

Iowa prison ministry ruled unconstitutional: Decision seen as blow to faith-based initiatives

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In what could be a major setback for the government's ability to fund religious charities, a federal judge has ruled against an Iowa program designed to rehabilitate prisoners through Christianity.

Federal judge Robert Pratt of Des Moines ruled June 2 that the InnerChange Freedom Initiative, operating at Iowa's Newton Correctional Facility, violates the First Amendment's ban on government establishment of religion.

"For all practical purposes, the state has literally established an evangelical Christian congregation within the walls of one its penal institutions, giving the leaders of that congregation, i.e., InnerChange employees, authority to control the spiritual, emotional, and physical lives of hundreds of Iowa inmates," Pratt wrote.

Much of Pratt's 140-page decision dealt with recounting the details of Iowa's InnerChange program. He found that participants were coerced with living-arrangement advantages unavailable to those who did not participate in the program, that the program and the prison had no sufficient way to monitor whether government funds given to it were spent on secular or sectarian purposes, and that the program was focused on Bible study and conversion.

"While such spiritual and emotional 'rewiring' may be possible in the life of an individual and lower the risk of committing other crimes, it cannot be permissible to force taxpayers to fund such an enterprise under the Establishment Clause," he wrote.

In an unusual move, Pratt ordered InnerChange to reimburse the government for more than \$1.5 million paid to the organization. The judge also ordered the organization to halt all activities at Newton prison, though he suspended

enforcement of his orders pending an appeal.

InnerChange is run by Prison Fellowship, the Virginia-based charity founded by popular Christian author and former Watergate figure Charles Colson. The organization released a statement attacking the ruling and promising to appeal it to the Eighth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. "For over ten years, the InnerChange Freedom Initiative has produced dramatic results in changing the lives of hardened criminals and stopping the revolving door of crime," the statement said. "This decision, if allowed to stand, will enshrine religious discrimination."

But Americans United for Separation of Church and State, which brought the lawsuit, hailed the decision as a First Amendment victory and a massive blow to President Bush's efforts to increase government funding for social services through religious organizations. "There is no way to interpret this decision as anything but a body blow to so-called faith-based initiatives," the organization said. *-Associated Baptist Press*