

Agency ministers beyond prison bars



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BY JACQUELINE KOCH

JKOCH@TIMESFREEPRESS.COM

When Calvin Figgures left state prison after a stint for drug crimes, he entered a halfway house in Chattanooga but found he had no way to get a job.

Then he connected with a local church, which led to his hiring by Chattanooga Endeavors, a charitable organization dedicated to helping offenders restore ties to their communities.

Now he serves as Chattanooga Endeavors' outreach coordinator and is starting a new ministry called Stephen's Table that connects churches to inmates.

"In some cases, your fam-



STAFF PHOTO BY ALLISON KWESELL

Matrika Davis pauses for a second at the New Covenant Fellowship Church during a kickoff event for Stephen's Table while speaking about her first-hand experience growing up with a father who was in prison.

ily's not there for you," Mr. Figgures said. "The church is there for you. And it does

help."

Mr. Figgures' situation is not unique. Hundreds of

Faith in prison

Religious breakdown of Tennessee state prisons.

76% Christian

17% No preference, agnostic or atheist

7% Other. This group represents 23 faiths including Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.

SOURCE:
TENNESSEE DEPT. OF CORRECTIONS

STAFF GRAPHIC BY BECK TOWERLY

inmates leave prison without support, housing or employment, which shows the need for a ministry such as Stephen's Table,

See MINISTRY, Page B4



STAFF PHOTO BY ALLISON KWESELL

The Rev. Floyd Davis of Silverdale Detention Center, left, listens to a presentation at the New Covenant Fellowship Church during a kickoff event for the Stephen's Table ministry. Mr. Davis was saved when he was incarcerated in 1993. The man at right is unidentified.

Ministry: Agency beyond bars

● Continued from Page B1
officials say.

In the New Testament, the disciple Stephen waited on and cleaned widows' dinner tables when few members of the early church took care of widows.

Similarly, the ministry hopes to serve people who often are overlooked by the community — incarcerated and former prisoners who need help finding friends, jobs and support.

Churches will partner with inmates upon their arrival and remain supportive during their time in prison and

after their release, said Tim Dempsey, executive director of Chattanooga Endeavors.

"We've got to find ways to make jobs and other opportunities available to people," Mr. Dempsey said.

"Stephen's Table, in addition to providing an uplifting positive influence in someone's life, will also result in a church's ability to steer people (toward) resources, transportation and housing."

Funding comes from a \$110,000 stimulus grant from the Office of Criminal Justice Programs that pays for two part-time staff members to

recruit churches.

At a recent meeting, about 100 churches pledged support for the program and offered their members to meet with prisoners in their cells and maintain friendships after their release.

Stephen's Table will start with prisoners in the Hamilton County Jail, but Mr. Dempsey said he hopes its services will be offered to any Hamilton County resident imprisoned anywhere in the state.

About 1,400 Chattanooga residents are serving time in state or federal prisons, records show.