

The prison business: Profit in filling jail cells

From the Editors in the [October 3, 2006](#) issue

The first major public building to reopen in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina wasn't a public school, hospital or courthouse. It was Orleans Parish Prison. And you can hardly blame Sheriff Marlin Gusman for being anxious to reopen it. David Morton reports in the *New Republic* (August 14 & 21) that every prisoner brings in from \$22.39 to \$43.50 per day in government funding. The more prisoners, the more money. Before Katrina, Gusman's jail averaged 6,000 inmates—4 percent of New Orleans' adult male population.

According to Morton, Gusman's predecessor, Charles Foti, began a practice of encouraging arrests in order to fill prison slots. After Katrina rendered many of the prison facilities unusable, Gusman reluctantly released some of the minor offenders. Calvin Johnson, chief judge of the criminal court, told the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, "I'm not exaggerating: there were people in jail for spitting on the sidewalk."

The prison's annual budget, over which Gusman had almost complete control, was some \$70 million. Sheriffs can deploy chain gangs around the city to dole out civic favors and increase their own name recognition. Some people said Gusman was more powerful than the mayor. Not long after Katrina, he won reelection as sheriff, despite being roundly criticized for his performance in evacuating the prison. His was one of the most recognized names on the ballot. Contractors contributed heavily to his campaign—some of whom will no doubt be offered contracts to rebuild the prison. He has asked for \$57 million from FEMA and has received \$31 million. Though the city is certain to be smaller in the future, there are no plans in place for reducing the size of the prison. Presumably, the percentage of adults locked up will simply be increased.

No political policy has been more popular in America over the past two decades than "getting tough on crime." That policy has perhaps reduced crime. It has definitely

filled the prisons. We ought to ask who benefits from our massive governmental spending on corrections. In cases like Sheriff Gusman's, we should wonder whether our boundless spending on corrections isn't driving who gets arrested rather than the reverse.

Several articles in this issue remind us about the often-hidden lives of prisoners and their families and of the church's opportunities for ministry with these people. The articles also remind us that the "free church" has things to learn from the "bond church"—the community of Christians behind bars.

Christians can be among those who would rather forget about the people who live out their lives in prisons. Christians can succumb to fear, and they can adopt a scapegoating mentality. Good Friday reminds us annually that we all cheer "Crucify him!" Every taxpayer is implicated in our government's tossing of lives into the gaping maw of the prison-industrial complex. Of all people, those whose Savior is a death-row convict ought to know better.