, penitence was born within the faith community and it must now be reborn as a vital force to change the system of corrections in our country and to celebrate the victory every man, woman, or youth may have regardless of their past mistakes.

Many feel that prison is the place for those who violate our laws and cause loss and pain to others. Others feel that the answer to our crime problem is to build more prisons and to lengthen sentences. Restorative justice responds to the offender and the victim with

an emphasis on healing, restoration, restitution, and seeks to change the traditional approaches to crime and criminal justice.

The loving and caring family found amidst people of true faith offers a supportive environment for healing to take place. Within every religious institution is the means for healing victims of crime, for restoring their lives, and assuring a stable and fruitful future. People of faith possess the means to prepare formerly incarcerated men, women, and youth for a new direction in life while still incarcerated and to provide the aid needed for successful reentry following their release.

**National Alliance of Faith and Justice (NAFJ)**, based in Washington, DC, is a nonprofit association of criminal justice professionals and community leaders, whose mission is to promote the value of the inclusion of faith in addressing prevention, consequences, and resolutions of crime with emphasis upon the most culpable and vulnerable issues and stakeholders.

Working closely with community stakeholders and decision makers, religious institutions and leaders, governmental agencies and officials, offender populations, their families, and victims of crime, the organization maintains partnerships and numerous programs.

As a partner of the Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign and as an intermediary for the Corporation for National and Community Service MLK Day of Service, NAFJ continues to rally volunteers in large numbers, largely faith and justice based, around the Justice Sunday National Continuum, which honors the late Dr. Martin Luther King through acts of service. NAFJ is pleased to collaborate with Beaches Chapel Church in introducing "I Was in Prison and You Came to Visit Me."

*"We hope that this powerful media product will serve as a call to action to volunteers to serve as pre- and post-release mentors and to dedicate their time and talents towards the building of the Beloved Community."*

– Addie Richburg, Director of Training and Administration,  
National Alliance of Faith and Justice

**For more information and to obtain a copy of the film, please visit the following Web sites or contact 904/241-4211 or [chapel1@bellsouth.net](mailto:chapel1@bellsouth.net):**



Beaches Chapel Church  
[www.beacheschapel.com](http://www.beacheschapel.com)



National Alliance of Faith and Justice  
[www.nafj.org](http://www.nafj.org)