

# THE CHRISTIAN LAWYER®

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## Shining the light of **Christ** into Prisons

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**Beyond the Walls**  
*by Lori Young*

**Developing Christian  
Character**  
*by Melissa Scott*

**We Must Uphold  
RLUIPA's Promise**  
*by Lori Kepner*

## FROM THE PRESIDENT & CEO DAVID NAMMO



David Nammo  
President & CEO

“A CorrLinks account? What is that?”

This was a question I asked myself some years ago. Do you know?

I asked because a family member ended up in federal prison for a non-violent crime, and I wanted to keep in touch with them. The only way to send emails into a federal prison is through the CorrLinks system. My brother laughed at me and said he couldn't believe as an attorney I didn't have an account. But I never engaged in criminal law at any level. He unfortunately had an account because a friend of his ended up in jail.

I won't get into the details, but I went to visit my family member in jail—which was my first visit to a jail. It was a minimum security federal prison but ultimately a horrible place: this jail was shut down because the warden and some of the security guards went to jail themselves for sexually abusing the inmates. Prisoners live at the mercy of those in authority over them and have very little recourse. It was a miracle that a little justice was done in this case. And I can't imagine those in the prisons in countries other than the U.S.

If you are like me, you probably participate in Angel Tree. It is the one time a year we think about prisoners and their children. But unless you have someone in jail, I'll bet you really don't think about prisoners or jails or anything in that universe. That was me until my family member ended up in jail.

Amazingly, Jesus includes visiting people in prison as one of the points that will be brought up on Judgment Day. And honestly, it is probably only because my family member ended up in prison that I visited jail.

For many people in the general public, they associate attorneys with prisons. The TV shows, the movies, and just a general impression is that most attorneys know criminal law. Admit it, how many times has a family member accused of a crime (from a misdemeanor to something bigger) called you out of the blue for help? And of course, how do you explain to them that your experience in trademark/estate planning/patent/bankruptcy/you name it is not going to help them.

What I have learned is that prisons are not good places. They are not places of hope. They are barely places of rehabilitation. It is why prison ministry is so important. It is one of the few rays of hope in any jail. Thankfully, my family member—despite the abuse, the harm, and the daily hopelessness—continues to grow spiritually in jail.

As you read these articles, I hope you are prompted to pray for those in prison and maybe even engage in or at least encourage the many who are following the call to prison ministry. The message of Jesus is often the only hope in the darkest of places, and we are the people called to spread that good news.

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Shining the light of  
**Christ**  
into Prisons

## I WAS SCARED OF PRISON MINISTRY UNTIL I LEARNED JESUS WAS ALREADY BEHIND BARS

*“Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them.” Hebrews 13:3a (ESV).*

The guard asked incredulously if we really wanted to go in there. He certainly was afraid to go in. After all, Lurigancho Prison outside Lima, Peru, was one of the largest and most dangerous in Latin America—in part because of the overcrowded conditions (I counted eight inmates per cell in the two-story wing we were about to enter). That day in March 2003, God began to correct for me the first and prevailing fear of prison ministry: *It is unsafe. I might get jumped.*

But the volunteer from Prison Fellowship Peru who led us into the first Lurigancho cellblock (without guards) was a woman, Nelly, who strode inside fearlessly, greeting inmates by name. She had recently convinced the warden to dedicate space in the prison for a playground for the 2,500 children who come with their mothers for visitation and wander unsupervised. She had become like a mother to these 7,000 men. I had nothing to fear.<sup>1</sup>

Lesson Two in overcoming fear came in a political prison outside Conakry in Guinea. We stood in front of one of eight cellblocks. Again, I had no idea what to expect if the guard pulled back the iron bar bolting the solid steel door; and no guard would venture in. Just then the Holy Spirit reminded me of Je-

sus’ revelation in Matthew 25:35-40 that He would already be inside that cellblock with the prisoners! Enoch, our volunteer from Prison Fellowship Guinea, motioned for the guards to let us go in. It was pitch-black (until our eyes could adjust), but Enoch charged forward, lifting up his arms and voice with shouted praise to God and hallelujahs to the Lord Jesus. (I could swear I heard the flutter of demons fleeing out the back window grate!) I have never sensed more strongly the presence of the Spirit of Jesus as I did following Enoch’s outstretched arms and as I shook hands with each of the 40 inmates (most of whom would never have a trial).

There are many other myths that may keep you and me from prison ministry. All can be dispelled. Here are some:

*This is complicated work. Leave it to the chaplains and professional volunteers.*

Yes, you first need orientation by the chaplain. And you need to know and follow the rules. But Jesus will ask us, not just the professionals, whether we visited Him in prison (Matt. 25:31-46).



*Seek justice. Love mercy. Restore hope.*



## Connecting incarcerated parents with their kids.

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Angel Tree doesn't end after the Christmas season—your church can participate all year long! You can develop ongoing relationships with Angel Tree families, inviting them to Easter services, youth activities, and more. Discover the difference your church can make for families impacted by incarceration.



Register for Angel Tree Christmas using the QR code or at [mychurch.prisonfellowship.org](http://mychurch.prisonfellowship.org).



*It is completely foreign to my experience. I have no Christian testimony or upbringing to which the inmates can relate.*

I too was lost and now am found, was blind but now I see (John 9:25). Everything else is details and variations on the same theme. Besides, your presence, handshake, eye contact, and the resulting dignity are gifts and testimony in themselves.

*Prison ministry is not my spiritual gift.*

Love is (Galatians 5:22). If I am a Jesus follower, I am indwelt by His Spirit and, therefore, I have the capacity to love.

*They are all guilty and earned their punishment.*

Due process doesn't mean actual guilt. In the United States, almost all plead guilty out of fear of a worse sentence if they exercise their right to trial. And our county jails are full of short-termers who have not yet been tried or convicted.

In foreign prisons, even minimal due process is rare. After I had visited every cell in his central prison, the Minister of Justice for Burkina Faso admitted that very few of his 753 male inmates (baking in a four-story prison designed for half that number) would ever have a trial. Heck, it was all he could afford, he said, to give them their one daily meal (millet porridge).

*It is uncomfortable, especially those of us white males walking among inmates disproportionately of color. As an attorney, I am used to being fully briefed, prepared, and in control. Visiting a jail or prison, I am not any of those.*

True. Get past skin color and look at our common humanity. I am not different inside.

*I am better than all of them.*

False. But for the grace of God, I might be in the next cell. Lord, help me get over myself, my false superiority. The ground is level before the Cross.

*Let someone else answer "the call" to prison.*

In most U.S. prisons, there is not an overabundance of visitors or ministers. At most, you will only find programming from the local Protestant church or ministry, a weekly Catholic Mass, maybe an imam and a Toastmasters class. The fields are white for harvest, Jesus said (John 4:35). If Jesus calls you to prison ministry, listen. Avoiding God's call won't work out too well. Just ask Jonah.

For this issue of *The Christian Lawyer*, we invited our brethren at Prison Fellowship to lend their perspective on this area of ministry and responsibility. Also, each of CLS' four ministries—to attorneys and law students, as well as through Christian Legal Aid and the Center for Law & Religious Freedom—share the latest.

Read expectantly, friend.



**STEVE MCFARLAND** practiced employment, commercial, and religious freedom litigation in Seattle; directed the religious freedom and pro-life advocacy ministry of Christian Legal Society (1991-99 and again currently); was the first executive director of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a federal agency; worked on prison reform at Prison Fellowship International and in the Office of the Deputy Attorney General, U.S. Department of Justice; and served World Vision/USA as its chief legal officer (2009-23).

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For female readers here, try visiting nonviolent women occupants in your local county jail. Many of them have only been accused but not yet tried and are only there because they couldn't afford bail.

## FINDING MY PLACE IN THE STORY OF REDEMPTION:

### How Encountering the Justice System Transformed My Legal Work

One night near Thanksgiving, as a young magistrate in Virginia, I sat across from a woman who had been arrested on drug charges. She looked about my age. As I watched her face, pale and disoriented, compassion welled up in my heart. “I wish I could do something to help her,” I thought.

But there was nothing. I could only decide that yes, there was probable cause for her arrest, conduct a bail determination, and detain her until the drugs had faded from her system.

She was released the next morning with papers reminding her of a court date yet to come.

That night, she appeared before me again on another charge. And again the next evening. Each time, the effect of the drugs was more visible on her body. I was watching a life deteriorate in real time, inches from my face, and despite my position, I felt powerless to share with her the hope or help she really needed.

