



## Compassion Coalition

### Ways to Connect with Prisoners and Former Offenders

*“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, ... when did we see you ... in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”*

*- Matthew 25:37, 39-40*

#### Make a Difference Through Prayer

- Pray that sufficient funds and volunteers will be mobilized to sustain the work of nonprofits meeting the needs of prisoners, former offenders and their families.
- Pray for staff and volunteers and staff who reach out to former offenders with the love of Jesus, that they will be filled with God's wisdom, compassion, and hope.
- Pray for wisdom and guidance for those in positions of authority within the justice system.
- Pray for just treatment of all people in the legal system regardless of race or income.
- Pray for families of offenders struggling to survive the emotional and financial stresses of incarceration, and especially for children of prisoners.
- Pray that prisoners and former offenders will receive the Word that can bring true freedom into their lives, and that churches will receive these brothers and sisters with open arms.
- Pray also for the victims of crime, and that former offenders and their victims would come to reconciliation and forgiveness, when possible.
- Praise God for the development of collaborative efforts such as Restorative Justice, the Knoxville Public Safety Collaborative and the Samaritan Network, and pray for their ongoing success (see the description of these initiatives below).

#### Make a Difference Through Your Life

- Meditate on the biblical call to "do justice and show mercy" (Micah 6:8), and what this means for your relationship with former offenders.
- Resist labeling offenders as "bad people"; consider them ordinary humans who have made mistakes. Often they have grown up without positive role models, and many, especially women, have been wounded by abuse and neglect. God values them as much as He does you.
- Hold fast to the belief that no one is beyond hope—that by the grace of God, with commitment, conviction, and community, people can change. Whatever someone's past, look for their potential as a productive member of the community.
- Be real. Demonstrate through your actions that you “walk the walk” and not just “talk the talk” of what a Christian should be. People who have experienced prison tend to see through phoniness, so just be yourself and allow God to work through you.
- Share God's love by sending birthday cards to prisoners and their children, or writing



## Compassion Coalition

notes of encouragement to former offenders (connect with one of the ministries listed below).

- Are you bilingual? Your services as a translator can be valuable in making community services available to non-English-speaking former offenders.
- Become an advocate for youth in the juvenile justice system. Show up in court, speak out for constructive sentencing options, visit youth while incarcerated, meet with parents, encourage youth to focus on schooling and parole requirements, and help to connect youth with social services and a supportive faith community.
- Become informed about factors that contribute to the disproportionate presence of African Americans, particularly young men, in the prison system, and learn how to join advocates in working to change that. For example, in Tennessee in 2007, African American youth represented 21% of the population, but 59% percent of juveniles in secure detention centers, and 80% of juveniles transferred to adult court.. For more information, read the report prepared by the Disproportionate Minority Confinement Task Force (<http://www.tn.gov/tccy/dmc.shtml>).
- If you are an employer, consider hiring someone with a criminal record who seeks a fresh start. Look for ways to connect this person with trained mentors and support services to help them succeed on the job and in life.

### **Make a Difference Through Your Church**

#### Connect with other organizations serving former offenders

- Develop a relationship with a prisoner from the Knox County area who is connected with a local prison ministry, and with the prisoner's family. Continue the relationship after their release. Invite the former offender to join the church community and to receive ongoing support with reintegration.
- Join the Good Samaritan Network, organized by the Tennessee Department of Correction (<http://www.tn.gov/correction/rehabilitative/goodsamaritan.html>). This network of churches and other agencies provides a range of services to people released from incarceration, often with no job, no money, no stable family support, and no permanent housing. If your church would like to walk with former offenders to help prevent recidivism, please call the Director of Volunteer Services at 582-2027.
- Churches are encouraged to become Restorative Justice sites, where non-violent juvenile offenders do community service once a month. Please call Compassion Coalition (251-1591 x 1) to learn more about this opportunity.
- Contact Prison Fellowship (615-989-1455) to host an Angel Tree party. Sign up before September 1<sup>st</sup> of each year to receive wish lists from prisoners' children who live in the Knoxville area. Congregations set up an Angel Tree, collect gifts, then invite the children (and potentially their families) to the church for a Christmas party.

