



A Pastor's View

**Dr. Karen Swanson, Director of the
Institute for Prison Ministries, Billy
Graham Center, Wheaton College**

This was a research study put on by LifeWay that interviewed a thousand Protestant pastors. And this was funded by the Institute for Prison Ministries as well as the Correctional Ministries and Chaplains Association, Assemblies of God as well as Crossroads, that all contributed to this research.

But I wanted to talk a little bit about just the whole idea of prison ministry and what comes to mind when you hear the word "prison ministry." And oftentimes it's a very narrow definition. It is basically somebody going into a jail or into a prison and sharing the gospel message with somebody. And that tends to be what we imagine when we think of prison ministry.

So I want to expand that vision and that definition and instead, I want you to think about correctional ministry. And I use the term correctional ministry because oftentimes youth are left out when we imagine prison ministry, because youth don't go to prisons. They go to detention. As well as the difference between jail and prison. Jail is at your local, community level. People awaiting trial. And then prison is after they've been convicted and sentenced, and typically more than a year.

Correctional ministry to me ... And I've always been focused on the holistic, compassionate care for people and not really dealt a lot with the whole justice issue. But as I've expanded my own definition in this area, I think it needs to include both of these areas. So we are gonna provide holistic, compassionate care, but also pursuing the justice as to why people are incarcerated in the first place. And that justice is for all. Not just ... As Vince talked about, there's no asterisk beside neighbor. We're gonna provide justice for all. Even the people who are demonized and approved by our society to demonize, such as sex offenders, who are often marginalized most of all.

I'm just gonna point out a few of the slides of the research. So 97% of the pastors agree that churches should care for families of the incarcerated, which Yasmine talked about as being a child with a parent incarcerated. The pastors also were ... 95% also agree that churches should provide resources and support for youth and adults leaving correctional facilities. We've talked quite a bit about reentry.

Another question was asked in which, if any, of the following activities your church currently involved? One is talks about imprisonment openly so that the topic is not tabooed, which should be on there. And that's 57%. So we talked about the shame and the stigma factor that oftentimes goes with people who are incarcerated.

Financially supports a ministry outside the church serving the incarcerated. Provides counseling for families of individuals returning from incarceration, 45%. Provides counseling for individuals returning from incarceration, 43%. Supports homes that help with reentry of people leaving incarceration, 24%. And then none of these, 17%.

You look at these statistics, and there's a gap between what pastors said the church should be doing and what is actually happening within the church. We do have ... We tend to be better at providing care than pursuing justice. At the same time, 97% said that the church should be doing something but yet there's only 57%. All of the other areas that were talked about were less than 57%. So there's this gap here, and so we need to raise that level and be consistent with what we believe.

Another slide talks about, which, if any, of the following ongoing activities does your church have? And this is individuals ministering in incarceration, a team from our church visiting or working in correctional ministry, or individual members again ministering with reentry or in our church having a formal ministry.

But again, oftentimes what happens is the activities that are happening within the church are oftentimes through individuals as opposed to as a church. So again, most of the correctional ministry is done by individuals. And some of you may be those individuals that are the only individuals in your church that are actually doing correctional ministry.

Another thing is, the people who are going into facilities are largely from Protestant churches. 90% of the volunteers. So we tend to do a really good job at going into facilities and providing bible studies. But at the same time, correctional ministry workers need support, accountability and training because oftentimes people are just going in on their own because God has given them that passion, versus really providing the support needed, the accountability and the training that's needed for them to be effective in that ministry.

But again, I think we do a pretty good job of providing holistic care. But I think again, there's this gap in pursuing justice. When I talk about pursuing justice, I'm talking about exposing and opposing systemic issues. Not just the individuals as talked about earlier, individual issues, but looking at systems such as the criminal justice system as to why are so many people locked up? Classism that comes into play. How the poor are marginalized. Racism that comes into play. The disproportionate of people of color behind bars. And then whole idea of mass incarceration defining our culture. As a society, this is an issue that we in the U.S. have a very unique ... have this problem or this issue that's going on.

I think sometimes we avoid these issues, dealing with them, because we see what God can do in the midst of ... Like in John's story. He came to Christ while he was incarcerated. So we tend to think that's okay then to lock somebody up, because then God can help them. But at the same time, we don't want to use bad things or use injustice that doesn't rationalize or doesn't justify injustice, because God can work through any circumstance. We have to not just ignore the justice issues that puts people incarcerated.

Some of the other research shows that almost 4-in-10 pastors say they have never addressed the growing correctional facility population in a sermon. And I tend to think that in the Christian evangelical world, this is not part of their world. Because again, people who have a loved one incarcerated, they don't talk about it. It's silent. Because the shame and the stigma, so they don't let people know. Or very few people know. And so it's not talked about from the pulpit.

Forty-six percent agree that the rapid growth of the inmate population in America is unjust. So again, there's lack of maybe understanding of the lower rates of crime and yet the higher rates of incarceration and what is all behind that mass incarceration. Half agree that the racial disparity within the inmate population in America is unjust. So again, these are the views of the Protestant pastors.

Twenty percent say their congregation is involved in advocacy efforts on issues related to the criminal justice system. So again, we tend to lean more toward the ministry aspect or holistic care, compassionate care, as opposed to the advocacy area.

Now there were some other findings. Some of the racial ... It broke down some of the racial differences among pastors. African-American pastors are more likely to address the growing correctional population than other ethnicities. And whites are more likely to select never addressing those. African-American pastors, 88%, are more likely to agree with the racial disparity within the inmate population in America is unjust. And African-American pastors, 42%, and other ethnicities, 36%, are more likely to select currently involved in advocacy than white pastors.

And I would say this is not an issue that is just for people of color. But this is, as we looked at it again thinking of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are people of color, from a white person, that this is our issue as well. Because they're my brother and sister. And so, looking at all of humanity and not, again, separating it out.

And so I think another area that we need to work on in this area is to get educated. To get educated on the facts of what is behind mass incarceration. And sometimes it's people hear that term and their eyes glaze over. They don't understand it. We need to be educated on what those facts are so we can communicate that.

We need to speak up for justice in areas in the system that are not just and understanding even what's happening in your local community as far as justice goes. But we also need to educate others. And I know there's several ministry leaders and you have thousands of volunteers. But

unless those volunteers are trained and educated and learn to speak up for justice, they're still gonna be Bob and Mary who are going into the church and doing a bible study, but that's it.

And the best way I think that we can have any kind of movement in this area, especially in the church, is we gotta talk about it. We gotta bring it up. Because if we don't bring it up and we're the people that care about this issues, then it's not gonna be heard. So we have to take the step of educating ourselves and talking about and educating others so that they have an understanding in what our biblical responsibility is.

David Platt writes this. "May we not sin through silence. May we realize that not to speak is to speak. Ultimately, may it be said of us that we not only held firm to the gospel, but that we spoke clearly with the gospel to the most pressing issues of our day." And mass incarceration is one of those pressing issues. Thank you.