

Event Summary (Generated by OpenAI)

Town Hall: Connecting Community with Returning Citizens

November 15, 2025

New Covenant Church, Indianapolis, Indiana

Event webpage: www.NewCovenant.org/townhall

Purpose of the Town Hall

This town hall gathered ministry leaders, corrections professionals, returning citizens, and community members to explore how the Body of Christ can extend **grace, opportunity, and belonging** to men and women reentering society after incarceration.

Grounded in Matthew 25:31–46, the event emphasized that visiting the incarcerated and welcoming returning citizens is not optional charity, but part of how we minister to Christ Himself:

“Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.”

The goals were to:

- Highlight **barriers to successful reentry** (especially housing, employment, stigma, and systems of debt).
- Showcase **faith-based and community-based models** that are working.
- Challenge churches to become **safe spaces for growth, discipleship, and reintegration**.
- Call believers to **practical action**, not just sympathy.

Presentation Summaries

1. Housing: “A Place to Begin Again”

Speaker: Dr. Michelle Daniel Jones

Organization: Executive Director, Constructing Our Future

Dr. Jones emphasized that **housing is the #1 barrier** to successful reentry, especially for women. For years, policymakers framed recidivism mainly as a “jobs” issue; listening to formerly incarcerated people revealed that **safe, stable housing** is even more foundational.

Key points:

- **Drivers of re-incarceration:**
 - Criminal justice and personal debt
 - Housing insecurity and homelessness
 - Job exclusion and lack of stable employment
 - Easy revocation of parole/probation
- **Women’s unique challenges:**
 - Many are “couch surfing,” living in cars, or in unsafe temporary arrangements.
 - Criminal history harms credit, which harms housing, which harms employment.
 - The system was largely designed around men; women’s needs have been neglected.
- **Constructing Our Future (COF):**
 - Created *by incarcerated women* in a public policy class to address housing blight and reentry needs.
 - Provides **safe, welcoming transitional housing** and wraparound services so women can plan their lives and move into **permanent housing** (apartments or home ownership).

- Strong emphasis on **partnerships** with community members, churches, and institutions who care about formerly incarcerated women.
- **Policy and advocacy wins:**
 - Helped pass legislation addressing **automatic termination of parental rights** for incarcerated mothers.
 - Helped pass an **anti-shackling bill** for incarcerated pregnant women and mothers, through a broad coalition of advocates, medical professionals, and formerly incarcerated women.
- **Programs & initiatives:**
 - Partnerships with Butler University to create **financial literacy** materials tailored to returning citizens.
 - Launching a **civic engagement course** so formerly incarcerated people learn that they can vote, testify at the Statehouse, and shape legislation.
 - Hosting **HIV/AIDS awareness** and health events.
 - Conducting a **statewide survey** on formerly incarcerated women and their children to fill critical data gaps.
- **Housing model:**
 - Current pilot home in Broad Ripple (Indianapolis), continuously occupied since December 2021.
 - New partnership with Broadway United Methodist Church to establish the **Newton House**, an 8–10 bed home for women, named after long-time member and COF founder Phyllis Newton.
 - Vision includes homes for women with children and aging women (65+).

Dr. Jones closed with a powerful reminder that when you look at a group of women—resident, staff, board member, executive director—you **cannot tell who was formerly incarcerated**. What you see is a community choosing a better future. She urged listeners to come alongside that intentionality with action.

2. Beyond the Walls: *Preparation for Reentry*

Speaker: Tammy Atwood

Role: Community Engagement Coordinator, Indiana Women's Prison

Ms. Atwood has served in the Indiana Department of Correction for **36 years** and coordinates community involvement and volunteer programs at the Indiana Women's Prison (IWP).

Key points:

- **What is reentry?**
Reentry is not a single program; it is a **coordinated process** of preparing individuals to return to society with the skills, documentation, support, and mindset needed to avoid reoffending.
- **Why reentry matters:**
 1. **Public safety:** Better-prepared returning citizens are less likely to commit new crimes.
 2. **Cost savings:** Successful reentry reduces long-term corrections and supervision costs.
 3. **Institutional safety:** People with goals and structure are easier to manage and less likely to engage in negative behavior.
- **Common barriers for returning women:**
 1. Lack of identification (ID, Social Security card, birth certificate).

2. Limited job history or skills.
 3. Mental health and substance use needs.
 4. Housing instability.
 5. Transportation challenges.
 6. Stigma of criminal record (“I’ve been in prison” written on the forehead).
- **What IWP reentry services provide:**
 1. **Documentation:** IDs, Social Security cards, birth certificates, Medicaid enrollment and appointments.
 2. **Education & employment:** GED preparation, vocational training (culinary arts, cosmetology, tech programs like Teladoc/Last Mile), resume building, job readiness.
 3. **Life skills:** Budgeting, scheduling, problem solving, conflict resolution.
 4. **Behavioral health:** Substance abuse treatment, cognitive behavioral programs, anger management, parenting classes.
 5. **Family connection:** A **family center** where mothers can bond with children in a home-like setting; pregnant women with nonviolent offenses and shorter sentences can keep their babies with them, with very low recidivism among participants.
 - **Unique programs:**
 1. **Indiana K9** service dog program, where women train dogs for mobility assistance, PTSD, and medical alerts at dramatically lower cost than traditional service-dog programs.
 2. **Tattoo removal** program for gang-related, trafficking-related, hate-speech, or abusive tattoos, in cooperation with national partners.

Ms. Atwood stressed that **over 500 volunteers** serve at IWP and that churches and community partners are essential. She encouraged more employers willing to hire returning citizens, more transitional housing, and continued volunteer engagement.

3. Finishing Strong: *Successfully Completing Parole*

Speaker: Dr. William Bumphus III

Roles: Assistant Pastor at Faith Center Church; leader and mentor at the Jesus House; high school football coach; adjunct professor

Dr. Bumphus shared the story and impact of **Jesus Inside Prison Ministry (JIPM)** and the **Jesus House**, a residential discipleship program for men coming directly out of prison.

Key points:

- **Ministry structure:**
 - JIPM is first and foremost a **prison ministry**, with a church attached.
 - Jesus House is a **faith-based residential program** for men released from prison.
 - The focus is on **discipleship and moral transformation**, not just services.
- **Origin story:**
 - JIPM founder (his father) was a **career criminal** who met Christ in prison.
 - Upon release, he was almost homeless and under intense pressure to reoffend. One act of kindness—being given a place to stay and basic clothing by another former prisoner—**literally saved his life** and kept him from going back.
 - Out of that experience, the vision for the **Jesus House** was born: a place where men can live, stabilize, and grow in Christ after release.

- **Core philosophy:**
 - The main problem is not simply lack of a job; many men had jobs when they got locked up.
 - The key is a “**morality change**” and renewing of the mind (Romans 12).
 - Jesus House is unapologetically a **strong discipleship program**:
 - 5 days a week of Bible teaching, often twice a day.
 - Residents must be openly committed to following Christ—“If you don’t love Jesus, you won’t last long here.”
 - The program’s goal is to **remove pressure**, so men aren’t driven back to old criminal coping strategies.
- **Impact and outcomes:**
 - Dr. Bumphus’s dissertation, *Jailhouse Religion: A Study on the Perceived Effects of Religious Prison Rehabilitation that Affects Recidivism*, used Jesus House as a research subject.
 - The study documented a **96% success rate**: men who complete the program **do not reoffend**.
 - Success is measured not only by staying out of prison, but by **no new victims** and transformed lives.
- **Stories of transformation:**
 - **Kevin King**: Once robbed people for a living; now spends his time feeding and clothing others, and built a micro-business with 40+ vending machines.
 - **Steve Witten**: Lived at Jesus House nearly 20 years, using his mechanic skills to support himself through an auto shop.
 - **Johnny Hill**: Incarcerated most of his life, with an out-date of 2070. After meeting Christ, his time was miraculously reduced. Upon release to Jesus House, he worked faithfully at Wheeler Mission and eventually became a **supervisor and case manager**.
- **Parole & partnerships:**
 - Jesus House has strong relationships with parole/probation officers, who recognize the program’s discipline and results.
 - Men stay **as long as needed**—there is no time limit as long as they follow program rules.
 - Funding is **100% private** (donations, faith support); they take **no government grants** so that discipleship and church attendance can remain central.

Dr. Bumphus underscored that **Jesus still loves prisoners and ex-prisoners**, and that when their lives change, the entire community benefits.

4. Connecting with the Community of Believers

Speaker: Chaplain Dolores Epps

Roles: Director, Friends Fellowship of Indiana; Assistant Chaplain at Indiana Women’s Prison; Volunteer at Rockville Correctional Facility; Associate Minister, New Covenant Church

Chaplain Epps shared out of **decades of ministry** to incarcerated women and returning citizens. What began as a desire to help young women in domestic violence situations led her into the prison—where one visit turned into a lifelong calling.

Key points:

- **Friends Fellowship of Indiana:**
 - Over 40 years of ministry in women's prisons.
 - Provides **Bible studies, birthday celebrations, treats, and hygiene items**, modeling Jesus' pattern of meeting practical needs and spiritual needs together.
 - Partners with IDOC to teach classes that can earn **time cuts** (e.g., in the PLUS purposeful living units).
- **The gap after release:**
 - Many women find Christ while incarcerated, but "**jailhouse religion**" fades if there's no support on the outside.
 - Chaplain Epps' passion is not only what happens *inside* but what happens **after release**.
- **Opportunities for churches and believers:**
 - **Mentoring:** Re-starting mentor programs like PLUS mentorship and Friends Fellowship mentoring (including correspondence mentoring for facilities like Rockville).
 - **Correspondence ministry:** Writing letters through a safe PO Box to encourage women spiritually.
 - **Community advisory boards:** Joining prison advisory boards to learn what's happening inside and how churches can partner meaningfully.
 - **Support groups:** Re-launching groups like *Journey Beyond Redemption* that meet monthly, provide practical help (laundry detergent, bus passes, food), and build community.
 - **Celebrate Recovery & similar Christ-centered groups:** She noted a **lack of active Celebrate Recovery programs** in their immediate community and emphasized the need for churches to host structured, Christ-centered recovery meetings for addictions and other life-controlling issues.
- **Housing & crisis support:**
 - Chaplain Epps often receives urgent calls about women being released with only a week in a hotel and **no safe long-term housing**.
 - She affirmed Constructing Our Future as the best women's reentry housing she has seen and shared concerns about unsafe, exploitative housing options elsewhere.
- **The church as "Jesus House":**
 - Even if churches cannot offer overnight housing, they can become **spiritual homes**—places of discipleship, encouragement, and practical help.
 - Returning citizens need **discipleship**, not just a seat in the sanctuary.

Chaplain Epps closed with Jesus' words in Matthew 9:37–38 ("The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few") and called believers to see returning citizens as part of that **great harvest**.

5. Managing Attitudes Toward Returning Citizens

Speaker: Dr. Bryan Hudson

Role: Pastor, New Covenant Church

Pastor Hudson concluded the event with a call to **heart-level change** in how believers think about and treat returning citizens.

Anchored again in Matthew 25:31–46, he reminded the audience that Jesus closely identifies Himself with the hungry, the stranger, the sick, and the imprisoned.

Key points for managing attitudes:

1. **Maintain a Kingdom Perspective**

- Jesus deliberately spent time with people society avoided and marginalized.
- He brought both **restoration and expectation**: “Go and sin no more.”
- Our attitudes and actions toward returning citizens reflect how seriously we take Christ’s words.

2. **See Their Humanity (Imago Dei)**

- Every person is made in the **image of God**, regardless of sin, race, class, or record.
- Past actions do not define a person’s value or their future potential.
- Avoid dehumanizing labels; speak of “enslaved persons,” not “slaves,” and “returning citizens,” not just “ex-cons.”

3. **Believe in Redemption**

- Scripture teaches **new creation realities** (2 Corinthians 5:17).
- Expect transformation; don’t assume failure.
- Extend the same grace God extended to us.

4. **Practice Compassion, Not Suspicion**

- Don’t default to fear or distrust.
- Instead of asking, “What’s wrong with you?” ask, “How can I support you?”
- Walk *with* people, not simply observe them from a safe distance.

5. **Walk with the Willing**

- Reintegration is hard spiritually, socially, emotionally, and financially.
- It is nearly impossible without help.
- Many returning citizens are **highly motivated** to change; walk as far as they’re willing to go.

6. **Don’t Hold the Past Over Them**

- Practice the **Golden Rule**—treat others the way you want to be treated.
- Avoid constantly referencing past mistakes or assuming that “what they did is who they still are.”
- Allow people to truly begin again.

7. **Help Remove Barriers, Not Create Them**

- Recognize the importance of **agency**—a person’s God-given capacity to act, choose, and shape their life.
- Incarceration strips away agency; our role is to help people **recover it**.

8. **Model Forgiveness & Be a Safe Place**

- Many of us simply “didn’t get caught”—we are not morally superior.
- Churches should be **safe places**: free of shaming, full of accountability, growth, and grace.

9. **Encourage Responsibility and Growth**

- Support does not mean lowering expectations.
- Healthy boundaries and accountability help people mature and thrive.

- The ultimate goal is not just “staying out of trouble,” but **becoming people who help and disciple others.**

Pastor Hudson noted that the best evidence of true transformation is when those once marginalized become **servants and leaders**, helping others find hope and a new life in Christ.