

# **CHURCH LEADERS**

By Buck Griffith, President

Church leaders should consider these thoughts before deciding *for* or *against* using the NLB curriculum or getting involved in the ripe mission fields of jails, prisons and substance abuse recovery.

Today, there are 7.5 million U.S. citizens directly engaged in the *criminal justice system*. This includes those with past felony convictions, those in county jails, juvenile detention centers, substance abuse treatment facilities, state/federal prisons, work release programs, restitution centers, or out on supervision . . . either on probation or parole.

Each of these represent 7.5 million dads, 7.5 million moms, and 7.5 million children - 12 years of age and under. This adds up to 30,000,000 souls – not counting at least 7.5 million *victims*. Then, add in siblings, grandparents, uncles/aunts, etc. Wow!

It is rare in contemporary America to find a church member whose life has NOT been touched by the “long arm of the law” or what we call the *criminal justice system*. If you add in those adversely affected as a result of substance abuse/addiction, the numbers are astronomical. Plus, we all work with or live next door to such.

NLBM maintains a *National Directory of Churches of Christ & Individual Christians Involved in Jail-Prison Ministries*. The most recent count reflects 1,000+ congregations and 2,300+ individual Christians. This represents one of the fastest growing and most fruitful ministries today.

Elders are clearly the “overseers” of the “flock” (sheep, church) according to Acts 20:28. As such, those in leadership must one day “give account” (Hebrews 13:17). No one just “assumes” this responsibility. They must be meet certain standards (Titus 1:5-9; Second Timothy 3:1-7). The “mission” of the church is to carry out what we like to call the *Great Commission* (Mark 16:15-16 . . . “preach the gospel to every creature”). We believe the *gospel* is God’s power to save. “Every creature” includes the over 2.4 million souls currently locked up in this country. Those at one of our National Jail & Prison Ministry Workshops wore T-shirts that said: “**Prisoners are Creatures Too!**” But it is easy to forget about them. “Out of sight – out of mind.”

In the USA, over 10,000 prisoners are baptized annually as a direct result of jail and prison ministries of *churches of Christ* . . . more than from any other single outreach ministry of the church. Most of those baptized never before had heard of the Lord’s church. Can this successful ministry be ignored any longer by church leaders?

More and more of these baptized believers are walking into congregations upon release. They are looking for the *churches of Christ* they were learned about while incarcerated. They are looking for congregations organized, worshipping, working, loving, and serving like the New Testament church they studied about in prison.

The church must be ready. What better way to “get ready” than for local churches to become involved . . . not just “tokenism” but a serious outreach effort. Not only should the congregation be involved in prison ministry but in substance abuse recovery. A vital part of the NLB curriculum is *Christians Against Substance Abuse* (CASA). Some 90% of those locked up have problems with addiction.

We have a “drug problem” in the church as well. It is rare to find a youth in the church that has not experimented with alcohol or other drugs before reaching his or her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. Left unaddressed, these members are headed for trouble – school drop-outs, lost jobs, lost marriages, and ultimately – the loss of freedom.

Reaching out to prisoners, ex-offenders, their family members and those struggling with addictions . . . is more rewarding than ministering to ourselves. Also, compassionate outreach attracts brethren who are “sick and tired” of funding the construction of gyms, buying travel buses and visiting theme parks.

Church leaders oversee the “entire” congregation. Consequently, the church should not become just a “prison ministry church” but also care for youth, singles, young families, senior adults, and the sick and dying. It is unrealistic to expect every church to be equally involved in prison ministry and substance abuse recovery but 100% “can” be *supportive* of such efforts and should be invited to do so. If your congregation is not involved, you should at least financially support a sister congregation that IS doing it.

Church leaders recognize that every member will not be effective in prison ministry but that “some” members will get involved in this mission field that will *never become active in any other local ministry*. Wise church leaders will provide and encourage training opportunities for member involvement. As leaders and decision-makers of the local church, you must choose what action will be taken concerning these millions of souls.

Those of us who have been energetically involved in this fruitful mission field for many years instruct new and prospective workers to go their church leaders seeking approval and encouragement. We never recommend that they bypass or try to “go around” their leaders. Many falsely “assume” that they would be met with rejection. “You don’t know *our* elders” is a frequently refrain. “They would never be in favor of a ministry like this.” We urge them to think more positively and approach you with accurate information.

We hope this helps. We are eager to answer any other questions. Feel free to contact us. You can learn much more by going to our website at [www.nlbm.org](http://www.nlbm.org). May God richly bless you as you consider future involvement in this evangelistic and rewarding effort.

Sincerely,

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