Before becoming a magistrate, I had never interacted personally with the criminal justice system. A lifelong rule follower, I had never been arrested, and no one close to me had ever spent time in prison. I trusted that the system worked as it should. Once I was a magistrate, I realized that, despite its many virtues and protections, America’s criminal justice system sits at the intersection of addiction, mental health crises, poverty, and cyclical brokenness. Under-resourced and complex, it delivers a form of justice, but it’s not built to restore lives.

In that moment, as the same scared young woman appeared before me for the third time, God planted a seed: I was going to do something to help people like her. Truly help.

#### The power of second chances

In 2015, after a year as a magistrate, I had the opportunity to join the advocacy staff of Prison Fellowship as a policy associate. I had met Heather Rice-Minus, who was then the organization’s director of government affairs, through her work on Capitol Hill. The ministry, founded by Chuck Colson in 1976, has a history of bridging partisan divides to advance human dignity in criminal justice reform through state and federal legislation. I knew I had found a way to take a step beyond administering

justice to shaping its course for vulnerable Americans in ways that would help to restore lives.

In my early days at Prison Fellowship, one of the first issues I tackled was improving outcomes for young people who were being held accountable for delinquency. That campaign helped to greatly reduce the number of young people sent to prison in Virginia, an important step toward reforming the state’s approach to juvenile justice. It also encouraged lawmakers to consider the value of shortening sentences and maintaining community connections to disrupt harmful cycles for young people. My legal training became useful in new ways as I weighed approaches to crime that could protect the public from harm while honoring perpetrators’ God-given capacity for change.



Another of the first state-level advocacy campaigns I worked on with Prison Fellowship was driver’s license suspension in Virginia. At the time, Virginia routinely suspended driver’s licenses for unpaid fines and fees accrued through people’s time in the criminal justice system. Though intended to recoup revenue for the courts, the policy had the opposite effect. Without a license, especially in rural areas lacking public transportation, Virginians could not get to work. Without a paycheck, they could not repay their mounting debts.

Working alongside advocates and attorneys from a variety of organizations, Prison Fellowship called for a change to this counterproductive policy. In July 2019, Virginia law was amended to prohibit courts from suspending driving privileges solely for



failure to pay court fines and fees. Additionally, existing suspensions were removed, and any related reinstatement fees were waived.

That campaign revealed to me how often we expect people with a criminal record to overcome obstacles to succeed—and then punish them when they fail. More than 70 million Americans have a criminal record. These records, even if nonviolent or long in the past, can limit access to employment, housing, education, professional licensure, and other opportunities and benefits.

Second chances have increasingly become an area of common ground in criminal justice reform. Whether we are motivated by public safety, tax revenue, opportunity, fairness, or compassion, there are significant reasons to support pathways to redemption for those who have served their time. If our end goal is to have successful, productive neighbors and safe communities, then we must reexamine every stage of our criminal justice system, from arrest to re-entry, and ask whether it serves that aim.

## The vanguard of transformation

With Prison Fellowship, I have used my legal training to build bridges with state and federal legislative offices. Alongside my team, I strived to be a trustworthy, knowledgeable partner who could graciously represent God's heart toward all those impacted by incarceration.

I got to know so many of the people impacted by the criminal justice system—as valued colleagues, dedicated volunteers, and as brothers and sisters in Christ. They brought me back constantly to the foot of the cross, reminding me that we share the same redemption story: despite the ways in which we have fallen short, the Lord invites us to be participants in His grand story of restoration and renewal. I hope that every Christian attorney will pursue opportunities to go behind bars and experience God with incarcerated men and women. Like me, they will

see both the challenges and the unexpected hope that characterize life after sentencing.

Today, people impacted by incarceration matter to me in an echo of the way they have always mattered to our heavenly Father, and one of the most exciting frontiers of my advocacy work has been amplifying their voices.

When I was a teenager facing a season of personal crisis, I read my Bible voraciously at night, asking God for answers. I felt led by the Holy Spirit to cling to the words of Psalm 119:46, “I will speak of your statutes before kings and will not be put to shame” (NIV).

For years, I kept that verse stored in the back of my mind, uncertain what it would mean for my future. Then, at a recent event, those words came racing to the forefront.

It was a day of concerted advocacy on Capitol Hill. Prison Fellowship's Justice Ambassadors—many of whom have had personal experiences with the criminal justice system—had prepared for weeks to meet with their representatives. They would urge leaders to pursue policies that restore lives, holding together the need for accountability, redemption, and justice for victims.

As I thought of what I could say to encourage them, the words that came out were from Psalm 119:46. I realized that the fullness of God's long-ago promise was for these brave advocates, who, once unheard by the system, have become the vanguard of transformation.



**KATE TRAMMELL** serves as senior vice president of legal, advocacy, and research at Prison Fellowship, overseeing its groundbreaking work to reform criminal justice and shape public policy to help restore the lives of people made in

the image of God. A graduate of Liberty University School of Law, she previously worked as a magistrate in Virginia.

# Why Second Chances Matter for Returning Citizens

For 50 years, Prison Fellowship has upheld a simple but profound truth: every person is created in God's image, and no life is beyond His reach. As followers of Jesus, we are all the beneficiaries of the ultimate second chance. Therefore, we are called to remember the vulnerable, the lost, the poor, and those in prison.

But what happens to those who, after facing the consequences of their crime, leave prison? Most will struggle because of the nearly 44,000 barriers they encounter, like access to employment, housing, and education. Their sentences may be over, but now they face hurdles preventing them from pursuing a second chance.

## That is why, in 2017, Prison Fellowship designated April as Second Chance Month.

It's a nationwide effort to help unlock second chances for the estimated 80 million Americans living with a criminal record. Second Chance Month brings together more than 1,100 churches, partners, and organizations to raise awareness, remove unnecessary barriers, and build a society in which redemption is possible.

As a formerly incarcerated person myself, I understand better than most the hardship these barriers create for returning citizens. I am deeply grateful for the second chance I received that helped to ensure my personal and professional success. It is not an overstatement to say that receiving a second chance changed the trajectory of my life.

**Justice That Restores.** At Prison Fellowship, we take a restorative approach to justice. Inside prisons across the United States, Prison Fellowship and church partners introduce people to the God who heals, restores, and transforms. We offer incarcerated men and women—whether they are believers or not—the opportunity to encounter Jesus through thought-provoking content and caring volunteers, enabling them to discover their purpose and become agents of change, both inside and outside prison.

Prison Fellowship also equips Christians to advocate for justice that upholds human dignity—advancing proportional punishment, promoting constructive prison culture, and empowering second chances for people who have paid their debt to society and wish to step into a bright and healthy future.

**Champion Second Chances all Year Long.** While April is nearly over, I hope you consider joining Prison Fellowship and thousands of others in championing second chances all year long. Working together, let's open doors, change perceptions, and help formerly incarcerated men and women get a fresh start.

### Seven Ways to Unlock Second Chances

1. Educate yourself and others on the struggles of having a criminal record.
2. Pray for people with a criminal record.
3. Promote Second Chance Month on social media.
4. Step forward in your community to help people find housing, employment, transportation, childcare, and more.
5. Take other advocacy actions to support voting rights and other second chance opportunities.
6. Become a Justice Ambassador to inspire the Church, change the culture, and advance justice that restores.



By Sammy Perez

*Sammy Perez is the senior director of Grassroots and Reintegration at Prison Fellowship. After rediscovering faith in Christ, Sammy Perez, who spent time in prison, graduated from Liberty University with a degree in psychology, specializing in addiction and recovery, and earned a master's degree in professional counseling. His expertise focuses on organizing and coaching Christians to pursue justice and facilitating reentry for people returning from prison. Perez is an adjunct professor at the Catholic University of America and enjoys life with his wife and four children.*

For more information, visit



## AN ATTORNEY'S SECOND CALLING:

### How a Defense Attorney Found a Home in Prison Ministry

The last time I visited death row, in late 2021, was much like my previous visits. After checking in at the entrance, I walked down a long hallway that sloped underground to the tiers of one-man cells. My client was waiting in a windowless room—directly below the execution chamber—with a small square table and three chairs. The recirculated air was suffocating. Through the closed door, we heard men shouting, passing messages from tier to tier.

It was a familiar scenario, but this visit carried one heavy distinction. On this day my client, a man of faith, was scheduled to be executed, and he had asked me to be a witness to it. For months, we had talked on the phone and visited frequently. The pardon and parole board had recommended clemency several weeks earlier, but we had heard nothing from the governor. Unless he called, my client faced death within hours.

“What do you think will happen?” my client asked, as he often did.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But I’ve been praying for you daily, and every time I do, I’m filled with an incredible sense of peace.”

#### A process of discovery

As director of correctional programs for Prison Fellowship in Texas, I know today that prison affords men and women opportunities to experience God. I don’t bring Jesus into prison; He’s already there, and when I go through the front gate, I’m certain to meet Him among my incarcerated brothers and sisters.

