

OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

"Hi, Fellas. Come on in." Norman Carlson, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and the Rise of Prison Fellowship

Author(s): Kendrick Oliver

Source: *Journal of Church and State*, Autumn 2013, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Autumn 2013), pp. 740-757

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23923085

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms



Oxford University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Church and State*

JSTOR

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

"Hi, Fellas. Come on in." Norman Carlson, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and the Rise of Prison Fellowship

Kendrick Oliver

It is the creation story of the world's largest prison ministry. On a sunny morning in June 1975, a car pulled up at the entrance to the Federal Bureau of Prisons in Washington, DC. Sitting inside the car were Charles Colson, disgraced former aide to President Nixon, Harold Hughes, recently retired U.S. Senator from Iowa, and Fred Rhodes, who had just stepped down as chairman of the Postal Rate Commission, concluding a long career in government service. As the cars behind them sounded their horns, the three men took a minute to pray together. Then Colson and Hughes headed into the bureau to meet with its director, Norman Carlson. Carlson was initially welcoming—"Hi, fellas. Come on in."—and he did not object when Hughes asked to open the meeting with a prayer. Thereafter, as Colson explained why they had come, Carlson remained silent, "his expression inscrutable." Colson told Carlson that his prisons weren't working. They failed to rehabilitate. In some states, Colson observed, the recidivism rate was 80 percent. There was only one person in the world, he declared, who had the power to remake lives, who could break the desperate cycle of habit and deprivation that led many prisoners, after their release from custody, to quickly re-offend. That was Jesus Christ. "[S]till not a muscle moved in Carlson's face."

KENDRICK OLIVER (BA, University of Reading; PhD, University of London) is a reader in American history, University of Southhampton. He is author of *To Touch the Face of God: The Sacred, the Profane and the American Space Program, 1957–1975* (forthcoming, 2013), *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*, *The Memory of Catastrophe*, ed. with Peter Gray, and *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Nuclear Test-Ban Debate 1961–63*. His articles have appeared in *Journal of Contemporary History*, *Historical Journal*, and *Journal of American Studies*. Special interests include American religion since the Second World War, the U.S. space program, and the Vietnam War.

Journal of Church and State vol. 55 no. 4, pages 740–757; doi:10.1093/jcs/css054
Advance Access publication June 5, 2012
© The Author 2012. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the J. M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Colson came to the point: Would Carlson issue an order permitting Colson, Hughes, and their associates to enter the federal prisons and select inmates to bring to Washington for training? The inmates would be taught the principles of Christian fellowship, with the aim of returning them to their institutions with the knowledge and support necessary to seed and nurture an informal network of prayer cells and Bible study groups among their fellow prisoners. The proposal projected a spiritual transformation of the nation's prisons from the grassroots. Suddenly self-conscious, Colson paused, realizing that what he had just said "sounded preposterous." But Carlson did not laugh. Instead—his face still "enigmatic"—he asked a question. A few weeks earlier, he had attended a chapel service at Terminal Island Prison in Southern California. There, an inmate had prayed for Carlson, the official responsible for keeping him in prison. Why had he done that? Carlson wondered. "It was an electric moment," Colson recalled. "Mr. Carlson," I said, "that man prayed for you because he loves you." Shortly afterward, the meeting concluded. "I'll issue the order," Carlson said. "Get together with my staff and work out the details."[1]

This, according to *Life Sentence*, Colson's memoir of his early ventures in prison ministry, was how the federal correctional system first opened up to his work for the Lord. *Life Sentence* was primarily written for an evangelical audience, and the account of the meeting with Carlson conforms to a model of social encounter, familiar to evangelicals, in which a divine hand can be detected in the startling progress made toward a desirable outcome. In the car, Colson, Hughes, and Rhodes had prayed that "God would touch Norman Carlson's heart." It turned out that God had already done so, through the prayer of the inmate at Terminal Island. It was this prayer, with all that it revealed about the power of God to reconcile men to one another, that clinched Carlson's assent to what Colson proposed, not Colson's lengthy recitation of the failings of the nation's prisons. *Life Sentence*, indeed, is dedicated to that unknown prisoner "whose prayer made all of this possible."[2] God was building His kingdom through Christian homosociality, through the spiritual love of men for their fellow men. A small brotherhood of evangelical politicians—Hughes among them—had adopted Colson following his conversion to Christianity in 1973 and supported him through his indictment, trial, and conviction for crimes related to Watergate. Serving his sentence at a federal prison camp in Alabama, Colson had formed a similar

1. Charles W. Colson, *Life Sentence* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, 1979), 44–47.
2. Ibid., 5.

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

fellowship with other Christian inmates. Over the weeks, the fellowship grew, its work appearing to ease tensions within the camp.[3] Now, with Carlson persuaded that the venture was worth facilitating, Colson hoped to effect an inmate-led Christian revival throughout the entire federal prison system. A few little platoons of faith, propagating by the grace of God, were all that were needed. With the Lord's blessing, he believed, "literally thousands of men could through this very limited concept and very simple technique be lifted out of the barren wasteland of despair in which they now live."[4]

