



A New Mindset

**Miea Walker, Engagement
Coordinator at the Second Alliance**

Ed Stetzer: While Miea's walking over here, she's the engagement coordinator for the Second Chance Alliance with the North Carolina Justice Center. Social justice advocate who's passion is addressing the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and entry for incarcerated women. In 2015, she received her master's in social work from North Carolina State University. And her story's been in Christianity Today in 2016. Second Chance Alliance engagement coordinator here and is chair of the CCDA's Mass Incarceration Task Force as well. A lot of experience in this space, and a lot of wisdom that we look forward to gleaning from you today. And as we kind of take some time for dialogue here as well.

Ed Stetzer: So one of the things that we've talked a lot about today is what the church should do. Now, you've been actually speaking in this issue, so tell me, what should the church do in response to mass incarceration or maybe even more, how have you seen churches respond in a way that we might emulate?

Miea: Okay. From my personal experience, I've seen that there is a barrier between the prisoner and their church. There's a great disconnect. The church knows how to do three things really well. Like we know how to pray, we know how to feed, and we know how to preach a sermon. However, I feel like we miss the mark on developing relationships and being very intentional in establishing community. It creates this division of "us" versus "them". When you're looking at men and women, specifically when they're incarcerated and they're seeing volunteers come in, most likely they hear the constant theme of, "I want to pray for you," or "I'm so excited you're a Christian." And, "How can we have that conversation?" Or, "I really want to bring Jesus into the prison." And, so they have this mindset that Jesus is not already there. It often causes this conflict between men and women who are coming out because their view of the church is very warped. They're looking for the individual to just walk life with them.

Miea: Any person that enters into that sacred space, is a very intimate setting, it's an opportunity to really display the heart of Christ. And we have kind of warped that vision into a "fix it mentality" instead of really incorporating their stories with them and walking life with them and just really being present. Because I think that once you are in that space and they're able to trust you, that's when the aha moment for them comes, right. Because there's a level of trust. They start to see things that they want to do outside of prison. There's goals and things that they've been seeking to establish. And once they feel that and they feel that safety that they know they can achieve it. But,

when we come from the perspective of I'm here to make you better, it just causes them to digress and to obviously say, "I don't want have any relationship with the church."

Miea: And then again, it also reinforces the behavior that is currently existing. So, you want me to jump through all these hoops in order to get what I need? Then okay, I'm going to go ahead and do that. You're not helping me to do anything differently. You're just reinforcing my own behavior and my own systems that I deal with.

Ed Stetzer: Okay. So one of the things you talk about is the church needs to get proximate on things. And so as it relates to mass incarceration, social justices, how might we get proximate here?

Miea: You can't learn about mass incarceration from a distance, right? You have to get close. You're going to hear Glen Martin say, "that those closest to a problem are closest to the solution." I think that extends to the church. That in order for us to really embrace mass incarceration and in order to really advocate in that space that we have to be able to listen to the experts and that's not necessarily coming from the church, it's actually coming from the people who are most affected. Understanding what their needs are, understanding how we can embrace them and love them, and then really taking that position to sit back and just listen. Because that's a way that you can educate.

Miea: Also, in addition, we need to be really reading books. I mean, obviously I tell people, there's so many movies out there but let's start with 13th. You know, why as a congregation are we not, instead of having a service, go in one Sunday and say, "Today we're going to watch 13th. We're going to have this conversation." Because this is an issue that is very polarizing. It affects all communities, specifically black and brown communities. And for our African American Churches, and for our Caucasian churches we need to be able to say I want to make a difference, I want to make a change and I don't really know about this issue, so let's sit and watch it and let's figure out what we can do next.

Ed Stetzer: I think you're actually, I think the first person who's mentioned it today, so it might be worth just a description. People might not know. I recently sat down with my daughters and we watched it together, talked through some of it. So what is 13th?

Miea: So 13th is really talking about the thirteenth amendment and how it ties to slavery back in the day. And you can really get a, it's by Ava DuVernay, she produced it and it's on Netflix. And you really get a thorough history of how our country came to be. Starting back from the 70's when President Nixon, and she goes through all the different presidencies and all the policies that established to where our brothers and sisters are currently incarcerated serving 20 to 30 years. You hear from advocates. Glen Martin is one of them. And you hear from, I can't think of the lady's name, but she's from the SE group. There's various people that are throughout that conversation that give their either own experience or things that they've seen as a loved one to really talk about the effects of mass incarceration.

