

Looking Back, Looking Ahead
Rev. Dean Bucalos
Mission Specialist, NBA Prison and Jail Affinity Ministries
January 2016



**National
Benevolent
Association**
of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

This past year has brought attention to many important social justice issues, particularly as they relate to prison and jail ministry. The NBA Prison and Jail Ministry Affinity Group has been right at the center of many of these issues, not only lifting them up before the wider church, but also inspiring those in our communities of faith to action. Our work is about inspiration, advocacy, and education. And there is much work yet to be done. As we begin the new year, I thought I would highlight some of our accomplishments in 2015 to remind us of the important work we are about.

Inspiration: To inspire, we published blogs on a variety of topics throughout the year. These blogs not only raise important issues, like the use of prolonged solitary confinement and mass incarceration, but also highlight ongoing ministries that are making a difference in our world. Ministries like Prison Congregations of America, Prison Visitation and Support, and penpal ministries all contribute to making the world a better place. This year, we began inviting guest bloggers to share the incredible work they are doing, and we hope to offer this forum for others in the years to come.



Rev. Bucalos meets with Senator Rand Paul in November 2015.

Advocacy: Our advocacy work took form in two ways. We were present at Ecumenical Advocacy Days in April 2015, along with 1,000 others considering the effects of mass incarceration and the moral imperative that demands criminal justice reform. As part of that four-day conference, we sponsored a gathering and panel discussion that brought together strong leaders from across the country who are at the heart of this important work. Later in the year, I was invited to Washington, D.C., to participate in a panel of faith-based leaders sponsored by The Interfaith Criminal Justice Coalition.

At two sessions, we spoke of the need for criminal justice reform to Congressional staffers. During my time there, I was able to speak privately with staff members of the senators and congressperson from my home state of Kentucky.

Our other advocacy work involved drafting and presenting a resolution at the 2015 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada. This resolution called the church to study the use of prolonged solitary confinement in our prison system and, then, to take action to minimize or eliminate its use. The resolution was passed without debate. We are now seeing dramatic changes across the country in the use of solitary confinement.

Education: The final piece of our three-pronged approach, education, continues to have impact. We presented three webinars this year on topics including mass incarceration, beginning a mentoring program for returning citizens, and an introduction to the use of prolonged solitary confinement and the damage it does. These webinars and the accompanying PowerPoint presentations can be found as resource pages on the NBA website:

<http://www.nbacares.org/care-resources/category/prison-jail-ministries-affinity-group>

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Educating our congregations about these and other issues is a priority. We know that education leads to action. That's why we offered workshops at the General Assembly and co-sponsored a day-long workshop in Kentucky for people involved in faith-based prison and jail ministries. Our NBA Prison and Jail Ministries Facebook group is one more way to learn about these important issues and to connect with others with similar interests.

Partners: Much of this work could not have been accomplished without the partnership and encouragement of our ministry partners: Reconciliation Ministry, Disciples Center for Public Witness, Disciples Justice Action Network, Disciples Home Missions, UCC Justice and Witness Ministries, and the National Religious Campaign Against Torture. A very special thanks to each of you. We look forward to deepening our partnerships and shared work in 2016!

Planning for 2016: I am looking forward to continuing the good work we have begun. In addition to our monthly blogs, we will sponsor four new webinars in 2016. The topics will include juvenile justice, a series on breaking the stigma of welcoming people into our churches who are struggling with mental health issues and co-occurring conditions, and those who are returning from places of incarceration. This year we will also continue to educate and equip people for these important ministries and will be bringing together a small-group component of our affinity group in the spring to meet with one another, network, share best practices, and offer support.



*Rev. Monica Wedlock Kilpatrick and
Rev. Bucalos at Ecumenical Advocacy
Days in April 2015.*

One of our goals is to reach out and connect people in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) who have an interest or a passion for prison and jail ministry. We know that every congregation and many of our families are affected by the incarceration of a loved one or friend. If you are such a person, please let me hear from you so we can add you to our growing contact list.

This ministry has grown rapidly because these issues and the people they affect call us to action. May we continue to be faithful and vigilant in the coming year!

***Rev. Dean Bucalos serves as part-time Mission Specialist for NBA Prison and Jail Ministries.
Connect with Dean by email at prisonministries@nbacares.org.***