

WHEN THE CHURCH STEPPED UP!

By Emmett Solomon

I was never so proud to see the Church in action as I have been in the last 6 months. State governments are all in stress because of the great recession and now the federal government is cutting back on grants to the states.

All states are being required to cut back on expenditures. As they look at cutting criminal justice budgets, the temptation is to cut programming and keep their prison capacity high. One such program comes under scrutiny quickly by the budget cutters, Chaplaincy Services. In January the initial budget proposal by the Texas House of Representatives eliminated Chaplaincy Services as a line item. Zero funding for chaplains.

That served to activate the Church in Texas. Thousands of Texans contacted their legislators and statewide officials supporting state funded chaplains, pointing out that Texas has had State funded chaplains since 1888. At the Capitol, spokesmen for Texas Churches, were strong in support of Correctional Chaplains. Newspapers ran front page articles. We now have indications that the Chaplaincy Service has been restored fully in the House Budget.

A larger issue is the threat that the legislators will opt to keep prison capacity high by cutting the programming which works to help people improve. If the legislators choose this easy route, they are likely choosing a path which will lead to more prison building.

States now over incarcerate. Up to 1/3 of the prisoners could be better managed in ways other than locking them up. We need to lock away people we are scared of and send to treatment people at whom we are just angry.

We now have empirical evidence regarding what works to change human behavior. Treatment always is better than incarceration. It also costs less. Locking people up is very expensive and simultaneously is destructive. Overuse of prisons will unravel the fabric of our society. Where it has been used most, there are already indications of that unraveling effect.

Wherever we live, I encourage all to contact their State Legislators and ask them to expand programming and close prisons. It will save money and make your state a better place at the same time. Together we can help our states be better places by lowering expenditures and being more like Christ by enabling more healing.