

Few churches prioritize prison ministries

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NASHVILLE, Tenn.—Most Protestant pastors go to jail, at least for a visit, and want to help prisoners and their families. But their churches often lack the training or finances to operate an effective prison ministry.

Those are among the findings of a new phone survey of 1,000 Protestant senior pastors from Nashville-based LifeWay Research.

Researchers found widespread support among pastors for the idea of prison ministry. Eighty-three percent of pastors have visited a correctional facility. Almost all believe churches should help families of those incarcerated (97 percent) and provide care for ex-offenders when they are released (95 percent).

However, many pastors have little contact with people who have been incarcerated. Half of pastors say no one from their congregation has been jailed in the past three years. A third have seen one or two people from their church go to jail. One in six (17 percent) says three or more attendees have been jailed in that time.

Little contact with inmates or ex-offenders

About a third of pastors (31 percent) say no former inmates attend their church. Another third (36 percent) have one or two former inmates in their congregation. A third (33 percent) have three or more former inmates in their church.

Overall, few pastors have contact with many inmates or former inmates as a normal part of their ministry, said Scott McConnell, vice president of

LifeWay Research. So, prison ministry isn't a priority.

"When half the pastors haven't had someone from their church sent to jail, then prison ministry isn't on their ministry radar," McConnell said.

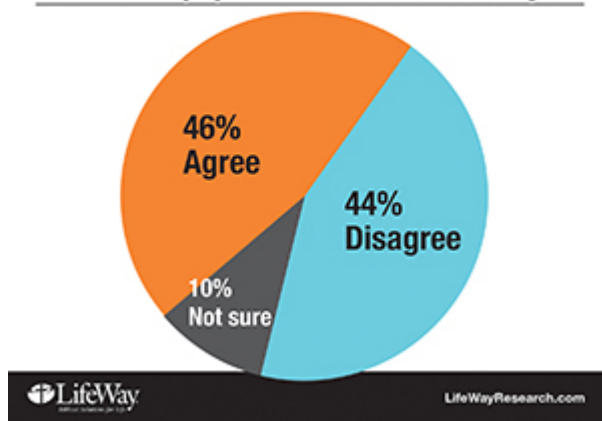
U.S. incarceration rate at record level

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.

More than a third (36 percent) 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 issues.

Among Protestant Pastors
The rapid growth in recent decades of the inmate population in America is unjust.



Half of pastors say the racial disparity among inmates is unjust. Four in 10 (39 percent) disagree. One in 10 (11 percent) is not sure.

Just under half (46 percent) say the rapid growth of the inmate population is unjust. A similar number (44 percent) disagree. Ten percent are not sure.

African-American pastors (78 percent) are most likely to say the rapid

growth in the overall number of inmates is unjust. Most Methodist (67 percent) and Presbyterian/Reformed pastors (72 percent) agree. Fewer Baptist (31 percent), Pentecostal (34 percent), Christian/Church of Christ (39 percent) and Lutheran (45 percent) pastors hold that view.

African-American pastors (88 percent) are also most likely to see racial disparities among inmates as unjust. Most Methodist (73 percent) and Presbyterian/Reformed (75 percent) pastors agree. Fewer Baptist (34 percent), Pentecostal (43 percent), Church of Christ/Christian (40 percent) and Lutheran (56 percent) pastors agree.

Where do we start?

Pastors often don't know how to start ministering to inmates, said Karen Swanson, director of the Institute for Prison Ministries at Wheaton College.

Other ministries, like distributing school supplies to kids or volunteering at a food pantry, are relatively easy to start, she noted. But ministry to inmates and their families is more difficult, she said, requiring special training and often a long-term commitment from volunteers.

About two-thirds of pastors cite a lack of training (62 percent) or volunteers (65 percent) as barriers to their church helping inmates and their families. Forty percent say they do not know where to start. Three in 10 (29 percent) say their church has too many other ministries.

Among Protestant Pastors

Five top barriers churches face in expanding prison ministry:



Note: Respondents could select multiple choices

One in five (21 percent) doesn't see a need for such ministry.

Money is an issue, as well. Half of pastors (48 percent) cite lack of finances as a barrier to ministry. A recent report from the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability found donations to prison ministries declined 6 percent from 2011 to 2014.

When churches do have a prison ministry, it often operates on an informal basis. Sixty-one percent of pastors say individual church members minister to families of inmates. Forty-five percent say church members minister in correctional facilities. Fifty-eight percent say church members help those leaving correctional facilities.

Swanson hopes more pastors will consider getting their churches involved in prison ministry. They may be surprised to find the ministry hits close to home.

"The mission field is in your backyard," she said. "Almost every county has a jail. And almost all prisoners are going to return home."

Churches will face an uphill challenge to grow their prison ministries, McConnell said.

"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."

Researchers conducted the phone survey of Protestant pastors March 9-24. The calling list was a stratified random sample, drawn from a list of all Protestant churches. Analysts used quotas for church size and Black Protestant denominations. Each interview was conducted with the senior pastor, minister or priest of the church called.

Analysts weighted responses by region to reflect the population more accurately. The completed sample is 1,000 surveys, providing 95 percent confidence the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 2.5 percent. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

The Institute for Prison Ministries in the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism at Wheaton College, the Correctional Ministries and Chaplains Association of the Assemblies of God and the Crossroad Bible Institute sponsored the study.