Yet, as the rest of *Life Sentence* makes clear, prison ministry proved to be anything but a simple enterprise. Not every inmate brought out to Washington for fellowship training turned out to be suitable; not every training seminar went well; and over time Colson and his associates came to supplement the program with other approaches to the task of cultivating Christian fellowship among prisoners. As its activities expanded, Colson's organization—incorporated as Prison Fellowship in 1976—grew in size and complexity. By the end of 1979, Prison Fellowship had forty-five staff members, including seven regional directors; its annual budget totalled $1.8 million; and it claimed to coordinate a network of four thousand community volunteers.[5] In recent years, the continued growth of Prison Fellowship—in 2010, it had an operating budget of over $40 million and nearly fifteen thousand certified volunteers—has prompted a number of scholars to declare it a formidable force in modern American political culture.[6] For Tanya Erzen, the emphasis that Prison Fellowship places upon individual transformations achieved through small-group, grassroots religious mentoring conforms to, is implicated in, and ventures a conspicuous validation of a neoliberal philosophy that asserts the greater efficacy of privatized social services over those funded and directed by the state.[7]

In the view of Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Colson's organization—by presenting itself as devolved, voluntarist, and communitarian in ethos—has also played a major role in naturalizing the status of religion in prisons, in turn denaturalizing attempts to interrogate its

3. Charles Colson, *Born Again* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 360.
4. Colson, "Proposal for Inmate Chaplains in Federal Prisons," May 1, 1975, folder 4, box 12, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
5. Prison Fellowship Annual Report 1979, Norman A. Carlson Subject Files, Federal Bureau of Prisons Records (in author's possession following Freedom of Information Act request).
6. "Raising Up Leaders: Prison Fellowship Annual Report, 2009–10," Prison Fellowship, available online at http://www.prisonfellowship.org/images/pdfs/legal_statements/PF_2010_Annual_Report.pdf.
7. Tanya Erzen, "Testimonial Politics: The Christian Right's Faith-Based Approach to Marriage and Imprisonment," *American Quarterly* 59 (2007): 992.

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

activities in the light of constitutional prohibitions upon religious establishments.[8] By 2006, indeed, a sufficiently permissive constitutional environment appeared to exist for efforts to rehabilitate prisoners by means of spiritual redemption that five states had contracted with Prison Fellowship's InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI) to administer special residential units within their correctional systems. That same year, a federal judge ruled that an IFI program at an Iowa prison was "pervasively sectarian" and coercive in nature and involved the state in an "impermissible advancement" of religion in violation of the Establishment Clause.[9] But though aspects of IFI may have fallen foul of constitutional law, there is no prospect now, according to Sullivan, of any disestablishment of the nation's correctional institutions.[10] Where Prison Fellowship has led, many others have followed. In 2005, a report funded by the U.S. Department of Justice observed that thousands of faith-based organizations were presently providing services to incarcerated and released prisoners, with prayer group programs, for example, available in 93 percent of American prisons.[11]

The rise of Prison Fellowship, then, has been profoundly consequential. Since that first meeting in Carlson's office, Prison Fellowship has pioneered techniques that have carried evangelical religion into almost every corner of the American prison system and declared the authenticity and necessity of faith-based social action within the precincts of the state—without, aside from the case of the IFI, provoking much defensive response from separationist groups or the close scrutiny of the courts. But federal and state correctional authorities cannot be cast as reluctant—or even just passive and neutral—partners in the growth of Prison Fellowship and prison religion more generally. Axel Schäfer has argued that the original architects of the Cold War state sought to reconcile its expansion with the ideology of limited government by devolving many social service functions to private and nonprofit organizations, religious agencies prominent among them. In the 1960s, religious providers were also enlisted in Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and war on poverty, which—with only limited regulation—generously dispensed financing for church-run programs and

8. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *Prison Religion: Faith-Based Reform and the Constitution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
9. *Americans United for Separation of Church and State, et al. v. Prison Fellowship Ministries, et al.*, 432 F. Supp. 2d 832 (2006).
10. Sullivan, *Prison Religion*, 224–26.
11. Jeanette Hercik, Richard Lewis, and Bradley Myles, *Development of a Guide to Resources on Faith-Based Organizations in Criminal Justice: Final Report*, September 2004, available online at https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/209350.pdf.

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

initiatives. Even conservative evangelical Protestants—traditionally averse to church-state collaboration—recognized the value of such funding for their own institution-building efforts, especially when the money arrived with so few strings attached.[12]

Within the prison system, it was actually fading confidence in the efficacy of government-led social engineering programs that created opportunities for new church-state alignments. Colson's criticisms of existing correctional rehabilitation regimes may have been underpinned by both conservative antistatism and his conviction as an evangelical that conversion to Christ was the only reliable source of personal transformation, but they were otherwise similar in theme to the conclusions being drawn by penological experts and prison system managers in the mid-1970s. Given the constraints upon their resources, imperfect understandings of human motivation within the social sciences, and the usually self-defeating nature of attempts to coerce individual reformation, prisons—left to their own devices—were unable to change prisoners who did not want to be changed. The only successful rehabilitations were those for which inmates themselves volunteered. In particular, it was concluded, correctional institutions should try to involve local communities in their rehabilitation programs, increasing the variety of provision and offering inmates a meaningful prospect of support and assistance once they were released. Significantly, correctional professionals were identifying a need to breach the walls that separated prisons from the world beyond at the very same moment that many organizations—religious groups prominent among them—were lining up on the other side of those walls expressing a similar intent.