#### Include and equip former offenders and their families

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## Compassion Coalition

- Assess whether your church would be welcoming to former offenders who may not look or act like the "typical" church member. Prepare the congregation theologically and socially to embrace the needs and gifts of people with a difficult past.
- Reach out to former female offenders, who often face extra hurdles in restoring custody and healthy relationships with their children and regaining economic stability. Look for ways your church can provide a practical, emotional, and spiritual anchor to a family in turbulent times.
- Offer a ministry of hospitality to families of prisoners who travel (sometimes long distances) to visit with incarcerated loved ones. Offer support in the form of food, travel amenities, child care, prayers, stress relievers, and referrals to social services.
- Work with the juvenile justice system to offer an alternative for youth who are picked up for minor offenses (such as curfew violations) but do not have family willing or able to take them home. If youth are not able to return home, they often get locked up. This is one factor why youth from broken families are more likely to develop a criminal history, which limits their future.
- Encourage the dignity and gifts of former offenders by inviting them to give as well as receive ministry. Provide appropriate opportunities for offenders to fulfill community service requirements as volunteers with church-sponsored ministries, serving alongside mature Christians. Ensure that former offenders are treated with grace, and preserve confidentiality about their history.
- In addition to helping former offenders reintegrate successfully, make it a goal to help prevent new offenders. Focus on developing key factors shown by research to reduce crime: educational achievement, jobs that pay a living wage, access to substance abuse treatment, and strong family ties. Personal faith and regular church attendance also help people avoid criminal involvement. One strategic priority is to help prevent at-risk youth from becoming future offenders through mentoring and educational opportunities.

### **Make a Difference as a Volunteer**

Connect with the following organizations that serve prisoners, former offenders, and their families. (Please note that correctional facilities and many related ministries have a minimum age requirement for volunteers.)

Amachi Programs (Knoxville Leadership Foundation): 524-2774, <http://www.klf.org>  
*Assists children of incarcerated parents in achieving their highest potential by engaging them in consistent mentoring relationships with committed people of faith.*

- Be a positive influence in the life of a child by becoming a mentor to one of over 800 children in the greater Knoxville area who have a parent incarcerated in state or federal prison.
- Take an active role in the life of a child by enjoying shared activities such as reading

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## Compassion Coalition

books, going to a park, playing sports or helping with homework.

- Families: Children can benefit from interacting with the mentor's whole family as well as quality one-on-one time with the primary mentor.

Between Jobs Ministry (Central Baptist Church of Bearden): 567-3423 or 389-7687, [mblutitle@aol.com](mailto:mblutitle@aol.com) or [curt.hall@knology.net](mailto:curt.hall@knology.net)

*Focus is on helping those between jobs, those whose job is at risk, those anticipating making a career transition in developing a winning strategy for finding their next job. This is done through offering information to help construct a resume/cover letter, finding a job in a tight labor market, assessing skills, strengths, accomplishments to present a total package for success in getting that next job, and to undergird the participants in the program with love, prayer and support.*

- Review and critique resumes or cover letters; assess transferable skills, strengths, and accomplishments.
- Provide one-on-one counseling to help participants see themselves in the best manner and present their best selves to a potential employer.
- Provide the ministry with job leads; contact potential employers about the benefits of looking to faith-based ministries as a pool from which to look for potential employees.
- Help the ministry with aspects such as developing and maintaining the website, obtaining non-profit status, and expanding educational training offerings for the general public.
- Share a success story or present a career-related topic at a bi-monthly meeting.