But growing up, I never envisioned myself working behind bars, or even in a courtroom. In college, I aspired to a career with the U.S. State Department. I attended law school hoping that a legal education would help me reach that goal, but an evidence class with a fascinating professor changed my trajectory. After graduation, I went to work for a criminal defense attorney, which led to trial and appellate work in federal public defenders’ offices in Virginia, Wisconsin, and Oklahoma.

I found the practice of law deeply rewarding. I had always been a problem solver. I enjoyed the strategy, the intellectual challenge, and, if I’m honest, the opportunity to prop up my ego by demonstrating my prowess in the courtroom.

I was not a believer in Christ for the first half of my legal career. In fact, I was aggressively atheistic, but I still considered the law a calling. I saw it as my chance to help people. I was interested

in what had happened in my clients’ life journeys to bring them to such a low point, and I used these often heart-wrenching details to fight for the best possible result to their case. But over time, I began to see my use of the details of their lives as more exploitative than redemptive. I was using their stories to improve their outcomes in the legal system, but I wasn’t changing their trajectories.

#### From pain to purpose

As I mined my clients’ stories for their defense, my own story was reaching a crisis.

My dad had been abusive. One night when I was 13, I heard my mom take a particularly violent beating. Afterward, she loaded my sisters and me into the car, and we left, taking refuge with relatives. Angry and confused, I started abusing alcohol and drugs. My dependence continued for decades.

I got married, had children, and built a thriving legal career, but despite the outward appearance of success, my alcoholism continued. I tried repeatedly to quit but couldn’t shake its hold.

My breaking point came in 2008, when I drove home from my office under the influence. I was arrested and taken to the police station. A friend picked me up and took me home, where I spent the rest of the night wrestling with my demons and with God.

My then-wife had been taking our children to church, and I had started tagging along in the weeks before my arrest. I was working more than 70 hours a week, and while I told myself I had no interest in the sermons, sitting beside my kids in the pews was one of my few opportunities to be with them. So, despite my strident atheism, I started learning about a man called Jesus.

On the devastating night of my arrest, kneeling on the bathroom floor, I begged Jesus to show me if He was real by taking away my need for alcohol.

God was the last thing I tried and, the first thing that worked. My dependence on alcohol ended, and my journey with Jesus began.

I continued practicing law and defending clients. The cases I took after my conversion—culminating with my exclusively handling death row cases after 2015—were some of the most challenging of my career. But with Christ in my life, I was able to pursue them with a greater sense of empathy and humility.



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I could see my own need for Jesus reflected in the lives of my clients—no matter that I wore a suit, and they wore a prison uniform. With some, like the man I was defending in 2021, I had the opportunity to build a relationship that has continued through today.

### The knock on the door

That last morning on death row, our long wait ended when we heard the warden's telltale knock. The governor had called, commuting my client's sentence to life in prison. Although there was no exuberant celebration, the tension dissipated, and a somber peace took its place. We felt the presence of Christ as intensely as if He stood next to us in that tiny room.

I still think about that moment every day. That experience of God's presence behind bars was like a knock on the door of my heart, inviting me to step into a new, related path. Because God delivered me from so much pain, I knew I had to help the men and women I had previously represented find the same healing I had. I would use my professional experience of the legal system combined with my personal experience of His grace to walk beside incarcerated people.

After a period of discernment, I retired from the law and pursued an opportunity with Prison Fellowship. Today, I lead a team of 12 people encountering God every day alongside men and women in prison.

As a litigator, I made countless closing arguments. I framed narratives for judges and juries and hoped they found my version compelling. Today, I still embrace the power of storytelling, but I'm helping people in prison understand where they came from and what patterns drive their choices. I help give them hope that the story isn't over—that they can write different endings.

In prison ministry, I see more clearly how the criminal justice system can help people choose new paths. But to do that, we must recognize that justice doesn't stop at sentencing. People in prison need effective rehabilitative programming. More than 95% of incarcerated people will return to the community, and the system itself can impose trauma. If people are coming back to my neighborhood, I would rather have them treated with compassion and fairness, educated to be good citizens, than have them mistreated, angry, and ill-prepared. Unless our crimi-

nal justice system helps people change, we will never exit the generational cycle of trauma and sin.

### Writing new endings

Recently, I attended an event at the Prison Fellowship Academy in Richmond, Texas—a year-long, in-prison program that helps participants envision a new way of living through caring staff and volunteers, thought-provoking content, and intentional community. Every year, we have an Angel Tree Christmas party at that prison. Children come to spend a day building memories with their fathers, and at the end, the dads give their children presents. It's an opportunity to restore family relationships, because when a parent goes to prison, the entire family serves that sentence. Through its programs and church partners, Prison Fellowship helps to foster reconciliation so families and our society can heal.

I'm grateful for my present vantage point, but I wish that I had understood earlier the opportunity I had to make a difference. While it matters whether attorneys help achieve the best legal outcomes possible for our clients, it is also important to recognize and preserve the human dignity that the process all too often strips from them. Attorneys are uniquely positioned to help incarcerated clients begin rebuilding their broken lives. I encourage attorneys to visit prison for themselves, see what it's like, and volunteer if they can. With more firsthand experience, they can address clients' fears and prepare them for the day-to-day realities of prison.

We are a group to whom much has been given and of whom much is expected. Whether it's volunteering in prison or taking on pro bono cases, we can find ways to help people write new endings for their stories.



**MIKE LIEBERMAN** is Prison Fellowship's director of correctional programs for Texas. A graduate of the University of Wisconsin and the American University Washington College of Law, he was a federal public defender in the

Eastern District of Virginia and ran the federal public defender's office in Madison, Wisconsin, for a decade. He then handled capital habeas cases in Oklahoma for seven years. After retiring from law in 2022, he joined the staff of Prison Fellowship. He lives near Amarillo, Texas, with his wife, Beth.

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## REDEMPTION THROUGH EXPUNGEMENT

*An unlikely partnership between a county prosecutor and a formerly incarcerated mayor led to a life-changing expungement program in Kansas.*

Criminal records tend to follow formerly incarcerated men and women wherever they go, creating significant barriers to employment and housing for years—and sometimes decades—after returning from prison. For those who have left criminal behavior in the past, expungement can help remove those barriers, clearing the way for second chances.

But expungement comes with its own barriers. A 2020 University of Michigan Law School study found that among those legally eligible for expungement, only 6.5% obtain it within five years. Those who do obtain expungement have extremely low subsequent crime rates, and their wages increase by more than 22%.<sup>1</sup>

Through expungement programs, Christians with legal expertise can play a crucial role in the restoration and redemption of those who have served time and are ready to positively impact their communities. Expungement can position those with a criminal record to thrive as parents, neighbors, employees, and citizens. Jermaine Wilson is living proof.

### Breaking the cycle of incarceration

Growing up in Leavenworth, Kansas, Jermaine didn't have a lot of hope. His father struggled with drug addiction and cycled in and out of prison. "It wasn't a matter of if I was going to prison," Jermaine says. "It was a matter of when."

Sure enough, Jermaine was arrested at age 12. Craving acceptance, he got involved in a gang and began selling and using drugs, which led to incarceration on a robbery charge at age 15. Jermaine was released from a juvenile detention center at 19, but his freedom lasted only 18 months.

At age 21, he began to ask himself tough questions behind bars: How did I get here? Is this the life I want for my son? "I wanted to be present in my son's life, but I knew I needed help,"

Jermaine says. "I cried out and said, 'God, I need help.' That's when God sent Prison Fellowship into my life."

Through the year-long Prison Fellowship Academy, Jermaine found healthy community with men who encouraged and supported him. He also encountered Jesus. "God met me in my prison cell and transformed my entire life," he says. "I no longer saw myself as a failure or a mistake. I saw myself as a man of God—a person with a purpose. . . . It took me losing my freedom to discover my purpose."

Jermaine also connected with his son through Prison Fellowship Angel Tree, which enables local church volunteers to provide children with the gospel message, a Christmas gift, and a handwritten note on behalf of the incarcerated parent.

Jermaine served his time and walked out of prison on December 9, 2010. But like so many formerly incarcerated citizens, returning to life outside prison walls presented a new set of challenges.

Jermaine entered a different prison—one without razor wire or handcuffs. He had completed his sentence, but society continued to punish him for his past. Jermaine became intimately familiar with some of the nearly 44,000 barriers to opportunity those with a criminal record face. Landlords refused to rent to him. Employers wouldn't hire him. And Jermaine's plight wasn't unique. About one-third of American adults live with a criminal record, and according to the National Consumer Law Center, about 94% of employers and 90% of landlords use background checks to screen applicants for an arrest or conviction record.<sup>2</sup>

With support from his wife, Jermaine persevered. Eventually a cleaning job led to other jobs, including a position in the dining facility at the U.S. Army's Fort Leavenworth. But when the government tightened its security clearance to exclude those with a criminal record, Jermaine began researching

the expungement process. He discovered he was eligible for expungement under Kansas law, but there was a problem: he didn't have the money.