A major stimulus to the revolution in correctional law that occurred in the 1960s was the litigation initiated by imprisoned black Muslims seeking recognition and protection of their religious rights under the Free Exercise Clause. Court judgments upheld many of their claims, including the right to have Nation of Islam ministers visit with them in prison and conduct religious services.[13] Adherents to other minority religions won similar decisions.[14]

12. Axel R. Schäfer, "The Cold War State and the Resurgence of Evangelicalism: A Study of the Public Funding of Religion since 1945," *Radical History Review* 99 (Fall 2007): 19–50.

13. See, especially, *Fulwood v. Clemmer*, 206 F. Supp. 370 (1962) and *Cooper v. Pate*, 378 U.S. 546 (1964). On Black Muslim litigation more generally, see Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 96–132.

14. In 1972, the Supreme Court upheld the right of a Buddhist prisoner to have a "reasonable opportunity" to pursue his faith "comparable to that offered other prisoners adhering to conventional religious precepts." *Cruz v. Beto*, 405 U.S. 319 (1972).

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Although the courts accepted that the exercise of such rights was still conditioned by the need to maintain an orderly prison administration, they did not establish any clear criteria for assessing the justice of any particular restriction.[15] Rather than contest each individual case, many wardens and prison managers seem to have conceded that access arrangements had to be adjusted to reflect the new pluralism of prison religion. In the wake of the Attica rebellion and its violent suppression in September 1971, the social agencies of mainline denominations sought to encourage grassroots, church-led programs to monitor conditions in local prisons and to assist released offenders.[16] A number of enduring evangelical prison initiatives also date from the post-Attica period. In July 1972, Bill Glass, a former gridiron star who had retired from the sport to found a religious ministry, organized a three-day crusade at the Marion Correctional Institution in Marion, Ohio.[17] Buoyed by the crusade's success, Glass moved to make prisons a central focus of his ministry. Many prison administrators proved willing, even enthusiastic, hosts of his crusades.[18] Glass held crusades in eight prisons in 1975.[19]

It was Colson, however, who really opened up the nation's prisons as an evangelical mission field. In 1975, only recently released from prison and still closely identified with the moral collapse of the Nixon presidency, Colson had a toxic public reputation, but he retained his talent for working connections. In the meeting with Carlson, it was Colson who did most of the talking, but he was significantly advantaged by the presence and support of Hughes. Carlson, like Hughes, came from Iowa, and he had admired Hughes's attempts during three gubernatorial terms to improve the state's prisons.[20] Carlson later acknowledged that he may not have assented to the proposal for inmate fellowship seminars had

15. The Supreme Court finally did so in *Turner v. Safley*, 482 U.S. 78 (1987).
16. See, for example, a special prison-focused issue of *Engage*, monthly journal of the Board of Christian Social Concerns of the United Methodist Church 4 (February 1972), in folder 8, box 55, Christian Life Commission Resource Files, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville; and a special issue of *JSAC Grapevine* entitled "Criminal Justice and Prison Reform," 4 (February 1973), in folder 1, box 46, Christian Life Commission Resource Files, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.
17. "Tentative Schedule for Prison Crusade, Marion, Ohio July 28–30," folder 15, box 3, Champions for Life Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
18. Bill Glass to "Prison Workers," August 21, 1974, folder 10, box 15, Champions for Life Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
19. Bill Glass "Prison Gang" newsletter, December 3, 1975, folder 2, box 16, Champions for Life Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
20. Colson, *Life Sentence*, 45.

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

it been made by Colson alone.[21] Moreover, in view of the resources required to select inmates for the program, bring them out of their prisons, convey them to Washington, and house them securely for the duration of each seminar, it was undoubtedly helpful that both Colson and Hughes were affiliated with the Fellowship Foundation, a nationwide network of Christian political and business leaders that had its headquarters at Fellowship House in the northwest of the capital. The program, Colson declared, would be "conducted under the auspices of Fellowship House," with members of the fellowship closely involved.[22] Unlike many well-meaning, grassroots volunteer initiatives, it seemed the program had more to sustain it than just hope, compassion, and the efficacy of prayer.

