

Faith-based Prison Programs: InnerChange Freedom Initiative



Since 1997, the [InnerChange Freedom Initiative](#) (IFI) has brought Christian ministry programs to state correctional facilities. IFI is operated by Prison Fellowship Ministries (PFM), which was founded by [Chuck Colson](#) of Watergate cover-up fame. Five such facilities have offered these programs—in Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, and Texas—and all are now privately funded. All, except the one in Texas, *were* state-funded until [Americans United for Separation of Church and State](#) (AU) brought a lawsuit against the one in Iowa. Its operations were ruled unconstitutional by a federal appeals court in December, 2007. The case was seen as a major challenge to President George W. Bush’s faith-based initiative, which sought to provide government funds for sectarian social services. (To view AU’s archives on the Iowa case, go to their Web site and search on “InnerChange.”)

IFI programs consist of lengthy Bible study sessions during which participants are told that alcoholism is a “sin” (not a disease) and that homosexuality and masturbation will draw them back into criminal behavior. An InnerChange brochure describes the program as a “24-hour-a-day, Christ-centered, biblically-based program that promotes personal transformation of prisoners through the power of the Gospel.”* Inmates opting not to participate in the program—especially Roman Catholics and Native Americans—have faced conversion pressures, such as being told they’re going to burn in Hell or that their own religious practices are forms of witchcraft and sorcery.*

A University of Pennsylvania study of the effectiveness of the program in one Texas correctional facility concluded that participants in the IFI had a higher likelihood of being rearrested than non-participants—36% vs. 35%. Reimprisonment was at 24% for IFI participants and 20% for non-participants.*

The Iowa program was declared unconstitutional in part because it was discriminatory. A surcharge had been placed on telephone calls to and from *all* inmates to support a program that benefited only those who subscribed to the religious teachings of InnerChange. Families who objected to the surcharge were told they would no longer be allowed to contact relatives inside the prison if they stopped paying.

The lawsuit also alleged that InnerChange participants were given special privileges, the first of which was an opportunity to move into the most comfortable living unit in the state’s most desirable prison.* Once there, they were allowed keys to their own cells, access to private bathrooms, free telephone calls to family, extra visits from family, and access to computers and big-screen TVs. Even sweeter was the opportunity for participants to accrue treatment credits they needed for parole.

The program was also faulted for using state funds to pay for pervasively fundamentalist Christian instruction. Those funds were from the state’s tobacco litigation settlement, which had been earmarked in its entirety for public health. Americans United claimed that 99% of the Iowa program’s revenues in 2001 were from the states of Iowa and neighboring Kansas. The public funds were transferred to the parent organization, PFM, which then disbursed them for the program’s expenses.

Though these five InnerChange programs are still operational—and still offering perks to participants—they are no longer state-funded. Meanwhile, faith-based prison programs have proliferated across the U.S.* Florida operates three “faith and character-based institutions,” which are entirely dedicated to religious rehabilitation.