While it's possible to complete expungement paperwork without assistance from an attorney, the process is confusing and overwhelming for those without legal experience. And for people facing underemployment and housing instability after incarceration, the cost of legal representation can be difficult to manage. Jermaine eventually found an attorney to work on his expungement for \$500, plus the \$190 filing fee, which he paid with his income tax rebate.

In 2015, when Jermaine's expungement case came across the desk of Todd Thompson, prosecutor for Leavenworth County, he recognized the name from his days as assistant county attorney and head of the juvenile division. Todd knew Jermaine's criminal history; in fact, it's likely Jermaine was one of the hundreds of juvenile cases Todd prosecuted. But Todd also knew about Jermaine's transformation. He had heard Jermaine talk boldly about his faith in Christ, and he had seen Jermaine working to heal divisions through his nonprofit, Unity in the Community. "He was doing all the right things," Todd says. "I had no reason not to believe him."



*Todd Thompson and Jermaine Wilson stand outside Jermaine's former prison cell.*

Three weeks after filing the paperwork, Jermaine received a letter in the mail saying his record had been expunged. His legal standing now matched his inward, spiritual reality: true redemption, a record wiped clean.

"I was shouting from the rooftops, thanking God," says Jermaine, who framed his expungement document. Jermaine's clean record paved the way for him to serve his community in a more formal way, first as a city commissioner and then as mayor. The kid who once dealt drugs on the streets of Leavenworth was given the key to the city.

The redemption story could have ended there, with one man flourishing after incarceration. But Todd had an idea for something bigger.

### **Tearing down barriers**

Todd heard about an "expungement day" in Wichita, and he wondered if Leavenworth County could try something similar. Normally, legal aid groups or bar associations—not the prosecutor's office—take the lead on expungement initiatives. "We are usually considered a barrier to getting your expungement, because we have to review it and decide whether it's warranted," Todd says.

In carrying out his role, Todd focuses on the importance of treating currently and formerly incarcerated people as human beings full of potential and worthy of dignity. And when he looked around, he knew there were people in Leavenworth who were eligible for expungement but didn't know it or couldn't afford it.

Todd realized he would need a partner to establish credibility and help get the word out. And he could think of no better person than incoming mayor Jermaine Wilson.

In 2019, on Jermaine's second day in office, Todd and Jermaine launched the free expungement initiative. Instead of focusing on a single day, Todd recruited defense attorneys who offered their time and services pro bono to work on expungements for a month.

While COVID years disrupted the program, Todd says his office attempts to run the expungement initiative annually, and other groups, such as Kansas Legal Services, also host clinics across the state.<sup>3</sup>

"We started seeing dominoes of other counties in Kansas wanting to implement the exact thing that we did," Todd says. "It has paid dividends for a lot of people."

Laws related to expungement vary from state to state. Todd advises looking into the statutes carefully. “It takes some effort and work, but it’s rewarding,” he says.

### More than a good idea—it’s a calling

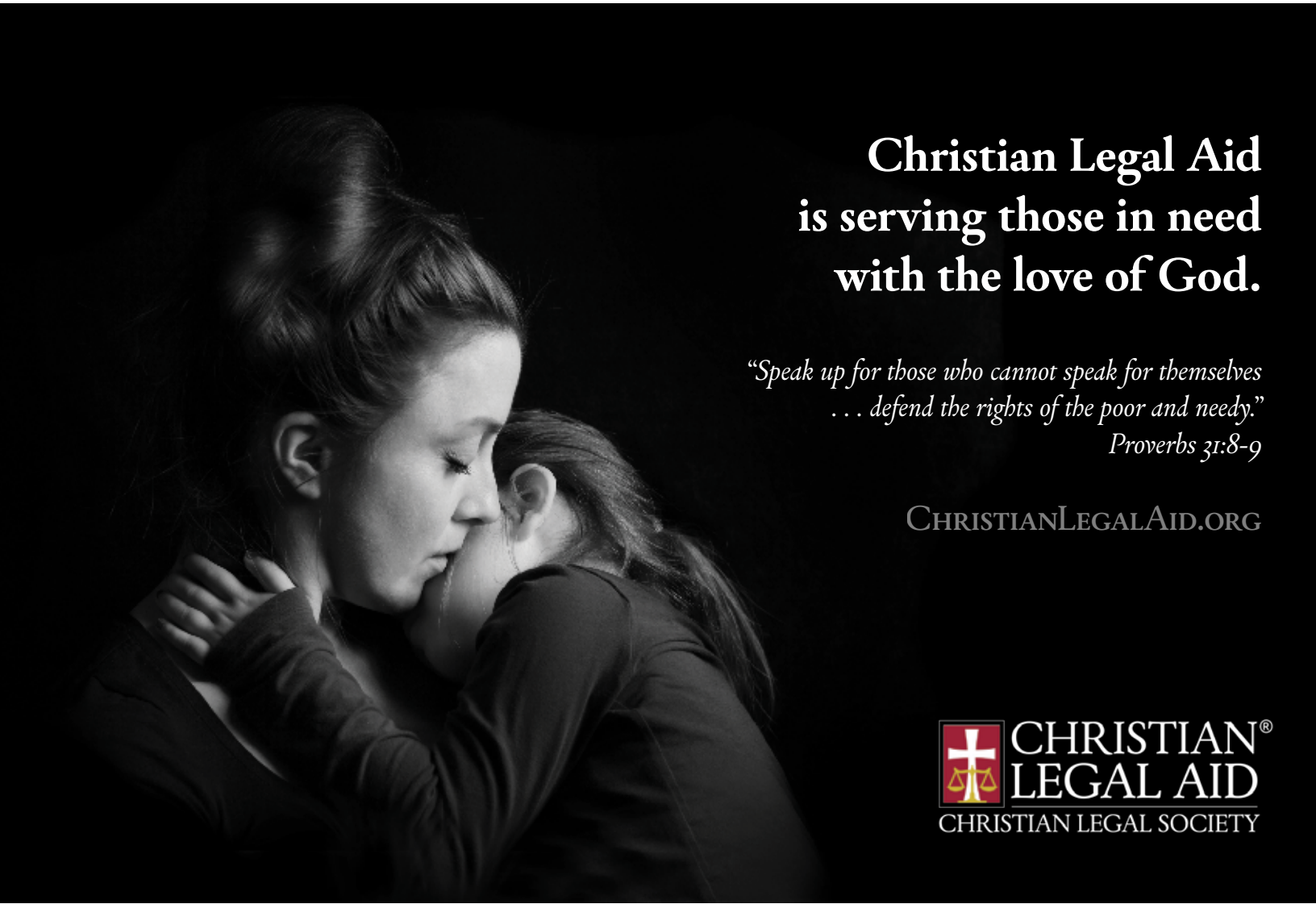
In Micah 6:8, “acting justly” is first on the list of what God requires of His people. But godly justice does more than balance the scales. God desires restoration, which means justice should repair brokenness and bring wholeness. An expungement program can go a long way toward restoring formerly incarcerated men and women. Individual Christians with legal expertise, along with programs like Christian Legal Aid, can play a crucial part in the redemption stories of people like Jermaine.

“There are so many people who need the same opportunity. They just need someone to take a chance on them,” Jermaine says. “Second chances create successes, not statistics.”

**PRISON FELLOWSHIP®** is the nation’s largest Christian non-profit equipping the church to serve currently and formerly incarcerated people and their families and to advocate for justice and human dignity. Established on the belief that all people are created in God’s image and that no life is beyond His reach, Prison Fellowship takes a restorative approach to those affected by incarceration. Prison Fellowship was founded in 1976 by Chuck Colson, a former aide to President Nixon who served seven months in federal prison for a Watergate-related crime. Today, we strive to make prisons safer and more rehabilitative, advance criminal justice reforms, and support incarcerated people, their families, and their communities.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Prescott, J.J., and Starr, Sonja. “Expungement of Criminal Convictions: An Empirical Study.” *Articles*, May 2020, <https://repository.law.umich.edu/facarticles/2165>.
- 2 “Background Checks.” *NCLC*, <https://www.nclc.org/topic/background-checks> (last visited Jan. 26, 2026).
- 3 *Expungement Clinics in Kansas* | *Kansas Legal Services*. <https://www.kansaslegalservices.org/clinics2025> (last visited Jan. 26, 2026).