In his account of the problems of the prison system and in his advocacy of inmate fellowship as one potential solution, Colson did not rely only upon the authority of his own experience of incarceration. He commended the fellowship program as consistent with an emerging school of correctional "realism" and particularly with views that Carlson himself had expressed about the function of the modern prison. In 1974, criminologist Norval Morris had published *The Future of Imprisonment*, a seminal statement of the case for abandoning coercive rehabilitation.[23] The same year, sociologist Robert Martinson reported the conclusions drawn from a survey of more than two hundred studies of offender rehabilitation programs: simply put, nothing worked.[24] In a memorandum composed some weeks before his meeting with Carlson, Colson had detailed the philosophy underpinning his proposal, citing Morris and also referring to Carlson's public concession that prisons had indeed failed in the task of rehabilitation. It was a failure that Colson attributed to a single, common flaw: rehabilitation programs were run by functionaries of the prison system. "Most prisoners," he asserted, "simply trust no one who receives his monthly payment from the government." If a program was to be effective, it had to be independent of the prison administration and "largely self-sustaining": a product of its own participants' will to be transformed.[25]

Carlson himself had never subscribed to the "medical model" of corrections, which he believed confused the complex and imprecise

21. Philip B. Taft Jr., "Whatever Happened to that Old-Time Prison Chaplain?" *Corrections Magazine*, December 1978, 56.
22. Colson, "Proposal for Inmate Chaplains in Federal Prisons."
23. Norval Morris, *The Future of Imprisonment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).
24. Robert Martinson, "What Works? Questions and Answers about Prison Reform," *Public Interest* 35 (Spring 1974): 22–54.
25. Colson, "Proposal for Inmate Chaplains in Federal Prisons."

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

social art of rehabilitating offenders with the more reliable clinical practices of diagnosing and treating physical illness.[26] In Carlson's view, correctional authorities, when they originally adopted the model, had forgotten that "most inmates are not sick, that we do not know the causes of crime, and that we have developed no sure cures."[27] The work of Morris and Martinson, however, lent new intellectual authority to efforts, which Carlson supported, to return the tasks of retribution and deterrence to the center of the correctional mission. This did not mean entirely abandoning the goal of rehabilitation. Carlson asserted that any offender who wished to change "must be given every opportunity to do so," but the role of the prison in this process was to facilitate, not coerce.[28] As director of the Bureau of Prisons, he continued to sponsor innovations in voluntary rehabilitative programming, in particular, establishing a new federal correctional institution in Butner, North Carolina, to serve as a laboratory for such experiments.[29] Carlson also sought to foster what he called a "quiet revolution" in communication between each prison and the world beyond its walls, encouraging citizen involvement in inmate rehabilitation and the use of community-based initiatives such as work-release programs and halfway houses.[30] The "medical model" was broken, but it had not

26. Comments by Norman A. Carlson, "Directors' Panel Discussion: Correctional Issues, Past and Present," in *Escaping Prison Myths: Selected Topics in the History of Federal Corrections*, ed. John W. Roberts (Washington, DC: American University Press, 1994), 178–79; Norman A. Carlson, "The Federal Prison System: Forty-Five Years of Change," *Federal Probation* 39 (June 1975): 37–42. See also Clemens Bartollas, *A Model of Correctional Leadership: The Career of Norman A. Carlson* (Alexandria: American Correctional Association, 2010), 55–57.

27. Norman A. Carlson, "A More Balanced Corrections Philosophy," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, January 1977, 23.

28. Norman A. Carlson, "Corrections in the United States Today: A Balance has been Struck," *American Criminal Law Review* 13 (Spring 1976): 630.

29. Paul W. Keve, *Prisons and the American Conscience: A History of U.S. Federal Corrections* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 218–21; John J. DiIulio Jr., "Prisons That Work: Management Is the Key," *Federal Prisons Journal* 1 (Summer 1990): 7–14.

30. Norman A. Carlson, "The Law and Corrections," *University of San Francisco Law Review* 1 (October 1971): 77–86; Carlson, "Federal Prison System." That correctional agencies should seek to expand their use of both citizen volunteers and community-based rehabilitation programs had been key recommendations of a recent major report on the manpower needs of the prison system. See *A Time to Act: Final Report of Joint Commission on Correctional Manpower and Training* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1969). Prior to his appointment as director, Carlson had been in charge of the bureau's Community Treatment Centers—halfway houses located in major cities that were designed to guide prisoners prior to their release. Bartollas, *Model of Correctional Leadership*, 25, 35.

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

been supplanted by the credo that "nothing works." Carlson was still convinced that something might work, especially if an offender who wanted to change his life could draw upon support from outside as well as inside the prison.

