

# Texas Baptists seek to minister in a world of gray and white

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HUNTSVILLE—Some Texas Baptists believe prison ministry not only means care for inmates, but also for correctional officers and their families.



David Valentine, pastor of Covenant Fellowship, a Texas Baptist church in Huntsville, distributed candy during a recent Texas Baptist Men-sponsored event for correctional officers and employees at the Wynne Unit, and he frequently brings candy and water to staff at the prison.  
(PHOTO/Simple Joy Media)

That's a hard-to-comprehend concept for many correctional officers who work long hours in an "us-and-them" color-coded world of uniforms, where they wear gray and inmates wear white.

"The unchurched staff, in particular, see everything as gray and white. It blows their minds when they see us doing both offender ministry and officer ministry," said David Valentine, pastor of [Covenant Fellowship](#), a Texas Baptist congregation in Huntsville.

Many people outside the criminal justice system don't recognize the challenges faced by correctional officers—"Call them 'CO' or address them as 'boss.' Don't call them 'guard.' That's like a slur," Valentine advised.

Their jobs require officers to be firm, and many develop tough skins and suspicious attitudes when it comes to dealing with people, he observed.

"It's hard for them to trust. There's a real skepticism. They see so many games. The COs always ask, 'Why are they really doing this?'" he said. "They've seen jailhouse religion, and they don't believe it. It takes ministry on a consistent basis, rain or shine."

Officers work in a climate where it pays to question motives and eye people with suspicion. That creates stress on marriages and tension in families, he noted.

"It's hard for them to just flip the switch and turn that off when they go home," he said.



As a part of National Correctional Officers/Employees Appreciation Week, Texas Baptist Men volunteers served more than 600 fajita meals to correctional officers and family members outside the Wynne Unit in Huntsville, and they prepared another 150 meals they left for the night crew. (PHOTO/Courtesy of Texas Baptist Men)

But in spite of the pressure, they often are unwilling to accept marital counseling or help with management of finances, time and stress, said

Mark Hollis, executive director of [Inmate Discipler Fellowship](#), a ministry of Texas Baptist Men.

"If they come to you and say, 'I need help,' they risk being seen as weak," he said. "Their peers are watching them."

Calvin Page, chaplain at the maximum security Wynne Unit in Huntsville, agreed.

"Christians need to understand the officers' plight in terms of their families and the stresses they face," he said. "The officers work long hours dealing with bad people—at least they're bad if God hasn't changed their lives. It's means a lot for somebody to just say, 'We appreciate you.'"

Correctional officers work in high-pressure situations "in one of the darkest places in Texas," Hollis said. "When they see the church only ministering to men in white and not the ones in gray, the officers call us 'hug-a-thugs.'"

That's why Covenant Fellowship has two distinct volunteer teams who work in the prisons—one group to minister to offenders and another to minister among the correctional staff, Valentine explained.

"We're building trust, and that takes time with the staff," he said. "It demands coming on a consistent basis to hand out water, candy—just something that says we remember them and care about them."

While long hours on duty and Sunday shifts limit the ability of officers to attend church regularly, Covenant Fellowship seeks to minister to their families.



As one way of showing concern, the church established a scholarship fund to enable officers' children to attend summer camp. "Most of the families are very receptive," Valentine said.

Ministry among officers demands long-term commitment to prove some Christians really are "burdened for the gray," Hollis said. "It's a ministry of presence. They may not remember what you said, but they'll remember you were there and showed them some appreciation."

Recently, Texas Baptist Men sponsored a "thank you" event for officers on the grounds of the Wynne Unit in conjunction with National Correctional Officers/Employees Appreciation Week.

TBM Disaster Relief volunteers prepared and served more than 600 fajita dinners for officers and their families. They also cooked another 150 meals they left at the unit for the night crew.

The event created a climate of openness among an often-closed population, Hollis noted.

"God broke down the barriers," he said. "I had officers crying on my shoulder and allowing me to pray with them. What's normal is not normal when God is there."

During the event, members of Covenant Fellowship helped the TBM crew serve meals, and Valentine distributed candy. Officers received a sack with gospel literature included, and they were encouraged to fill the bag with candy they could take home to their children.

"There were people who were standing around, checking us out. I could tell they wanted to talk but were waiting for people to leave so we could have a private conversation. There was some meaningful ministry that came out of that," Valentine recalled.

Six officers and their families attended Covenant Fellowship the Sunday after the appreciation event, he noted.

"It blew me away when I saw the officers in church on Sunday," he said.

"Some we already had been working with, but they never had made the commitment to come to church before."