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Proverbs 31:8-9*

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# Beyond the Walls: The Importance of After-Prison Ministry and Christian Legal Aid

BY LORI YOUNG

Statistics show that an alarming number of people in our nation are affected by crime and incarceration. There are nearly two million prisoners confined in the U.S. today: 203,000 in federal prisons; 1,098,000 in state prisons; 562,000 in local jails, and thousands more confined in various agency systems.<sup>1</sup> Imprisonment carries consequences that extend far beyond the life of the incarcerated person. For the 2.7 million children who have at least one parent in prison,<sup>2</sup> life is turned upside down. Whether the parents are together or separated, the core family is disrupted. The incarcerated parent cannot pay child support, causing a financial strain on the home. Sometimes, both parents are incarcerated, or both are unfit because of poor life choices related to the imprisonment. In those cases, guardianship is necessary for a family member to care for the child. An equally important statistic is that the vast majority of people imprisoned will be released. Eventually, 95% of all convicts will be released from prisons or jails. That is roughly more than 600,000 people per year in the U.S.<sup>3</sup>

The more important question is how we, as Christians, respond to those who are and who were formerly imprisoned for the commission of crimes in our communities. During incarceration, prison ministry is an effective outreach that shares the love of Christ with prisoners. Many have witnessed a remarkable transformation within those who have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior and now desire to live a life walking with Him. But what about outside the walls of the prison? Once the new Christian's prison term ends, do opportunities to minister to the new believer continue? Without a doubt. This is where Christian Legal Aid (CLA) can be powerful, sharing God's desire "to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair" (Isaiah 61:3 NIV).

The staff and volunteers of a Christian Legal Aid clinic provide high-quality legal services at no cost to clients while also sharing the love of Christ with them. Clinics like this across the country achieve this goal effectively and efficiently with limited

staff, minimal administrative costs, and donated services from local private attorneys, keeping expenses low.

The need for such services is great. Unresolved legal issues affect a person's health, stress levels, access to medical care, housing, responsibilities and obligations to support dependents, and safety. After release, formerly incarcerated persons are limited in their ability to secure employment and housing because of their past decisions, sometimes decisions made decades ago. Because they have fully paid their debt to society and made the necessary changes in their lives, they can now have their records expunged and make a fresh start. An attorney is often needed to help with the complex legal steps involved in this process.

An attorney is also specially trained to stay apprised of changes in the law. For example, in Oklahoma, after release from prison, people were often burdened with crippling fines, making building a changed life extremely difficult. Then, in November 2024, the law was amended to significantly reduce post-release fines and fees, but only upon application to the court. Trinity Legal Clinic of Oklahoma worked with the clients of Living Faith Discipleship Ministry, a men's after-prison re-entry program, to help them successfully complete these applications, enabling them to move forward with rebuilding their newly restored lives.

Another critical area of life impacted by imprisonment and the mistakes that led to it is the family. Rebuilding relationships is a daunting challenge but crucial for healing and full restoration. This is particularly true for the new believers' most precious people: their children. During imprisonment, visitation with children is usually suspended. Sometimes, the child may even be placed in the guardianship of a third party, such as a grandparent. The parent typically owes a substantial amount of back child support and needs legal representation to reestablish parental rights and responsibilities. Recognizing that family is an institution of God, a Christian attorney will help encourage reconciliation and restoration of family relationships. In my own cases, whenever I represent a parent seeking to petition the court to end a guardianship, I require the parent to write a thank-you letter to the guardian for caring for the child. This begins the healing process for everyone involved. In one such case, the thank-you letter from the parent (mom) to the guardian (grandmother) broke the ice and led to the restoration of their relationship to the point that, by the time we went to trial to terminate the guardianship, all parties were in agreement,

and at the conclusion of the hearing, the child, the mom, and the grandmother left on a vacation together.

For former prisoners who have accepted the love of Christ and are committed to walking a new path in life, Christian Legal Aid can be an important service that reinforces that love and the hope of restoration.

Here are real stories of clients who received help after prison from Christian Legal Aid clinics.<sup>4</sup>

## **BRANDI**

Brandi visited Trinity Legal for help with a most precious issue—regaining custody of her children. As has happened to way too many of our nation's brothers and sisters, Brandi had become addicted to meth. Her life spiraled out of control. Brandi went to prison, and her children went to live with their grandmother. In prison, Brandi knew something had to change—and it did. Brandi worked hard in a program and overcame her addiction. After her release, she remained clean, secured employment, and purchased a home and a car. Then, she began the long journey of reconciliation with the guardian and with her community. She visited Trinity Legal, and we could see she was a new woman. We decided to take her case and help her with the difficult task of proving to the court that she had changed. We helped her to terminate the guardianship in one county, and we also entered her paternity case in another county to help her modify custody in the paternity case involving the same children. This was appropriate because, unfortunately, the father of the children is still struggling with addiction. Brandi now has custody of her children. She has also chosen a career in which she counsels others struggling with drug addiction to find a better path and to break free of addiction. Regarding her children, Brandi has this to say: "Every day I know that I must still show them my commitment to them, and my commitment to being their mom, which is the most important job God has ever given me."

## **SINGLE MOM**

The stories of the clinic's driver's license reinstatement clients often reveal a difficult reality: they're already driving, often out of necessity. One single mother shared that she must drive her children to school daily because there is no school bus and then drive herself to work because of time constraints with public transit. Ride-sharing is financially out of reach. When the clinic helped her regain her legal driving privilege, the relief was palpable—she no longer had to live in fear of being caught.

## C.W.

Despite a difficult upbringing marked by family instability and her mother's periodic incarceration, 17-year-old C.W. was a straight-A student with a full scholarship to nursing school. But during one of her mother's periods of incarceration, her adult sisters came to her house and got into an altercation with their mother's live-in boyfriend. The situation quickly turned deadly, with one sister shooting the mother's boyfriend, and then ordering C.W. to help her cover her tracks and move the body. Being young, traumatized, and scared, she did as she was told. After cooperating with law enforcement, she was convicted of the felony of "assisting a criminal" and was incarcerated for over two years.

Upon her release, C.W. persevered through many of the difficulties associated with re-entering society, and her willingness to work hard in an employment setting paid off. On more than one occasion, her performance earned her a promotion, which triggered a background check that then led to her termination. She encountered similar difficulties with housing. At one point, she was earning \$80,000 a year (before the termination described above) but was living in her car because her conviction led to repeated denials of rental applications.

Twenty-three years after the incident, C.W. sought help from the help desk at her local CLA. Initially, she received guidance and paperwork to pursue expungement pro se; however, when the prosecutor objected on the grounds of ineligibility, the help desk's supervising attorney intervened, representing

C.W. at the hearing. He successfully argued that C.W. (1) was eligible for an expungement and (2) deserved to have the court exercise its discretion to grant her expungement petition.

The benefits of Christian Legal Aid extend far beyond the client—strengthening children, families, and communities. In the most practical way, it answers God's command in Micah 6:8: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."



**LORI YOUNG** has served for 13 years as the executive director of Trinity Legal Clinic of Oklahoma, a nonprofit following God's call to do justice in central Oklahoma by providing free legal services to people with low income and by sharing with them the love and hope of Jesus. A graduate of Oklahoma State University and Oklahoma University Law School, Lori has taught various classes as an adjunct professor at OSU-OKC. Lori currently serves on the boards of directors of Christian Legal Society and locally of the BritVil Food Pantry and Camp Sooner Christian Service Camp.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2025.html>.
- <sup>2</sup> <https://nicic.gov/weblink/programs-incarcerated-parents-preliminary-findings-pilot-survey-2022>.
- <sup>3</sup> <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/human-services/incarceration-reentry-0>.
- <sup>4</sup> Client stories shared from Trinity Legal Clinic of Oklahoma and Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic of Indianapolis.



LAW STUDENT MINISTRIES

# Robert Earl Won't Move

BY ANTON SORKIN

**SPECIAL THANKS** to Jeff Baker for his notes on this piece.

Among the most difficult aspects of the Christian life is to love those who are different from us. Whether ideologically or based on lifestyle choices, there are those we come across whom we struggle to understand and, even more fundamentally, we struggle to appreciate. I don't know what it is about Christians that drives them into cells of dislocation from the centers of need, but I do know that when it happens, it too often happens in the context of those accused and convicted of crimes as if we forgot that our own amnesty is bought by the blood of another.

## ***The Alabama Solution***

This year, the Academy Awards nominated a documentary that tells the story of Alabama inmates and the horrific prison conditions perpetuated by the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC). In *The Alabama Solution*, we learn about a fascinating movement of jailhouse attorneys who band together around a common cause in the effort of finding justice and hope. "Training up under those men," tells one inmate,

"people say it was a law class; it was so much more than a law class. It was like a rite[] of passage of coming into manhood."