There was a broad affinity, then, between the model of peer-led but externally aided inmate fellowships proposed by Colson and Carlson's own conception of how rehabilitation could be achieved in a modern correctional setting. There was also a striking fit between Colson's proposal and Carlson's desire to explore new means of servicing the religious needs of federal prisoners that were alternative to the existing system of correctional chaplains. By the mid-1970s, the federal chaplaincy system, which employed one or two full-time government-funded chaplains within each prison, was widely held to be an anachronism.[31] Since the Second World War, at both the federal and state level, many aspects of the prison chaplain's traditional inmate counseling function had been secularized and devolved to specialists schooled in the human sciences.[32] In 1969, a high-level report on the principal manpower priorities of the nation's correctional institutions made a single, fleeting reference to the role of the chaplains.[33] Often, prison chaplains themselves became pessimistic about their ability to make a real difference in inmates' lives, with the consequence that they either resigned their posts in frustration or surrendered their sense of purpose to the service of institutional routine. "There is," noted an article in *Corrections Magazine*, "an overabundance of dead religious wood in the chaplaincy."[34] One chaplain observed that a number of his colleagues had ended up working in prisons because, tainted by scandal or a record of incompetency, they could not find a parish in the free world willing to take them on.[35]

What really made the case for reform of the correctional chaplaincy compelling, however, was the tide of court decisions affirming the rights of prisoners who adhered to minority faiths. Prison administrators could no longer claim that they were affording to all inmates reasonable opportunities to exercise their religious rights simply by employing a full-time chaplain from one of the

31. In 1978, there were 62 full-time chaplains serving in 39 federal facilities. Arrangements in state systems were more diverse. Taft, "Whatever Happened to that Old-Time Prison Chaplain?" 55.
32. John W. Oliver, "To Whom Should the Prison Chaplain Minister?" *Federal Probation* 36 (March 1972): 19–22.
33. *A Time to Act*, 33.
34. Taft, "Whatever Happened to that Old-Time Prison Chaplain?" 55.
35. Byron E. Eshelman, "The Prison Ministry," *Federal Probation* 32 (September 1968): 37–41.

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

mainline Christian churches. How, then, were correctional authorities to meet the diverse religious needs of those in their charge? It was simply too costly to employ full-time chaplains for each of the faiths represented in the prison population, as the courts themselves acknowledged.[36] At the very least, the existing state-paid correctional chaplains would have to accept that their responsibilities now included coordinating a mix of other religious providers, including volunteer ministries, chaplains funded from external sources, and contract chaplains brought in on a part-time basis. For the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the mid-1970s were, by force of necessity, a time of experiment and change with respect to the administration of religious provision for inmates. For evangelical entrepreneurs like Colson, it was a season of opportunity. But to correctional chaplains, these developments appeared ominous, because why should their role endure when much of the real pastoral work with prison inmates was now to be done by others?[37]

Quite aside from his thoughts about the prayer of the inmate on Terminal Island, Carlson had good reason to regard Colson's proposal as compatible with what he, as bureau director, wanted to achieve in the federal prisons.[38] This did not mean that Colson got everything he wanted. He had ambitions to seed fellowships in every federal institution, but Carlson would only consent to a small pilot program, which needed to show early evidence of success if it was to be continued and rolled out across the whole correctional system.[39] Colson had hoped to keep prison officials entirely out of the process of selecting candidates for the program, but chaplains were handed a role in recommending inmates, and wardens had the power to veto the final choice.[40] He had also originally envisaged that the training seminars in Washington would each last three to four weeks; the bureau agreed to a fortnight.[41] In addition, Colson had initially proposed that

36. *Gittlewacker v. Prasse*, 428 F.2d 1 (1970).
37. Taft, "Whatever Happened to that Old-Time Prison Chaplain?"
38. Carlson regularly attended Lutheran church services, but one close colleague could not remember him referring to any personal religious convictions during the course of his work as director. Bartollas, *Model of Correctional Leadership*, 95–96.
39. Colson, "Proposal for Inmate Chaplains in Federal Prisons"; Colson, *Life Sentence*, 48.
40. Ibid.; Paul Kramer, diary, November 12–26, 1976, folder 3, box 14, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College; Summer, "Up-Dated Roster of Prison Fellowship Representatives," February 15, 1977, folder 1, box 22, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College; Colson, *Life Sentence*, 49.
41. Colson, "Proposal for Inmate Chaplains in Federal Prisons"; Colson, *Life Sentence*, 48.

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

participants in the program, once they had returned to their institutions, be accorded the status and title of "inmate chaplain."[42] It was a term to make institutional chaplains choke, and so very swiftly it was abandoned and replaced by references to prisoner "disciples" and a prison "discipleship" training program.[43]

Colson's discipleship program encountered strong resistance from within the prison system in its first two years. Many prison officials, observed Paul Kramer, one of Colson's assistants, "do not like this program and want to find ways of ending it."[44] In particular, correctional chaplains perceived it as a threat because there was an implication of their own irrelevance in a program that took the inmates out of their institutions for religious training and then returned them with a commission to nurture autonomous Christian fellowships. It did not help that Colson, in developing the program, drew upon the support of the Good News Mission, based in Arlington, Virginia, which combined an evangelical ministry in local prisons with fierce denunciations of mainline correctional chaplains who sought to integrate the insights of clinical psychology into their pastoral work.[45]