FOCUS (Following Our Choices Unto Success) Prison Ministries: 694-3837, <http://www.focusprisonministries.com>

*A Christian, non-denominational organization with the motto "Changing Focus, Changing Lives" that connects churches with multiple ministry opportunities to serve prisoners, families of prisoners, and released prisoners in Knox County Jail and Detention Facility as well as the prisons of East Tennessee.*

- "Behind the Walls" programs include evangelistic events, weekly support group meetings, discipleship classes, life-skills classes, one-on-one work in maximum security units, and faith-based transition counseling.
- "Beyond the Walls" programs provide transition services to released offenders, including weekly support group meetings, transitional housing, mentoring, job assessments, training and apprenticeships through the CEO (Christian Ex-Offenders) Services program, and living skills education through the FOCUS Christian Academy at Peace At Last Residence Hall.
- FOCUS offers many volunteer opportunities for working with prisoners, former prisoners, and their families, for people of all levels of ministry experience. See the website, [www.focusprisonministries.com](http://www.focusprisonministries.com), for a list of opportunities.

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## Compassion Coalition

FOCUS Christian Academy at Peace At Last Residence Hall: 388-9703

*A Christian halfway house that encourages former male offenders to live a productive drug-free Christian life and to have a close relationship with God.*

- Assist the staff with office work.
- Mentor/sponsor the men by helping them find jobs and encouraging them to remain sober.
- Drive clients to appointments, job interviews, and meetings.

Good Samaritan Network: 615-741-1000 x 8161,

<http://www.state.tn.us/correction/rehabilitative/goodsamaritan.html>

*A collaboration of non-profit, civic, and faith-based members who provide services to individuals released from correctional facilities. The goal is to prevent recidivism by establishing a relationship between a returning offender and a mentor from their community, with targeted support from members of the network. The network is looking for partners to offer services, including:*

- A Good Samaritan basket with toiletry and clothing essentials.
- Emergency food or food vouchers for former offenders not yet earning an income.
- Clothing for job interviews, employment, and daily living.
- Emergency housing assistance, such as rent subsidies or boarding homes.
- A mentor who can offer guidance, encouragement and spiritual nurture.
- A list of employers willing to hire qualified individuals regardless of criminal background.
- Transportation to work via church van or bus passes.
- Life skills training and substance abuse rehabilitation.

H.E.L.P. House (Philadelphians Prison Ministry): 689-3613,

<http://www.philadelphians.com>

*A drug- and alcohol-free transitional house for up to seven men who desire to change their lives. Focuses on the whole person and achieving successful reintegration into employment, family and society. Provides weekly Bible studies, Alcoholics Anonymous group meetings, counseling, and classes such as basic computer and parenting.*

- Meet a former offender at the bus station and take him to dinner to welcome him.
- Offer transportation to the grocery store or to shop for clothes.
- Donate a bus pass or gift cards for clothing or groceries.
- Tutor residents to prepare for the GED, and help the men create resumes and prepare for job interviews.

The Next Door: 865-360-6701, <http://www.thenextdoor.org>



## Compassion Coalition

*A transitional living program that provides assistance to women who are re-entering society from incarceration. Addresses the physical, mental and spiritual needs of women in crisis—equipping them for lives of wholeness and hope. The program consists of a six-month planned curriculum of recovery support services to address the issues of the co-occurring disorders of addiction and mental illness.*

- Answer phones and direct visitors at the front desk or serve as a special events assistant.
- Serve as a job coach, dinner volunteer, or help the women with transportation needs.
- Serve as a prayer partner, encourager, and mentor to a former offender.
- Families: Children can participate with their families in cooking dinners, being prayer partners and encouragers, and in any other way their parents deem appropriate.
- Groups: Host a supply drive to collect items for welcome baskets that provide necessities to new residents. Many of those coming out of incarceration lack even basic clothing and personal items.

Philadelphians Prison Ministry: 689-5833, <http://www.philadelphians.com>

*Demonstrates the love, mercy and forgiveness of Jesus by maintaining a consistent presence in regional prisons.*

- Volunteer to minister in regional prisons by joining the praise and worship band, leading a Bible study, or facilitating a weekly self-awareness group program.
- Families: Bake cookies to be distributed during Christmas services or other special services held inside prisons.
- Groups: Assemble various items such as toothpaste and toothbrushes in JESUS bags, which are given to prisoners as Christmas gifts.