These programs serve a dignified purpose of not only empowering inmates to file pro se complaints, but also in building a system of accountability against those forces that peddle in degrading enforcement tactics and perpetuate a culture of violence. A culture largely ignored and unremedied—for these men, in the words of one inmate, are seen as worthless. And

even when light finds a way and the Department of Justice opens an investigation into the stewardship of ADOC, meaningful change is resisted, forcing shifts of inmates, subjected to indentured servitude under the loophole in the Thirteenth Amendment,<sup>1</sup> to go on strike.<sup>2</sup> A short strike, for the state employed a system of starvation until the last inmate went back to work. In the days after the film's release and its award nomination, ADOC moved the three men at the heart of the film into solitary confinement, almost certainly in retaliation for illuminating the inhumane and lethal prison conditions.<sup>3</sup>

But that's just what the film depicts, and who am I to know any better?

Having studied the criminal justice system and spoken to those on the inside who not only prosecute cases, but also engage in prison ministry and community development, the one thing I've noticed that makes a profound difference is the necessary correlation between knowledge and action. James in his epistle calls a faith devoid of works worthless (see James 2:17), and in much of our public travails, this disconnection between faith and deeds is sheltered under the umbrella of a soft pietism of low expectations. Christians are not provoked to go above and beyond the systems of the Church in the mostly geographical regions of affluence that is America. They are not often called to live among the refuse and squalor of society. Or among those misaligned with preferred living and voting patterns. From many pulpits, the idea of feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick and imprisoned in Matthew 25 is not half as important as reading your Bible, going to church, and being kind. All good things but too often kept in order and managed to reduce inconveniences. If we are being honest, we should readily admit that our lifestyles attest to our priorities. And perhaps our lifestyles also attest to a moribund faith (James 2:26).

## The Searching Evil

In his article on the sins of mass incarceration, Jeff Baker, a clinical professor and associate dean of experiential learning at the University of Alabama School of Law, notes a crisis of love undergirding the way we approach justice and those in prison. In his opening section, he outlines the extent of this challenge and the multifaceted areas demanding repair. He writes:

Mass incarceration in the United States arises from a complex scaffold of policy decisions, social biases, procedural discretion, market forces, profit motives, racism, and fear. Mass incarceration is not inevitable

This business of mass incarceration cares little for the dignity of the humans it captures; contributes little to public safety; ignores the basic causes of crime; and squanders opportunities for safety, rehabilitation, restoration, or true justice.

or natural; it is the organic result of policies stuck in intractable, reinforcing cycles. It is the consequence of compounding choices that create an industrial inertia and a capitalist market that requires a steady inventory of human beings. The phenomenon of mass incarceration does not rest on any sound, recognizable jurisprudence, political theory, or social science, yet lucrative profit motives sustain it. This business of mass incarceration cares little for the dignity of the humans it captures; contributes little to public safety; ignores the basic causes of crime; and squanders opportunities for safety, rehabilitation, restoration, or true justice.<sup>4</sup>

Notice the various elements that create this problem. The complexity undergirding its design. The vested motivations for those tasked in its continuation. And the consequential undignified treatment of those caught in the wires.

For evil is a crafty virus; it latches onto systems and perpetuates its designs through the fabric of confusion and incremental decay. It saps the reformers of strength through a glut of intermediate challenges that demand ingenious, multiscale solutions that tap into both the physical and political natures of our common design. It speaks in tongues of men without the parameters of love to guide its applications and, therefore, it obfuscates the ramifications of its designs through the portal of good intention.

## Conclusion

In recent months, we've heard about an influx of purchases for detention centers to warehouse migrants and data centers to expand the reach of artificial intelligence. The Church is called to speak a note of moral clarity in the midst of a systematic creation of inhumane patterns. We have seen this with mass incarceration and now see it again in other forms, but the spirit

remains the same: “And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him” (Genesis 4:8 ESV).

This is not a time for idleness. Nor a time for fear. Nor a time to be overcome by evil, but a time for overcoming evil with good (Romans 12:21). A time to pull the law toward neighbor-love.<sup>5</sup> A time to take seriously the admonition of the Prophet Isaiah and “loose the bonds of wickedness (Isaiah 58:6).” But before we move, as Christians and goods, we must first seek to build the requisite process for staying informed; once informed, applying godly wisdom to discern the ways we can rectify systems of oppression; and then have the courage and moral imagination to move in whatever direction love demands.



**ANTON SORKIN** is the director of CLS’ Law Student Ministries, where he helps law students nationwide integrate their work and worship. He has a passion for helping students study the interaction between law and religion, engage with the complexity of the modern forms of public witness, and better love God and serve their neighbors. He is an affiliate professor at Trinity Law School.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2020).
- 2 Jamiles Lartey, *What an Alabama Prisoner’s Strike Tells Us About Prison Labor*, *The Marshall Project* (October 1, 2022), <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2022/10/01/what-an-alabama-prisoners-strike-tells-us-about-prison-labor>.
- 3 The three men: Melvin Ray, Ricardo “Raoul” Poole, and Robert Earl.
- 4 Jeffrey R. Baker, *Christian Realism and The Sins of Mass Incarceration*, 3(2) *Georgia Criminal Law Review* 189, 189 (2025).
- 5 Jeffrey R. Baker, *A Sermon on the Law: The Jurisprudence of Love*, 15(2) *Wash. U. Jurisprudence Rev.* 314, 326 (2023).

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CENTER FOR LAW & RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# We Must Uphold RLUIPA's Promise

BY LORI KEPNER

Why should we care about religious freedom rights for prisoners? Because how we treat the most powerless says more about us than how we treat the powerful. God's Word says He created all people as His image-bearers, and they should be treated with respect. Proverbs 22:2 says, "Rich and poor have this in common: the LORD is the Maker of them all" (NIV). This includes inmates and prisoners, who are among the most politically powerless members of society.

Religious freedom is a civil right. It also enables us to live out our Christian values. Those values undergird both our commitment to support the freedom of individuals to choose diverse faiths, including faiths counter to Christianity (religious freedom applied to all), and our Lord's specific calling to share the good news that our particular faith offers (our own religious freedom lived out).

The protections of religious freedom must therefore extend not only to those with religious views that the government favors, but also to religious adherents whom the government disfavors. It is CLS' commitment to integrity in the application of religious freedom for all that has enabled CLS to build diverse

coalitions of support over the years, including the coalition that helped pass the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA)<sup>1</sup> in 2000. That commitment continues today as CLS has again drawn together a diverse coalition for CLS' amicus briefs filed at the petition and merits stages in Damon Landor's RLUIPA case currently before the Supreme Court.<sup>2</sup> The coalition included Muslim and Christian organizations and civil rights groups like the ACLU.

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In 1999-2000, CLS helped drive a coalition of organizations seeking to re-establish religious freedom protections after the Supreme Court said that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA)<sup>3</sup> did not apply to state and local governments.<sup>4</sup> The coalition worked closely with the Clinton White House and both Republican and Democratic senators.<sup>5</sup> Through testimony at congressional hearings,<sup>6</sup> the coalition carefully laid a foundation for Congress' exercise of its constitutional powers that would be relied upon in passing the bill. This was essential because the Supreme Court had said that section five of the Fourteenth Amendment was not adequate to support a law of the magnitude of RFRA and required more "congruence and proportionality."<sup>7</sup> By the summer of 2000, a bipartisan group of senators introduced the bill that would become RLUIPA to protect against state interference hindering religious free exercise in the specific areas of zoning and prisoners' rights.<sup>8</sup> The coalition firmly agreed that to remain "the most successful multi-faith country in all recorded history," prisoners must not be prevented from practicing their faith.<sup>9</sup> The bill passed the Senate by unanimous consent, with the sponsors affirming that "if a government action substantially burdens the exercise of religion," the government would have to show its action served "a compelling public interest . . . by the least restrictive means."<sup>10</sup>

CLS played a role at a particularly crucial moment for the bill on July 27, 2000. Already late afternoon, on the last day before the August recess, the Senate had just recorded its passage of the bill by unanimous consent. The coalition worried that if the bill did not get a vote in the House that very day, it might stall. A lot can happen to derail momentum over a recess. Sam Casey, executive director of CLS at the time, took the endorsed Senate letter showing unanimous consent and physically ran it to the House side, handing it to Representative Charles Canady of Florida, who had championed related bills in the House.<sup>11</sup> That very evening, Representative Canady went to the floor of the House and orally moved for the bill's "immediate consideration in the House."<sup>12</sup> The clerk read the Senate bill, which the House then passed by voice vote.<sup>13</sup> It was a remarkable day for religious freedom! President Clinton enthusiastically signed the bill into law on September 22, 2000, with CLS leadership present.<sup>14</sup>

The facts in the *Landor* case currently before the Supreme Court are egregious. Damon Landor is a Rastafarian, and maintaining dreadlocks is an important part of his adherence to his religion (think Samson).<sup>15</sup> Early in his incarceration,



officials had honored his right to practice his religion by having long dreadlocks,<sup>16</sup> but upon arrival at a new correctional facility for the final weeks of his five-month sentence, an intake guard dismissed Landor's effort to communicate his legal rights, throwing the copy of the 2017 Fifth Circuit case clarifying his religious rights in the trash.<sup>17</sup> The warden also displayed an autocratic disregard for Landor's legal rights and ordered guards to cut his hair. The guards handcuffed him and shaved his head, which had not been cut in almost 20 years.

