

*Restoring Prisoners to the Table of the Faithful*

I didn't get serious about my faith until I was locked up. And if it wasn't for an accidental encounter with a faithful Christian, I could have easily lost my way when I came home.

– George Eiland

Stephen's Table is a network of churches in the Chattanooga area that systematically reach out to prisoners during their incarceration and offer them a place to worship when they return home. Through simple acts of charity, members reignite hope in the hearts of those behind bars, helping them complete their journey to healing and wholeness in Christ. However, this is no ordinary prison ministry. In both scope and emphasis, Stephen's Table stands apart from other evangelical efforts.

Scope: Not wanting to leave anyone behind, Stephen's Table engages every single person from the Chattanooga area that is serving a prison term regardless of where they are incarcerated (Luke 15:3-7)

Emphasis: Member churches connect prisoners to a place of worship and let social service agencies address the assorted personal problems they face when they come home (Acts 6:1-7)

By joining Stephen's Table, churches distinguish themselves as a place that welcomes prisoners to worship and not a target for manipulation and abuse. And by practicing the limits of benevolence, churches preserve their essential role as a place of "prayer and ministry of the word" while connecting prisoners to community resources to assist them with housing, employment, counseling, healthcare, transportation, clothing, food, etc.

## Membership

The only requirement for a church's membership is a single volunteer willing to serve as a liaison on its behalf. Liaisons help shape their church's involvement in Stephen's Table and function as the primary contact within the network. Their responsibilities include:

- Completing training for church volunteers
- Attending an annual meeting
- Distributing material about network activities
- Answering calls from prisoners
- Praying for the project and those it serves

## Activities

No single church can answer all the spiritual needs felt by prisoners and their families – nor can a single agency answer all their material needs. But working together, everything is possible. What one lacks another can provide and united we can help prisoners and their families find a place to worship and ensure that none of their material needs go unanswered.

Members churches are listed in the Stephen's Table directory and are invited to participate in a variety of activities to benefit prisoners and their families, including

- **Lenten Cross** – A project of prayer and almsgiving in preparation for Easter
- **RE:CONX** – Care packages to ease the transition from prison to the community.
- **Good Samaritan Collection** – Offerings of items to be used in RE:CONX.
- **Hospitality Committee** – Volunteers from member churches welcoming prisoners home and introducing them to the network.
- **Offender Helpline** – Successful offenders giving guidance and support to their peers.
- **Yellow Ribbon Committee** – Small church groups cultivating relationships with prisoners from the Chattanooga area.

Member churches decide which activities best fit their congregation; however, all members are encouraged to prayerfully consider establishing a

Yellow Ribbon Committee, which forms the foundation of the Stephen's Table network.

## **Yellow Ribbon Committees**

With 1,200 people from the Chattanooga area serving prison terms in Tennessee – and a goal of engaging them all – capacity, collaboration and organization within the Stephen's Table network are key factors to success.

Through church based committees, trained volunteers cultivate relationships with prisoners, reminding them that have not be forgotten and helping them make positive decisions that improve their incarceration experience.

Members form their church based committee in seven simple steps:

- Step 1 :: Identify Stephen's Table liaison
- Step 2 :: Recruit 3-5 members from church
- Step 3 :: Train members
- Step 4 :: Match committee with inmate
- Step 5 :: Monthly sponsorship meetings
- Step 6 :: Publicize within member churches
- Step 7 :: Development & Fellowship

Once in place, church committees carry out a variety of activities that are intended to provide moral support and guidance to the prisoner/s they are sponsoring. Activities might include exchanging letters, visitation, special occasion gifts, and making sure participants have access to a local newspaper, phone book and other information resources.

## **Training**

Volunteers are often moved to serve in areas in which they may not be well prepared. Likewise churches find themselves addressing increasingly complicated social problems. To enhance and support the work of Stephen's Table liaisons and other network volunteers, we provide a three part training program that addresses:

- The roles, responsibilities, benefits, and hazards of volunteering.
- The impact of social issues on our community.
- How crime and incarceration effects individuals, families and the community.

- Cultural diversity and vulnerable populations.
- Major mental illness and the complexity of human behavior.
- The meaning of empathy and maintenance of personal boundaries.
- The limits of benevolence in the context of spiritual ministries.
- Responding to survival requirements.
- Interaction with social service systems

## **Support**

A variety of tools, materials and activities are available for volunteers to support their work and enhance their experience.

## **Promotional Material**

Print ready advertisements, brochures, images, slides and promotional text are available online at [www.stephenstable.net/media](http://www.stephenstable.net/media)

## **Application**

Church applications can be found on our website [www.stephenstable.net/application](http://www.stephenstable.net/application)

## **Meetings**

Newcomer meetings are held every month. Please call for details.

## **Chattanooga Endeavors**

Chattanooga Endeavors, Inc. (CEi) is a publicly supported charity based in Chattanooga Tennessee with a mission to improve public safety by restoring former offenders to productive roles in society. With a special emphasis on recently released prisoners, we prepare former offenders for work, support them in their job search and offer limited opportunities for remunerative work training through an alternative staffing program.

## **Contact Information**

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