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New Ex-Offender Program Puts Church Ahead Of State

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By his final day, Xavier Branch was more than eager to leave prison. It was a trying term, a whole year of which he spent in excruciating solitary confinement. But as he walked back into the wider world, he soon realized he was left only to return to the same friends, frustrations, and, ultimately, the same destructive drug use that led him to incarceration.

On the outside, one day he hit a tragic low: he was denied his usual refuge at the local Salvation Army in Baton Rouge, which had provided him housing when he was unable to make his rent payments. Faced with his persistent drug problems, the shelter refused him. “I gave up,” he told me, “and looked up at the sky and said, ‘Lord, I’m in your hands.’”

Branch found his salvation in Step Out, a service group that helped him drop his drug habit, secure a steady job, find a church and become “born-again.” The nonprofit is part of Out4Life, a new program run by the evangelical powerhouse Prison Fellowship Ministries (PFM) solely devoted to ex-offenders. First launched in two Bible-belt states, the program is quickly expanding and skillfully becoming the go-to contractor for cash-strapped governments to outsource their ex-offender programs, raising serious questions about separation of church and state.

PFM was founded in 1976 by Watergate felon Charles “Chuck” Colson, after his own seven-month prison stint, where he experienced rebirth in Christ. With Colson’s own salvation story as a walking advertisement, PFM rapidly became an influential player in the evangelical world—and in politics. As governor, George W. Bush partnered with Colson to forge a prison program in Texas, which laid the groundwork for the faith-based initiative he launched from the White House.

Colson continues to be a heavy hitter in evangelical politics, too; last year he was one of the chief promoters of the [Manhattan Declaration](#), which promises to reignite the culture wars in the name of religious liberty. In a [video](#) promoting the Declaration, Colson likened contemporary America to Nazi Germany, and “elites” and “intellectuals” to Hitler.

For decades, PFM has placed its volunteers inside prison walls to minister directly to inmates. In addition to [questions](#) about the programs’ effectiveness, such partnerships with state institutions have drawn legal challenges. InnerChange, a PFM program inside correctional facilities, was shut down by the state of Iowa in

2008 after Americans United for the Separation of Church and State won a legal challenge to its constitutionality. AU charged, and the court agreed, that InnerChange, which received government funding, required inmate participants “to attend Bible study, Christian classes, and church services,” in violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Alex Luchenitser, the lead litigator for Americans United in the case, wrote in a legal journal, “Inmates who did not subscribe to the program’s religious teachings faced discrimination and pressure to convert.”

Despite legal challenges, PFM continued to minister in prisons and two years ago decided to direct a bulk of its considerable resources toward cutting recidivism, the rate of repeat offenses and incarceration, through the Out4Life program. In the coming year, it plans to launch Out4Life in ten additional states with more on the horizon.

In creating Out4Life, PFM says it was responding to a deep need its volunteers and chaplains saw within prison populations. It was also intervening in the newest trend in dealing with recidivism, says Winnifred Sullivan, a law professor at the University at Buffalo who has written on the intersections of prisons and religion. Reentry programs are increasingly popular, she explained, but one of “the hardest things for a state to do well.” Correctional facilities are strapped for cash and state budgets are in the red. This makes the resources PFM offers very attractive. “PFM can do this, in part,” Sullivan told me, “because of their church and business networks.”

These programs have bipartisan support. Under President George W. Bush, Congress established the Federal Prisoner Reentry Initiative, requiring government agencies to “coordinate and collaborate” with community and faith-based groups. President Barack Obama’s recent budget set aside \$144 million to infuse into his predecessor’s reentry programs, and his Department of Justice maintained the same “faith-based” language in its clarion call for grant recipients.

After Out4Life launched in its first state, Louisiana, Governor Bobby Jindal unfurled his broad initiative to reduce the state’s recidivism rate and open ten regional facilities to provide reentry services for ex-offenders. “We were working hand and hand to come up with the construct,” said Jeff Williams, the Louisiana director for PFM and Out4Life. In Georgia, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich penned an op-ed with PFM President and former Virginia Attorney General Mark Earley, praising the organization’s “holistic approach to prisoner reentry.”

Each program will vary, Out4Life’s staff explains, depending on the state, region, and coalition members involved. But the basic structure of future programs will mirror the one in Louisiana, set in place with “a partnership with state and church,” says Jean Bush, Out4Life’s National Director. Dr. Woods Watson, a Baptist minister in West Monroe, Louisiana, an “anchor leader” for Out4Life, told me, “The deck is really stacked against them [ex-offenders].” During reentry, ex-offenders face problems securing three major things: “safe and affordable housing, gainful employment, and abuse services.”

But with funding from the government, the Out4Life program, Americans United’s

Luchenitser wrote to me in an email, “could raise serious Constitutional problems.” Content on its Web site, he continued, suggests “Out4Life is designed to funnel ex-prisoners to churches for reentry programming. If state funds are being used to support this effort, state money could be unconstitutionally supporting religious indoctrination.”

There is not, Out4Life staff claim, a direct line connecting prisoners from PFM programs inside prison to those outside. Their programs, they stress, are entirely voluntary. But the breadth of PFM’s services can make this a natural transition. Because PFM is so immersed in Louisiana prisons, Williams told me, most ex-offenders they work with “have ministry-related activities inside of the prison.”

States that provide faith-based reentry programs are legally required to ensure that non-religious programs are available for ex-offenders as well. These alternatives, Sullivan says, sorely lack the political will and money to back them in many states. PFM has spotted this gap. “Our passion,” Bush told me, “is to have the church in the forefront.”

State institutions warmly welcome this, Bush claims. With their slashed budgets, they are content to see community groups take the lead. “The wall that separates the state and the church,” Bush told me, “has to come down to help people.”

Branch largely credits his turn to Christianity and the man who introduced him to his church, an Out4Life anchor leader, for his own transformation. For Branch, his conversion in life and faith are inseparable. Anyone can make the same transformation after prison, he insists. All you need to do is “get your priorities right, change your environment, and put your faith in Jesus Christ.”

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