The discipleship program had other vulnerabilities. In particular, contrary to his initial hopes, Colson found that his association with Fellowship House was not easily converted into a network of grassroots volunteers enthusiastic about involving themselves in a ministry to prisoners. The program lacked established and reliable contacts in many of the communities where federal prisons were located.[46] It had to trust, therefore, in the judgments made about candidates by program staff during their flying visits to an institution or by proxies (including some chaplains) who may not have understood or been committed to the program's goals. Although the first training seminar went well, the second did not: some of the participants had been selected at the last minute and turned out to be poor choices. Colson described one as a "seductress."[47] In the course of the fourth seminar, in August 1976, a participant brought his girlfriend to Washington, DC, and succeeded in

42. Ibid.
43. Colson, speech to Pastors' Conference at the Southern Baptist Convention, June 9, 1975, folder 5, box 149, Charles Colson Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
44. Kramer, "Prison Program," no date given, folder 1, box 12, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
45. Taft, "Whatever Happened to that Old-Time Prison Chaplain?" 56.
46. Kramer to Colson, "Why I Am Burdened," no date given, folder 3, box 14, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
47. Colson, *Life Sentence*, 86–90; Kramer to Colson, "Meeting with Dick Summer, Chaplain, Bureau of Prisons," March 31, 1976, folder 12, box 10, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

getting her pregnant.[48] Moreover, even when the seminars were effective, producing dedicated inmate "disciples," Prison Fellowship frequently failed to provide them with any significant follow-up support. Colson acknowledged in November 1977 that, with respect to communication with past participants, the performance of his organization had been "woefully weak."[49] Richard Houlahan, head of the federal prison chaplaincy, later asserted that, in its early days, Prison Fellowship "was so disorganized that the brunt of the work had to be accomplished by our own staff."[50]

Although he was aware of these problems, Carlson continued to back the discipleship program. According to Colson, a report commissioned by the bureau following the first five training seminars concluded that many inmate disciples, after their return from Washington, DC, had played an instrumental role in reviving religious programs within their institutions.[51] Carlson still regarded the seminar concept as "a model for quality community-based religious programming for prisons."[52] In the spring of 1977, he told the *Los Angeles Times*: "I personally am sold on it and have seen it work."[53] By this time too, the rehabilitation of Colson's public reputation had made it easier for the bureau's director to give his endorsement to the program. In 1976, Colson's memoir, *Born Again*, had become the urtext of the "year of the evangelical."[54] *Born Again* not only convinced many erstwhile skeptics that Colson was sincere in his own religious conversion, but it also transformed him into a much more plausible agent of redemption in others, prisoners in particular. Moreover, lacking as it did any significant political sponsors or popular constituency of support, the bureau was not oblivious to the benefits that might accrue from an association with Colson's renewed celebrity. The discipleship program, Carlson observed, was "helping to focus national attention to the needs of prisons and prisoners."[55]

48. Kramer, "Prison Program."
49. Colson to Loux, November 17, 1977, folder 1, box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
50. David Treadwell, "Prison Mission: Born Again Colson Preaches Of and For 'Losers'," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 4, 1980, 1B.
51. Colson, *Life Sentence*, 209–10.
52. Carlson, "Prison Fellowship Workshops: Training in Peer Relationships," January 1, 1977, folder 1, box 12, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
53. Russell Chandler, "Colson's Program Spreads Bible's Word to Prisons," *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 1977, 1.
54. On this point, see Garry Wills, "'Born Again' Politics," *New York Times Magazine*, August 1, 1976, 8–9, 48–49, 52; and David Kucharsky, "76: The Year of the Evangelical," *Christianity Today*, October 22, 1976, 12.
55. Carlson, "Prison Fellowship Workshops: Training in Peer Relationships."

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Some Prison Fellowship staff were concerned that Colson had become so confident of Carlson's readiness to intervene when wardens and chaplains refused to cooperate with the program that the organization was neglecting the need to build long-term relationships with prison administrations at the local level. Carlson "can't and won't be on the phone to each and every prison where you have problems," Kramer told Colson. "Sure, he can open the doors initially but the scar and hostility will remain."[56] When the warden of the federal penitentiary in Oxford, Wisconsin, turned down a request to release inmates selected for one of the Washington seminars and challenged Prison Fellowship to hold an in-house workshop at his prison instead, Colson conceded the point. Rather than appeal to Carlson, he accepted the warden's challenge.[57] So began, rather by chance, Prison Fellowship's second major program: after the workshop in Oxford proved a success, the organization repeated the venture at federal prisons in Minnesota, Kentucky, and Georgia and started to receive invitations to bring its teaching team into other institutions.[58] Colson quickly realized that the in-prison program could also be exported into state correctional systems, which would help safeguard the future of the ministry as a whole: "We cannot have all of our eggs indefinitely in the federal basket." Carlson promised to use his influence with state corrections commissioners to facilitate the move.[59]

Yet the program that Carlson was willing to endorse was, once again, not without some conspicuous deficiencies. The rapid expansion of Prison Fellowship's in-prison operations, combined with the continued failure to secure local community funding and support for its activities, resulted in both severe budgetary pressures and the imposition of additional responsibilities upon an already-stretched administrative team at the organization's headquarters.[60] Colson became frustrated when no progress was made on his plan to expand into state institutions, commenting, "One of these days we may pleasantly surprise ourselves by doing the thing, rather

