

The Role of Faith-Based Organizations in Providing Effective Social Services

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee on Government Reform, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to share with you today, regarding the Faith Based communities ability to deliver effective social services.

Earlier today, you heard Mr. Phillip Dautrich, the Program Manager for the InnerChange Freedom Initiative program at the Carol Vance Unit, in Richmond, Texas share regarding the effectiveness of the Bible-based, Christ-centered program operating within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. I stand here before you today as one of the men, a graduate of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative, whose life has been changed and has been restored as a vital functioning member of the Houston community.

I always welcome the opportunity to share with others, what God has done in my life. Just a short bio here, as a foundation for the remainder of this talk. I was born and raised in Alice, Texas in a Christian home. I was taught right from wrong from a Christian mother and father. But, somewhere along the way, I decided that I had a better idea. Mine led to a path that ultimately landed me within the confines of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Institution Division as inmate # 733885. I could blame it on a lot of things, but I won't. I decided that I would make decisions for my life about what was right or wrong outside of the context of the Bible or accepted Cultural norms. I never did drugs because they were illegal, however for some reason I never applied this same principle to the ownership of other peoples money. In 1995, I was reprimanded to serve an 8-year sentence in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice-Institutional Division. I served time at the Stevenson Unit and the Estelle Unit.

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While at the Estelle unit in 1996, I visited the Chapel library and read a book entitled '*The Body*' written by Chuck Colson, the founder of Prison Fellowship Ministries, who served time for his Watergate crimes. While reading the book, I became convicted of my former lifestyle and became acutely aware of the wrongs I had committed against society and those who had been closest to me. The book also gave me a very clear picture of what God had designed the church to be in the world. Colson describes the Church as Jesus' hands and feet in the world as it seeks to minister to the less fortunate and needy. I saw where I had missed the boat, and the change would require me to build my life upon the solid foundation of the teachings of Jesus. Shortly after reading that book, I became aware of a program that was beginning at the Jester II Unit (now the Carol Vance Unit) in Sugar Land, Texas. It was started by Prison Fellowship Ministries, which was founded by Chuck Colson, the author of the book that had profoundly opened my eyes. I applied for and was accepted to be a member of Group 2, which began the InnerChange Freedom Initiative program in August, 1997. After 5 months into the 18-month program, I was given an opportunity by the Parole Board to leave the confines of the Institutional Division and was offered Parole for April, 1998. However, something happened in the next couple of days. I thought about my past. I didn't graduate from College. I was divorced. I had lacked a commitment to completion from early in life. I had been a great starter, but a lousy finisher. I decided if this change in thought and deeds was to be serious it would have to start now. So, after lots of prayer and discussions with the staff of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative, I decided to ask the Parole Board for an opportunity to complete the program

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at the Carol Vance Unit. **My request was granted.** I was the first person in the history of the state to request permission to spend additional time in prison to complete the InnerChange program. So, I completed the program and was released to Mandatory Supervision on February 26, 1999. I will complete my parole supervision on October 25, 2003. A Question many people ask me, even to this day, "Was the extra time worth it?" My reply is always "Certainly." When I look at my life today, compared to what I thought it would be, I am always able to affirm my decision once again as "YES."

Since my release to mandatory supervision, I have been working in the ReEntry and AfterCare portion of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative program as the AfterCare Assistant. I assist men from the Houston-area community who are seeking to live a transformed life. An integral part of this re-entry process is reliant upon community involvement, especially the Christian community. Prior to release, each InnerChange member is matched with a mentor, hopefully close to the neighborhood in which he will be released. We also ask and expect each released member to attend a local nurturing church, much like Memorial Drive United Methodist Church in West Houston, which welcomed me back to the community and supported and encouraged me during my transition from institutional life to community life. These are two of the most critical components of successful re-entry into the community. We also work with families and children of the men both inside and outside of the prison, as the family adjusts to the additional stresses and strains of an additional member being restored to the family unit.

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Two other critical areas, which the local church community is essential in assisting a releasee with is, employment and transportation. Upon release from the Institutional Division of TDCJ, a person is given \$50 at the gate of the prison and \$50 upon the initial report to the parole office to which he is assigned. That is a total of \$100 with which to start a new life. The Christian community seems to be more open than the secular to giving releasees an opportunity to prove they have changed and want to live a productive life in the community by opening up job opportunities within their companies. Some churches provide assistance in transportation via bus service or even donate used vehicles releasee use during the early stages of ReEntry.

In Texas, I am always amazed at how we spend thousands of dollars in taxpayer money to keep a person incarcerated, but provide almost no assistance to the ReEntry and AfterCare phase once a person is released. However, with the report by Dr. Byron Johnson released last week during a visit at the White House with President Bush, Attorney General Ashcroft and Secretary of Labor Chao, in the report Dr. Johnson emphasized the importance of AfterCare and ReEntry support. The design of the church is the most likely place to find resources coupled with the personal relationships necessary to guide and direct a person from institutional life to community life. In addition because of the foundational principles of the Church, it is a gracious and understanding community. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is founded on the principles of love, mercy and grace provide the proper foundation and support environment which will encourage a person to continue walking under the instruction of the Lord even amidst trials and temptations.

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee on Government Reform, I stand here before you as a living example of the success a Faith-Based Organization can have on providing social services to those in the community released from the Criminal Justice System. One of the core values of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative is RESTORATION. As I stand here before you, I can testify to the restoration that has taken place in my life. Two weeks ago today, I was present in the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington, DC. Two InnerChange graduates, Mr. Robert Suttan and Mr. Bernard Veal, as well as myself, shared the excitement of getting to meet the President of the United States as he met with us and other key leaders such as Chuck Colson, convicted Watergate conspirator, and founder of Prison Fellowship, Mark Earley, former Attorney General of Virginia and now the President of Prison Fellowship, also in attendance were the several members of the President's cabinet mentioned above. As we sat in the Roosevelt Room that day, President Bush affirmed the work that was being accomplished by the Faith Based prison program called the InnerChange Freedom Initiative.

Not only am I a living example of the success of Faith Based Social Service programs, I could spend all afternoon sharing stories of successful persons reentering our communities from the Criminal Justice system that would move your heart, just as it did in the Roosevelt Room of the White House two weeks ago.

I believe that we are on the edge of a great milestone for our country as we embrace the power of the faith community in restoring people to their proper place in the communities. As we restore fathers to their homes, and mothers to their children,

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and mend families together once again. We will once again see the greatness on which our country was founded, sound biblical truths. It is time for the faith community to step up to the call that is being laid before them, and work hand in hand with the governmental programs which can mobilize the armies of mercy, compassion and grace that are a body of the Body of Christ called 'the Church' which are located within the communities in which we reside.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee on Government Reform, I would like to thank you once again for the opportunity to stand before you and I would encourage you to support programs and funding for the Faith Based Community. Statistics are in, provided by which prove that Jesus does make a difference in the lives of a group of men, just outside of Houston who were courageous enough to believe that Jesus could change their lives. The Houston Christian community stepped up to the plate and met the challenge of loving their fellow believers in Christ back into the community and mentoring them into their proper role as productive caring citizens of the Houston community. Now, in addition to the InnerChange Freedom Initiative prison in Texas, Prison Fellowship has been asked to operate prisons in Kansas, Iowa and Minnesota where we are seeing the same Christian community support as we do in Texas. Thank you for your time and attention to my comments this afternoon. My God Bless the work that you do.

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