Prison Fellowship: 615-989-1455, <http://www.prisonfellowship.org>

*Partners with local churches to minister to prisoners, former prisoners, and their families. Seeks to restore prisoners to the community and the church as contributing members, to bear witness that no life is beyond the reach of God's power. Serves children of prisoners through the Angel Tree ministry. For current volunteer opportunities, go to <http://volunteer.prisonfellowship.org>.*

Restorative Justice: 251-1591, <http://www.compassioncoalition.org>

*A collaboration of Compassion Coalition partner churches, Knox County Juvenile Court, the District Attorney's office, and local nonprofits that gives juvenile offenders the opportunity to complete court ordered community service alongside supportive Christians.*

- Become a Volunteer Site Coordinator, which means being a supervisor, role model, and mentor for the youth assigned to work at your site.
- Groups: Volunteer together at Restorative Justice community service sites and get to know the youth.

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## Compassion Coalition

- Families: Serving together as a family can make a significant impression on troubled youth who may not have grown up with healthy family dynamics.

The Royal Chaplain Corps: 455-7769, <http://www.royalchaplaincorps.com>

*Addresses the spiritual, emotional and relational needs of Knox county juvenile court staff and clients. Works with youth in the juvenile justice system to develop alternatives to incarceration.*

- Be a mentor to youth in the juvenile court system who without intervention might end up in juvenile detention, and later prison. Help give them the skills and self-confidence to develop a new and positive direction for their life.
- Maintain a prayerful, compassionate "ministry of presence" in Knox County courts, attending to the spiritual needs of offenders, families, attorneys and court staff.

The Steps House: 573-7152, <http://www.stepshouse.net>

*Provides housing for homeless men, including former offenders, while addressing legal, medical, vocational, addiction and life skill issues.*

Tennessee Community Resource Board: 579-1514, <http://communityresourceboard.com/>

*Coordinates with the Department of Corrections and the Board of Probation and Parole to involve community volunteers in improving the incarceration experience for state inmates. Helps former prisoners rebuild their lives and succeed in the difficult transition from incarceration to responsible participation in the community.*

- Provide services to inmates such as tutoring, financial planning, and counseling services. Visit <http://communityresourceboard.com> to learn how to sign up to volunteer at the correctional facility closest to you.
- Get involved with one of the many ministries already in place at each prison, such as 12-step recovery groups, anger/grief management classes, basic life skills training, typing classes, or outreaches of specific Christian denominations.

The Urban Cowboy Restoration Project (C.O.N.N.E.C.T): 851-8005, <http://www.connectministries4u.com>

*Creates job opportunities for men re-entering from prison who are at high risk of recidivism, with support services including life skills, job readiness, and employment training along with of case management, mentoring and counseling.*

- Mentors are needed to walk alongside men who are re-entering the community.
- Partnerships welcome with churches, businesses, and other community groups.

### **Additional organizations who serve prisoners, former offenders, and their families:**

Kairos Outside: 866 257-7772, <http://www.kairossoftennessee.org>

*Holds special weekend retreats for the female loved ones of incarcerated men and women*



## Compassion Coalition

*in East Tennessee, giving spiritual encouragement and a chance to develop supportive relationships with other women in similar situations.*

Knoxville Public Safety Collaborative: 215-7521, <http://www.knoxsafety.org>

*A partnership between the police department, the Tennessee Board of Probation and nonprofit service agencies that provides supervision and treatment to high-risk offenders and their families, in order to help offenders cope with barriers to a successful transition into the community.*

### **How to Learn More**

- Call Prison Fellowship at (615-989-1455) for a schedule of training events.
- The Tennessee Community Resource Board sponsors the annual *Faith in Corrections Conference* to enhance the work of volunteers serving in Tennessee prisons and jails (see <http://www.faithincorrections.com>). This conference allows individuals to plug into education and training provided or endorsed by the TCRB.