56. Kramer to Colson, "Why I Am Burdened."
57. Colson, *Life Sentence*, 252–53.
58. Ibid., 253–63, 292–301; Kramer, "Lexington, Kentucky," September 16, 1977, folder 1, box 22, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College; Colson to Loux, August 16, 1977, folder 1, box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
59. Colson to Loux, July 11, 1977, folder 1, box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
60. Loux to all staff, August 4, 1977, folder 4, box 12, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College; Colson to Loux, December 12, 1977, folder 1, box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

than thinking about why it isn't done."[61] It was difficult enough to cope with the demands of running the existing federal in-prison program. A few weeks after a workshop in the federal penitentiary in Terre Haute, Indiana, Colson returned to the town to lend his weight to a drive to recruit community volunteers for the prison, but Prison Fellowship headquarters had failed to publicize the event and only three people showed up. "If Terre Haute is any example of how we are organized," Colson seethed, "then the only honest thing we can do is fold up, close our doors, return all of the contributions to our contributors, tell them that God isn't in this, and quit."[62] Having agreed to host a workshop, a federal chaplain at Fort Worth experienced so many administrative oversights and contradictory communications that he bitterly denounced Prison Fellowship at a regional chaplains' conference just as the organization was hoping to develop its presence throughout the Texas correctional system.[63] Still, during a meeting with Colson in January 1978, Carlson declared that "something very profound is happening within the prisons." Colson wrote, "I told him I thought it was God moving and opening doors. He said, 'You may very well be correct.'"[64]

It was Carlson, indeed, who conceived Prison Fellowship's third major program. In the spring of 1977, the Bureau of Prisons was scheduled to open a new correctional institution in Memphis, but it lacked in its remaining budget for the year the funds to hire full-time chaplains for the facility. Carlson asked Colson if Prison Fellowship could supply and finance two "brothers"—the bureau avoided the term "chaplain"—to minister to the inmates until more money became available.[65] Colson was thrilled to accept the proposal, understanding that it stemmed as much from Carlson's desire to find alternatives to the correctional chaplaincy system as from any short-term budgetary constraints. Here was an opportunity to bring the gospel to inmates from a position inside the

61. Colson to Loux, September 7, 1977, folder 1, box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
62. Colson to Loux, 24 February 1978, folder 2, box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
63. Veerman, "Case Study in Miscommunication," attached to Veerman to Loux, April 10, 1978, folder 3, box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College; Kramer to Loux and Butner, "Texas," January 10, 1978, folder 8, box 13, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
64. Colson, January 17, 1978, folder 1, box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
65. Colson, *Life Sentence*, 209–10; Solteau to Kramer, no date given, folder 1, box 12, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

prison walls. The arrangement represented "a remarkable breakthrough," Colson declared in a speech to the National Association of Evangelicals. "If Memphis succeeds, the Bureau will permit us similar access to other prisons."[66]

Assessed by its own lights, the Memphis experiment was not a success. The program in its original form—with the two brothers operating semi-autonomously within the prison—survived less than a year and was certainly never adopted as a model elsewhere. One of the two brothers proved a disastrous appointment, coming quickly to be regarded both in Memphis and at Prison Fellowship headquarters as unreliable and hostile. He departed from the program in January 1978, leaving behind a trail of unpaid debts and bad checks.[67] Complex lines of accountability helped to cause conflicts with the prison administration. Prison Fellowship wanted the brothers in Memphis to foster a close community engagement with the inmates, but the warden and his staff frequently turned down visitation requests from volunteers.[68] Headquarters, meanwhile, failed to provide clear direction to its local community representatives, with the result that they neglected the task of raising the necessary funds for the program to become self-sustaining.[69] There was also no support for the program from within the official chaplaincy system, where there were concerns about the credentials of the two brothers and their sensitivity to the spiritual needs of

66. Colson, speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, February 24, 1977, folder 16, box 149, Charles Colson Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.

67. Soltau to Loux, "A Report to Gordon from George Soltau Concerning My Initial Interviews at the Memphis Prison," no date given, folder 3, box 14, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College; Fortas to Colson and Loux, February 3, 1978, folder 11, box 10, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College; Crawford to Fleming, February 28, 1978, folder 11, box 10, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College; Lawson to Loux, February 28, 1978, folder 11, box 10, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.

68. Kramer, "Chaplaincy/Intern Programs," June 15, 1977, folder 3, box 14, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College; Soltau to Loux, "A Report to Gordon from George Soltau Concerning My Initial Interviews at the Memphis Prison."