- Ed Stetzer: So, again, you see it on Netflix, and if you don't have Netflix, it's available different places you can watch as well. What should the role of the church be in fighting social justice issues related to justice-involved individuals? What does that look like? And it relates to people who are maybe in the midst of some of those systems or caught up in them?
- Miea: I think we need to challenge our congregations to become anchors of hope. We need the church to understand the call of justice. And, our Father is a father of justice and equity. And he has provided a roadmap for reconciliation. But we also need to unlearn the behaviors that we were taught and adopt a biblical response of hope. You can't have a relationship with God and not understand justice and mercy.
- Miea: But however, I feel like during this time and in this season of where we are, that our country has adopted this distortive racial narrative that was formed on the foundation of our country. We have really resurrected the narrative of hate and bigotry. And I truly believe it is that narrative which has caused us to choose a king instead of King of kings. If you look at what's happening, and you see the policies and things that are in place, it amazes me. I think after the election and we all woke up, I really had an opportunity to just get on my knees and cry because I was like, "Is this really what God wants for us?" But I don't think that we are really seeking God's face.
- Miea: I think the church has really become this empire, this monetary empire that it's all about money, it's all about things. It's all about the big churches, it's all about the quick and easy sermons and we're really not trying to reach out to the community and really be in relationship. We don't want to be in community with each other. It's this fast quick service, and it's out the door. And it's all about the money at the end of the day. So, it's just destroying communities, it's destroying people that are in church. I see so many men and women who come to me and say, "I just want to feel whole. I just, when I enter into this space I really want to be seen, I want someone to see me." And it's hurtful. So they're carrying around this baggage and not necessarily wanting to engage in the church. If I go, this is what they expect of me. They're trying fix me, they're going to change me, and I don't feel whole. I don't feel that I'm at a place of worship. I don't feel that I'm being taken care of or my needs are taken care of. And I don't think that I'm actually being seen or included as a part of conversation.
- Miea: And so we really have to work towards that. We have to change that. Because all the things that we see on TV every single day is really devastating. It's impacting so many people on so many levels in terms of mental health, and in terms of how you communicate with your kids. It translates to the school system. And I don't think it's going to change until we acknowledge that we're complicit in this response and the things that will happen. When you're allowing that to happen, when you see that on TV and you're just like, "Okay, it's nothing." And you go about your own day and you go to work and you're picking up your kids from school and everything's fine. We're complicit. The body of Christ is complicit in the actions and the things that are happening. And so until we call that out, it's not going to change.
- Miea: And it's not going to change specifically for our brothers and sisters that are literally walking out into this space. They have no idea. I mean, some of them may have access

to television and are seeing that, but what does it mean for them when they're walking out the door. Because the narrative right now is, "I don't really care about you." When you tell the police, oh it's okay. You don't have to necessarily be so nice. What are you telling them? You can't say I support prison ministry and don't understand Black Lives Matter. Not in this context and not today. There is a direct link to that. So when you ignore all of our social issues, which not only affects those of us who have been incarcerated, but it transfers to our kids, to our communities, to our financial development, and to the people that are coming home, and to our families and loved ones, to all institutions, and we turn a blind eye. It's going to continue to happen.

Ed Stetzer: Okay, let's press in on a few of those things. I think there was good stuff there that we want to talk about. So one of things you talked about, you were prophetic and critical church. Matter of fact saying, may be all about the money. Of course I've been in a lot of churches, a lot of church plants, I know a lot of churches even here are just trying to do ministry and trying to think about this, so what do you mean by that? I think we all see there are bad examples out there, but I'm thinking we're seeing there are a whole lot of good examples in here that want to actually be known for showing and sharing the love of Jesus and the brokenness.

Miea: There are some good examples out there, absolutely. By no means am I saying that the church as a whole. Just from my experience and things that I've seen and I'm going to specifically talk about North Carolina. You know, we have a lot of stuff going on, but in terms of our churches, and the churches that I've visited or the churches that I've had the opportunity to speak, it really comes from a very monetary quick and easy perspective. You want the say the feel good scriptures. We want to have praise and worship. We're passing around the new box and then after that, it's over. And so I'm not seeing anyone have intentional community and relationships.

Miea: And even when I examine, like, what are you doing, where's your after school program, what are you doing for the kids in the community? How are you, not just working with or loving on the members of your church, how are you branching out to their neighborhoods and to the community? And we're not doing that.

Ed Stetzer: Okay. And in that place I think I'd be on the same page with you, the desire to be more about the Kingdom work. More about in the midst of brokenness. I think their. But I think a lot of churches are trying to work towards that direction. We're thankful you're here, we're thankful for those who are watching on live stream. We want more not less of that.