Upon his release, Landor sued for damages under RLUIPA, based on the clear violation of his rights. Yet his case was dismissed because the district court said RLUIPA did not allow for the recovery of monetary damages, and the Fifth Circuit affirmed.<sup>18</sup> It did so even though the Supreme Court had recently held that RFRA's parallel language about "appropriate relief" should be interpreted to include monetary damages.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, the outcome in this case may come down not to the question of whether state officials knew their actions were clearly illegal, but rather whether they knew they could be subject to damages.<sup>20</sup> If so, it would mean that parallel language in two religious freedom laws with the same animating purpose

(holding state actors to strict scrutiny when they substantially burden religious exercise) would be interpreted drastically differently because they are based on different congressional powers (Fourteenth Amendment, Sec. 5 for RFRA; Commerce Clause, Article I, Section 8, Clause 3 of the U.S. Constitution, for RLUIPA). Our coalition’s amicus briefs argue that should not be the case.

Regardless of what the Supreme Court decides, CLS will remain committed to building coalitions for religious freedom moving forward, just as we have done for decades.



**LORI KEPNER** is senior counsel with the Center for Law & Religious Freedom. Prior to joining CLS, she served as both in-house counsel and as a campus minister with Cru for 18 years. Lori earned her J.D. from The University of California, Berkeley, in 2003, and clerked on the Eighth Circuit for two years before joining Cru. She lives in Northern California.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 42 U.S.C. §2000cc et seq.
- 2 *Landor v. Louisiana Dep’t of Corr. and Public Safety*, 23-1197. CLS filed an amicus brief on June 6, 2024, in support of Mr. Landor’s cert. petition and filed a merits amicus brief in support of Mr. Landor on September 3, 2025.
- 3 With broad support, Congress passed RFRA, 42 U.S.C. §§2000bb - 2000bb-4, to protect religious free exercise, even when it was burdened by rules of general applicability, after the Supreme Court decided *Employment Division v. Smith*, 494 U.S. 872 (1990).
- 4 *City of Boerne v. Flores*, 521 U.S. 507 (1997).
- 5 Interview with Carl Esbeck, the R.B. Price Professor Emeritus of Law and the Isabella Wade & Paul C. Lyda Professor Emeritus of Law at the University of Missouri School of Law and CLS Center director from 1999-2021 (February 17, 2026).

Regardless of what the Supreme Court decides, CLS will remain committed to building coalitions for religious freedom moving forward, just as we have done for decades.

- 6 See, e.g., Issues Relating to Religious Liberty Protection: Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, 106 Cong. Serial No. J-106-35 (June 23 and September 9, 1999).
- 7 *Flores*, 521 U.S. at 508.
- 8 146 Cong. Rec. S6687-88 (daily ed. July 13, 2000) (statement of Sen. Hatch for himself, Mr. Kennedy, Mr. Hutchinson, Mr. Daschle, Mr. Bennett, Mr. Lieberman, and Mr. Schumer).
- 9 146 Cong. Rec. S6688.
- 10 146 Cong. Rec. S7774 (daily ed. July 27, 2000).
- 11 Interview with Carl Esbeck.
- 12 146 Cong. Rec. H7190 (daily ed. July 27, 2000).
- 13 *Id.* at H7192.
- 14 Interview with Carl Esbeck.
- 15 *Landor v. Louisiana Dep’t of Corr. and Public Safety*, 82 F.4th 337, 339 (5th Cir. 2023).
- 16 The Fifth Circuit held RLUIPA prevented forcing Rastafarians to cut their dreadlocks in *Ware v. Louisiana Department of Corrections*, 866 F.3d 263 (5th Cir. 2017).
- 17 *Landor*, 82 F.4th at 340.
- 18 *Id.* at 341.
- 19 *Tanzin v. Tanvir*, 592 U.S. 43 (2020).
- 20 See *Landor*, No. 23-1197, Transcript of Oral Argument (U.S. Supreme Court, Nov. 10, 2025).

# Developing Christian Character

BY MELISSA SCOTT

A simplistic definition of “character” is the moral, ethical, and mental qualities of a person. In operation that would be the way a person thinks, acts, feels, and behaves based on life’s training and upbringing, education, and experiences. Character may also be referred to as a person’s personality, temperament, disposition, and nature—all of which are shaped by training and experiences.

From personal experience, I would favor upbringing and training as two of the most important factors in developing a person’s core values—their character.

Character is the foundation for excellence in your life. It has often been said that the character you develop in private will determine your success in public. We must be diligent to develop Christian character, as any breakdown in life can be traced back to a breakdown in character.

You may not be rewarded for your strengths, but you will always be disqualified by your weaknesses. You’ll never change or correct an area of your life if you’re not willing to confront it.

## Why Character Matters

Character starts to develop from the day we are born.

Knowledge builds character, and the character that is developed determines the amount of anointing that is placed on your life. This is why God’s ability to move on our behalf is always limited by and linked to the character we’ve developed. A lack of character will cause certain failures, discouragement, and the like.

God’s Word is His bond. Until people can count on our word, our character will always be found to be lacking. Our word needs to be our bond.

Character is built on principles, not emotions. Emotional people don’t see the full picture. Emotional believers give rise to irrational thought. Emotional people have underdeveloped character. We need to live by principles and not by emotions (Jeremiah 17:9).

I’m sure we can all think of situations where an individual was disqualified because of their lack of character. There are numerous examples of professional athletes who possessed immense talent, but their character did not match—consider the extramarital affairs, criminal charges, etc. These are extreme examples, of course, but it does support the point. Dr. Edwin Louis Cole of the Christian Men’s Network frequently said that talent will often take people to places or levels where their character cannot sustain them.

We must be more concerned with our own character than the lack of character in those around us. Remember, judge not (Matthew 7:1-2).

## How Do we Strengthen our Character

Suffering produces perseverance, which produces character, which produces hope. Most Christians today are living their lives based on their relationships with other people as opposed to their relationship with God.

**Romans 5:3-4 (AMP)** - Verses 1-6 in the AMP are worth the read!

<sup>3</sup> And not only this, but [with joy] let us exult in our sufferings and rejoice in our hardships, knowing that hardship (distress, pressure, trouble) produces patient endurance; <sup>4</sup> and endurance, proven character

(spiritual maturity); and proven character, hope and confident assurance [of eternal salvation].

**James 1: 2-4 (AMP)** - The entire chapter is worth reading, but for the sake of brevity, I will only quote verses 2-4.

<sup>2</sup>Consider it nothing but joy, my [b]rothers and sisters, whenever you fall into various trials. <sup>3</sup>Be assured that the testing of your faith [through experience] produces endurance [leading to spiritual maturity, and inner peace]. <sup>4</sup>And let endurance have its perfect result and do a thorough work, so that you may be perfect and completely developed [in your faith], lacking in nothing.

## Character Qualities of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit

God's character is holy (Isaiah 6:3). God's holiness will always reveal weaknesses in us. We must move ourselves toward holiness. God is good (Psalm 107:1). God is faithful (Psalm 100:5) He is righteous and just (Romans 3:23). God is loving (Romans 5:8). The ultimate gift of love was for Jesus to come to the earth.

Jesus is the express image and brightness of His Father. He is the identical image of His Father (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus is holy, good, faithful, righteous, just, and loving (2 Corinthians 4:14-15).

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of holiness. Nothing the Holy Spirit does can be done outside of holiness (Romans 1:3). He will always lead us in holiness. He is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17), another helper (John 15:26), and the spirit of power (Luke 1:35). The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Grace. The Holy Spirit keeps us on track, and because he cannot lie, He will never let you down. He is the Spirit of eternity (Hebrews 9:14). He knows everything about your future, your destiny. The Holy Spirit is creative, a giver, and brings emotional stability.