69. Veerman, "Analysis of Existing Memphis Prison Fellowship and Recommendations on How to Improve," June 13, 1977, folder 12, box 10, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College; Colson to Butner, December 8, 1977, folder 2, box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College; Colson to Loux, January 23, 1978, folder 1, box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

nonevangelical prisoners.[70] Colson himself did much to alienate institutional chaplains from Prison Fellowship's initiative in Memphis when he gracelessly declared in a speech that, as servants of the prison administration, they could not be trusted by inmates.[71] One of Colson's colleagues ruefully observed of the program: "If someone were trying to *purposely* irritate all the key people, you couldn't have done a better job." He was consoled only by the thought that "this project must be the will of God because if it wasn't, it would have died a natural death by now."[72]

Yet, even had it been run competently, the Memphis program would still have provoked concerted opposition. To institutional chaplains, the program offered clear evidence of Carlson's impatience with the entire chaplaincy system, and they were right to suspect that Colson was as excited by the wider implications of the program as he was interested in the souls of the inmates in Memphis prison.[73] Carlson continued to support Prison Fellowship's presence in Memphis through its many early misadventures.[74] In April 1978, he and Colson formulated a plan to appoint a government-funded religious coordinator at the prison to serve alongside Prison Fellowship's remaining brother.[75] The coordinator would be tasked with the administration of the prison's religious programs, leaving the brother free to devote his time to the pastoral care of inmates. Over the long term, Carlson envisaged that this arrangement would become the model for the delivery of religious programs throughout the federal prison system. In the place of full-time chaplains, each institution would employ a single religious coordinator working in tandem with externally sponsored pastors and interns, part-time contract chaplains, and local volunteers. Paul Kramer observed that "Norm is right on line with what Prison Fellowship's future chapel concept is."[76] The

70. Veerman, "Analysis of Existing Memphis Prison Fellowship and Recommendations on How to Improve"; Taft, "Whatever Happened to that Old-Time Prison Chaplain?" 56; Colson, *Life Sentence*, 232–33.
71. Colson, *Life Sentence*, 214–15.
72. Veerman, "Analysis of Existing Memphis Prison Fellowship and Recommendations on How to Improve."
73. Soltau, "Retreats, Chaplains, North Central Region and South Central Region," May 27, 1977, folder 12, box 10, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
74. Colson to Loux, January 23, 1978, folder 1, box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
75. "Summary of Meeting," April 6, 1978, folder 3, box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College; Colson to Loux and Veerman, May 1, 1978, folder 1, box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.
76. Kramer, "Meeting with Carlson," May 24, 1978, folder 2, box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

organization had exchanged its exceptional access to Memphis for a structure that would permit it to have a presence inside every federal prison.

Full-time federal correctional chaplains were not, in the end, harried into extinction, but their responsibilities came increasingly to conform to Carlson's emphasis upon a coordinating role in service of an open marketplace of prison religion. In 1981, Carlson firmly rejected the recommendation of a task force on chaplaincy services that two full-time staff chaplains be employed in every major federal prison facility, with ministry as their primary function.[77] "Inmates have won the right to the religion of their choice," he asserted, and so "the chaplain, a paid government employee, is placed in the position of promoting all religious programs equally, and he must become a 'broker' or a 'coordinator' of religious activities."[78] In the years since, both federal and state correctional systems have become progressively more reliant upon the use of volunteers to provide religious services to inmates, with some states employing no professional chaplains at all.[79] No organization has benefited more from these developments than Prison Fellowship.

Carlson and Prison Fellowship needed one another. Carlson required a credible partner organization that was able to demonstrate that effective religious programming could be offered to prison inmates outside the chaplaincy system. His tolerance of Prison Fellowship's frequent youthful indiscretions provides a measure of that need. And until the control exercised by wardens and chaplains over religious programs could be broken, Prison Fellowship remained dependent upon Carlson's interventions to maintain its access to federal prisons. If anything happened to Carlson, reflected Colson in September 1977, "our whole ministry" could be wiped out "by the stroke of a pen."[80] Carlson and Colson continued to collaborate into the next decade. Carlson, for example, aided the expansion of Prison Fellowship's activities overseas by writing many letters of recommendation to foreign correctional officials.[81]

77. Kathy Young, "The State of Prison Ministry," *JSAC Grapevine* 12 (April 1981), folder 8, box 55, Christian Life Commission Resource Files, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.

78. Carlson, untitled speech, October 16, 1981, Norman A. Carlson Subject Files, Federal Bureau of Prisons Records (in author's possession following Freedom of Information Act request).

79. Nancy T. Kinney, "The Implications for Inmate Rights of the Voluntary Provision of Religious Services," *Criminal Justice Policy Review* 17 (June 2006): 189.

80. Colson to Loux, September 7, 1977, folder 1, box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.

81. See, for example, Carlson to Toyoshima, November 25, 1980, Norman A. Carlson Subject Files, Federal Bureau of Prisons Records (in author's possession following Freedom of Information Act request).

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

This is not the conventional script of a mid-1970s conservative evangelical mobilization against a secularizing state. Prison Fellowship owes its empire to the director of a federal agency and to a relationship formed as much on the ground of mutual organizational interest as from the breath of an inmate's prayer.

This content downloaded from
195.252.230.123 on Tue, 24 Mar 2026 11:18:52 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms