



STEPHEN'S TABLE LAUNCHED
www.StephensTable.net

**Restoring Prisoners To
Their Home Communities**

**An Outreach of
Chattanooga Endeavors**
www.ceiservices.net

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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CHATTANOOGA, TN – Chattanooga Endeavors, Inc. (CEi) a charitable organization in Southeast Tennessee dedicated to the rehabilitation of former offenders, announced today an initiative to restore ties between prisoners and their home communities severed by incarceration. Operating under the name "Stephen's Table," organizers have received a \$110,000 grant from the Office of Criminal Justice Programs to build a network of 100 churches that will reach out to prisoners from the Chattanooga area and assist them in making decisions that both improve their incarceration experience and reduce failures during reentry. There are approximately 1,400 people from the Chattanooga area serving terms in state and federal prisons.

Research supports the approach, with one Florida study showing that social ties reduce reoffending by over thirty-percent. And it is not hard to understand why. "Having mature, uplifting relationships in the community," says CEi's Tim Dempsey, "both holds returning prisoners accountable and alleviates stress that leads to poor decisions." Plus, he points out, resources often follow these relationships, providing the material assistance needed for a successful transition from prison to the community.

"The majority of prisoners completely lose contact with their hometown," says organizer Calvin Figures. "And [when they are released], this empty space is filled quickly by all the negative influences that put them in prison in the first place." By the time help arrives, it is often too late – with about two thirds returning to crime and ending up back behind bars.

To counter this unintended consequence of incarceration which works against public safety, committees of trained volunteers will be set up in participating churches to carry out the initiative's goals. Through letter-writing, visitation, and other simple acts of kindness, members will foster positive social ties with prisoners and build a supportive community for them when they come home.

The initiative bodes well for Chattanooga as Tennessee begins to roll out a new strategy for supervising more offenders in the community and fewer in prison ([Times Free Press](#), 9/1/09). "We support the

State's direction," says Dempsey. "They are following evidence-based practices that have worked in other states to improve public safety and reduce the head count in prison." However, he points out, communities must do their part for the strategy to work best. "Local leaders must provide legitimate opportunities for former offenders to succeed," says Dempsey. "Otherwise you just end up with more in the community struggling to make ends meet."

The potential impact of Stephen's Table on public safety is plain to see. However, for the religious community, there is an additional concern. "Christians are called to minister in the fringes of society which often creates some anxiety for those that know in their hearts that this ministry is something Jesus would have them do," says Rev. Barry Hildebrandt, Cross of Christ Lutheran Church Pastor. "Prison work has always been complicated by the details of actual visitations, and by the fear of coming face to face with someone behind bars and most church volunteers find themselves on untrod ground in this regard" he adds. Stephen's Table eliminates these obstacles to prison ministry by giving volunteers a simple model and by training and supporting them as they carry it out.

To learn more about Stephen's Table, churches should plan to participate in a kick-off event with Darryl Smith, National Director of Campus Crusade for Christ's Student Ventures,

Saturday, October 17th

9:00 a.m. – noon

New Covenant Fellowship Church

1326 N Moore Rd

For information about this event, call Calvin Figgures or Floyd Davis at 423-266-1888.

Photos are available on Flickr

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/32805688@N05/sets/72157622479389886/> .