We must develop Christian character—character qualities of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

Below are some examples of what character means in the following **situations**:

1. Marriage—fidelity, gentleness, and patience
2. Home—respect, cooperation, and peace

3. Business—fairness, honesty, and integrity
4. Society—kindness and courtesy
5. Workplace—promptness and diligence
6. Relationships—honesty and kindness
7. Towards God—reverence, respect, love, obedience, compassion, and commitment
8. Towards oneself—willingness to hear the truth and acting on it

## Developing Godly Character

Christian believers need to develop more godly character to fulfill God's calling in their lives. Here are several steps to developing such character:

1. Recognize the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ in your life.
2. Allow Jesus to be the decision maker in your life. Principles, not emotions, must lead you.
3. Recognize the Bible as the absolute authority of God and your manual for making good decisions.
4. Embrace biblical principles in the face of worldly behavior (Luke 6:46).
  - (a) Each test you face will either drive you closer to or further away from Jesus and the will of God for your life.
  - (b) The truth of God's promises to you can only come to pass to the degree you are walking in godly character.
  - (c) Life is designed so that you only get out of it what you put into it.
  - (d) You can't reap a good harvest from seed you haven't sown.
  - (e) Sowing and reaping will always govern your destiny.
5. Faithfulness determines character. Good character is not the goal, but rather it is the **KEY** that unlocks the door to God's divine purpose in your life.



**MELISSA SCOTT** is the director of CLS' Attorney Ministries. While she earned her J.D., she served as a judicial law clerk, gaining invaluable insight into the judicial system and developing a strong foundation in legal research and analysis. Before CLS, she practiced as an attorney in Ontario, Canada, advocating for clients and common-sense legal principles.

## 2026 CLS REGIONAL RETREATS

In 2026, CLS will host a total of six regional retreats. The newest addition is a retreat in Florida that will take place in early May. If you did not get a chance to join a regional retreat, don't fret. The CLS National Conference will take place October 8-11 in Denver. Be sure to take advantage of the early bird registration period from May 1 to July 31 at [CLSconference.org](http://CLSconference.org).



2026 CLS Midwest Regional Retreat in Wisconsin.  
*photo credit: Darcy Dekker*



2026 CLS Southeast Regional Retreat in North Carolina.



## CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION ON CHRISTIANITY AND LAW

In addition to the annual CLS Law School Fellows program, CLS hosts multiple events striving to continue the conversation on Christianity and law in America. Already this year, the third annual *John Witte, Jr. Lecture Series on Christianity & the Law* took place in January in Washington, D.C.

CLS team members are also traveling across the country contributing to this critical conversation, as noted by the highlighted events below. The conversation is also open to the public through the *Cross & Gavel*® podcast and the *Cross & Gavel*® Substack. New attorneys looking to engage in the conversation should check out the Witte Workshops, the application period for which is open from May 1 to June 15, with the event taking place in August.



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CLS hosted its third annual *John Witte, Jr. Lecture Series on Christianity & Law* on January 23, with an emphasis on commemorating the work John Witte, Jr. has done in the field of law, family, and religion. Our guest speaker was Dr. Maria Doerfler, an incredible Yale University professor with a unique specialty in the church of late antiquity.



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CLS launched the Witte Workshops, a weekend training program for new attorneys as an extension of the John Witte, Jr. Lecture Series. The opening banquet included lectures from John Witte, Jr. and Robert F. Cochran, Jr. The project seeks to gather 16 new attorneys for 2 days of workshops on the simple topic of what good stewardship look like in the legal profession. The program director for the Witte Workshops is accomplished law student educator and mentor, Jeffrey Ventrella.



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At the University of Oklahoma, Mike Conklin discussed a paper he wrote for our fall 2025 *Journal of Christian Legal Thought* that argues for the existence of God using trial techniques. It was a full-house and now Mike is traveling to other campuses with his apologetics.

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*1 Corinthians 6:1*

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# ATTORNEY CHAPTERS

CLS attorney chapters provide the opportunity for regular fellowship activity, mentorship, resources, and so much more. Each of our chapters listed below holds monthly or regular meetings that will help you integrate your faith and the practice of law while establishing healthy relationships with Christian attorneys in your community. Scan the QR code to learn more about these chapters.



## **ALABAMA**

Birmingham

## **ARIZONA**

Phoenix  
Tucson

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Inland Empire  
Los Angeles  
Orange County  
Sacramento  
San Diego

## **COLORADO**

Colorado Springs  
Denver

## **DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

## **FLORIDA**

Central (Orlando)  
Jacksonville  
Miami  
Tampa  
West Palm Beach

## **GEORGIA**

Atlanta

## **HAWAII**

Honolulu

## **ILLINOIS**

Chicago

## **INDIANA**

Indianapolis

## **KANSAS**

Topeka  
Wichita

## **MARYLAND**

Baltimore

## **MINNESOTA**

Minneapolis

## **MISSOURI**

Kansas City  
Springfield  
St. Louis

## **NEBRASKA**

Lincoln

## **NEW JERSEY**

Cape May County

## **NEW YORK**

Metro New York City  
Upstate New York

## **NORTH CAROLINA**

Wake County

## **OHIO**

Central Ohio

## **OKLAHOMA**

Oklahoma City

## **OREGON**

Portland/Salem

## **PENNSYLVANIA**

Western Pennsylvania

## **PUERTO RICO**

## **SOUTH CAROLINA**

Greenville

## **TENNESSEE**

Chattanooga  
Memphis  
Nashville

## **TEXAS**

Austin  
Dallas  
Houston  
San Antonio  
Williamson County

## **VIRGINIA**

Leesburg

## **WASHINGTON**

Seattle

## **WISCONSIN**

Madison

# CHRISTIAN LEGAL AID CLINICS

Looking to give back to your community? CLS believes in the biblical calling of serving those in need. CLA clinics provides this opportunity to attorneys and other legal professionals looking to re-invest in their community. Scan this QR code to learn more about the CLA clinic opportunities in your community. If you are interested in learning more about starting a CLA clinic in you community, email us at [cla@clsnet.org](mailto:cla@clsnet.org).





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Josh Grosshans  
Chairman of the  
Board

## FROM THE CHAIRMAN JOSH GROSSHANS

*Now may the God who gives endurance and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, according to Christ Jesus, so that you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one mind and one voice (Romans 15:5-6 CSB).<sup>1</sup>*

“Unity is the best theology” is a phrase I was taught by my father, a retired Southern Baptist pastor. I’ve pondered this statement for years. Some days I want to argue with it. Yet, as I recently read through Romans, I was struck by Paul’s repeated call for unity among believers. Unity is a concept our culture also preaches more and more but seems to achieve less. Doesn’t it feel like we are more divided than ever? Sadly, the Church has not been immune from these divisions.

When I pause to imagine what unity in the Church looks like, my heart is gladdened as Christian Legal Society (CLS) inevitably comes to mind. CLS unites us, across the spectrum of the Church, around a common vision of ministry in and through the practice of law.

Several years ago, at a CLS National Conference in Washington, D.C., my dear friend, Anthony, decided our late-night walk through the monuments on the National Mall was the perfect time to start a debate on a hotly contested theological topic. Being a true Minnesotan, he wore a t-shirt in the 40 degree weather while calling me, a Floridian, “weak” for wearing every stitch of warm clothing I owned to keep from freezing to death. When we finished at the Jefferson Memorial at 1 am, neither of us had convinced the other (though my arguments were far superior). But we ended the night the way we began—as brothers. And throughout the conference that year, as every year, we jointly celebrated CLS’ work for

the poor, for the truth, and for attorneys and law students in spiritual need.

I find myself having these experiences routinely with my friends in CLS. It continually unites me with believers whose faiths look different from mine in many ways, including my local chapter friend who is convinced he is going to convert this Southern Baptist to the Eastern Orthodox Church. CLS unifies us with a collective purpose and encourages us to engage, labor, and grow together.

Counter to our culture, that spirit of unity continues to blossom at CLS. I see it in our current board of directors who, at our last gathering paused the meeting no less than four times to pray for each other and for you. I see it in our staff as they continue to work together in meaningful ways across the four core ministries of CLS. And we see it in our student and attorney chapters, which continue to provide opportunities for us to band together in our local legal communities.

Each year, the CLS National Conference closes with the song “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.” It’s a beautiful moment I look forward to all year. I tear up every time because in that moment I feel the harmony of glorifying the Father with one mind and voice. This year, I hope you will join us Denver and in that song. Join us in your local law student or attorney chapter. Join us in our mission to serve the poor. Join us in taking a stand for religious freedom. Join us in praying for our incredible staff. And join us at the 2026 CLS National Conference! And maybe you can also help me convince Anthony to see things my way!

<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations marked CSB have been taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Christian Legal Society  
**NATIONAL CONFERENCE**



October 8-11, 2026



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