



**2015 Ecumenical Advocacy Days: Reflections from
Rev. Christina Thomas, Criminal Justice Chaplain
April 2015**

Rev. Christina Thomas, chaplain for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, traveled to Washington, D.C. with the National Benevolent Association during the 2015 Ecumenical Advocacy Days. She offers this reflection of her experience.

I would like to thank the National Benevolent Association (NBA) of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) for inviting me to attend the 13th Annual Ecumenical Advocacy Days (EAD) conference: Breaking the Chains of Mass Incarceration and Systems of Exploitation. As an ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) serving full-time in prison ministry, it was a life-changing experience that has forever influenced the spiritual, cultural, moral and ethical trajectory in which I do ministry.

Ecumenical Advocacy Days

The EAD conference provided both confirmation and affirmation that God has chosen me to partake in the Kingdom-building work of assisting both incarcerated and formerly incarcerated men and women in their rehabilitation, transformation and successful re-entry back into society. The plenary session on Sunday on “The Churches’ Response to Systems of Exploitation” was particularly impactful, as we heard the guest speakers’ painful, troubling and passionate speeches about the ills of mass incarceration, not only in America, but also within their respective countries. Photographs taken and shown of children and youth unjustly subjected to overcrowding and deplorable living conditions—both as “sanctuary” from human trafficking and exiled as a result of inhumane systems of exploitation—were especially heartbreaking.

As a chaplain for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), I am confronted daily with vivid images of the disproportionate number of African-American and Hispanic males incarcerated for first-time drug offenses. It was encouraging to hear Saturday’s panelists speak on “The Role of the Church in the ‘War on Drugs’” and declare the importance of the church’s fundamental role in the fight to decriminalize drug and alcohol chemical-dependency issues by changing the public discourse from one of punishment to prevention and treatment.

Visits with Elected Officials

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to advocate for prevention and treatment during the Lobby Day Visits on Capitol Hill on Monday. I must acknowledge that I was slightly nervous about meeting with politicians and speaking to them about issues near and dear to my heart. However, I was pleasantly surprised and relieved to find that our senators and representatives for the State of Texas are kind, genuine and caring people who conveyed a deep respect for our faith community and appeared just as intrigued to hear from us as we were in hearing from them.

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I met with Melanie Israel, professional staff member in Senator Ted Cruz’s office, and Gregory Berry, chief counsel of Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee’s office, and thanked them for their support of the Smarter Sentencing Act of 2015. This piece of legislation, among other things, addresses the issue that “mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses have created significant racial disparities within the federal prison system.”

I also had the opportunity to meet with Clark Davis, legislative correspondent of Senator Cornyn, and Curtis Philp, senior counsel of Congressman Lamar Smith, and shared with them the work I do in reducing recidivism by assisting formerly incarcerated men and women to successfully reintegrate back into society. These visits in particular provided me a critical opportunity to influence these two politicians’ stance, not only on the Smarter Sentencing Act of 2015, but also on the issue of eliminating the detention bed quota for immigrants and the implementation of alternatives to detention.

“We really do have the power...”

I walked away from EAD feeling as though my voice was heard and what I had to say mattered. I felt proud to walk on Capitol Hill in solidarity and community with the worldwide and global faith church in the realization that, as Christians, we really do have the power to effect the change we wish to see in our respective communities! To God be the glory! Amen.

About the NBA Prison and Jail Affinity Group

The National Benevolent Association (NBA) of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is excited to initiate a collaborative ministry addressing justice issues within America’s prisons and jails. In particular, NBA will focus on supporting congregations as they engage in prison and jail related ministries and in connecting conversations across Disciples-related ministries in order to strengthen this work. As part of the NBA’s strategic initiatives, Rev. Dean Bucalos has been contracted with the NBA as a mission specialist for prison and jail ministries. Throughout the life of the Disciples church, ministries such as the Disciples Center for Public Witness, Reconciliation Ministries, and Disciples Home Missions have been engaged in advocacy efforts related to prison and jail ministries. To learn more, contact us at prisonministries@nbacares.org.