Ed Stetzer: One of the things I think you said the that is really helpful is for a lot of us, maybe watching on live stream or who are here, we're engaged in prison or jail ministry, your word is that we need to care about issues of systemic injustice. On other words, not just ministering in prison, but you mentioned caring about Black Lives. You mentioned caring about, whatever it may be, racial systemic injustice and more. So, and I think this is where, I think if I go preach and I say, "I want you to care about prison ministry." That's almost, maybe it's not an easy case, because Dr. Swanson shares with us that it's not, but it's an easier case to say, than, and it's linked that you would care about justice issues. But we're talking mass incarceration, we're talking about justice issues. So help

us again, how do you link the fact that we should be ministering in and around correctional ministry, and also care deeply about justice issues? Bring those together for us.

Miea: For those that have experience with the criminal justice system.

Ed Stetzer: Yeah, because I think a lot people even watching now would say, "Okay, we got a Bible study, I go in every Tuesday to the jail." But you're saying that's not enough. You got to care about the systemic issues.

Miea: You got to care about the systemic issues, and you got to care about the person themselves.

Ed Stetzer: Yeah. Talk to me more about that.

Miea: So, there's a lot of mental health issues that are ongoing inside the prison system. I'll say for my sisters, and specifically women, I've been really working to highlight the narrative of women in prison, two thirds of women in prison are of color. The majority of them are experiencing trauma in terms of domestic violence, in terms of rape. There's a history there that's not been addressed. And it also translates to how they parent. How they're connecting relationships. A lot of that comes from very dysfunctional relationships. It is also a lot of the stories are generationally inherited. So the narratives that they've grown up in. The narratives that they've seen from their mom and their dad and from their grandmother as it translates to them, and they continue to perpetuate that because they don't see anything different. And so we're not talking about mental health.

Miea: As far as a prison ministry, we're not addressing those things. We see the things that are very easy and simple. We don't really want to dive in do the hard work. And we have to. We have to. If we want to look at a holistic community and we want to talk about restorative justice, we want to talk about really supporting our brothers and sisters when they're coming home, we have to go the extra mile. Specifically today. Our narrative today, really just hits head on on the fact that we have to go more, we have do more.

Ed Stetzer: There's more to do.

Miea: Absolutely.

Ed Stetzer: You have written a lot particularly on the relationship of women in incarceration and care deeply about that. So what are the challenges and the trends of women in incarceration?

Miea: Recently we had a report from the institute of justice, it's one of my research websites that talked about women in jail. So we always know about women in prison, but they did a report on women in jail and so, the number of women in jail had increased from under 8000 to 110,000. Many of the women in prison and jail experience physical and

sexual abuse, PTSD, high rates of HIV, and addiction and mental illness. And their engagement in the criminal justice system is directly related to their intimate partner relationships. So this intimate partner violence, again, sexual abuse, and most often dysfunctional relationships.

Miea: The sad thing is that many of these women who report victimizations are experiencing trauma and continue to be vulnerable and reexperience the victimization primarily because when you are incarcerated. And this is for men and women. When you are incarcerated, you're going through that strip search. You're going through body searches. And I can tell you it's very very uncomfortable and sometimes degrading of what they do when they're strip searching you. And a lot of the times this happens when you're going out on doctor's visit, or if you are coming back from visitation. So you think about the very first time that a woman enters the prison system and they're saying, "Take off all your clothes. Strip. Squat. Spread your legs." And they're touching you in all those inappropriate places. And there's nothing you can say about it.

Miea: But, because they haven't been diagnosed, and unless you literally come in with a doctor's note saying that this individual suffers from A, B, C, or D, they're not going to send you to a therapist. Unless something happens. Unless you snap. Unless you have that record. They're not going to send you there. So you're thrown into the most foreign environment, a strange environment, and you're stuck in a space where you're like, I don't know what to do. And yet I just felt violated. And then you're with other women, who may have the same type of aggression, and again, they're only doing what they're taught. As a means of survival. So, if I see that you have something that I want, then I'm going to take it, and I will take it by any means necessary. And if that means I have to strip you down and do that, then I will.

Miea: But those are things that we're not talking about that affects not what happens inside, but affects them as they're transitioning home. It's one of those issues that are not necessarily talked about. We don't talk about mental health for women, and we don't talk about the trauma. And so, for me, I've been advocating about we need to instill, have trauma informed care training for the staff and for our officers, and then for people who want to come in and do prison ministry. For our churches, they need to be trained. Specifically for in the state of North Carolina, the only thing we do is the Prison Rape Elimination Act. So we do it for the sponsors and volunteers, and we do it for the staff.

Miea: But in terms of trauma informed care tools, that need to be trained for our jail staff members as well as prison staff members, they're not doing that in my state and they should. And so that's one of the mantles I've been picking up. We have to change the conversation because if we want our sisters to be whole and to go home and to really be a good parent, then we need to address those things that are impacting their ability to do so.

Ed Stetzer: That's a good word. Would you join me in thanking Miea Walker.