

Actress pushes churches to reach out to prisoners

by [Rebecca Cusey](#)

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(RNS) Jesus left his followers with precious few commands: love thy neighbor, feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the prisoner among them. So why do so many churches have such a hard time with that last one?

Oscar-winning actress Hilary Swank, for one, is waiting for a good answer.

In her recent film, "Conviction," Swank plays Betty Anne Waters, a real-life high school dropout whose 18-year quest to free her brother from a wrongful murder conviction led her from GED to the bar exam.

"As we're sitting here speaking right now, someone is in prison for a crime they didn't commit," Swank said at a recent screening of the film at a historic black church in Alexandria, Va., "and that's not OK."

Waters' brother, Kenny Waters, was the 83rd prisoner exonerated and freed as a result of DNA testing, forced by the persistence of the New York-based Innocence Project. To date, 261 prisoners have seen their wrongful convictions overturned.

"I think we always have to have hope and faith that eventually the right thing will happen," said Swank, who said she believes in a higher power but doesn't subscribe to a particular religion. "I don't know how it will be solved, but I think in talking about it, we shine a bright light."

Prison Fellowship, the nation's best known church-based outreach to inmates, is teaming with Swank and her film to help show congregations prisoners' needs, and lobby to reduce wrongful convictions, end prison

rape and halt the shackling of female inmates during childbirth.

"I think it's hard to convince people these things are happening," said Kimberly Alleyne, spokeswoman for Prison Fellowship. "Who wants to believe that these women are being shackled and held down while they're giving birth to babies? It's almost unconscionable."

While Swank's movie highlights the problem of wrongful conviction, U.S. prisons are full of people who admit to being guilty. In 2008, the last year for which the Bureau of Justice Statistics data was available, 7.3 million people -- one in every 31 American adults -- were in jail, prison, on probation or on parole.

"I think some struggle with the issue of helping prisoners because by and large, many of the people who are serving sentences are guilty," Alleyne said. "Our approach is whether they're guilty or not -- particularly if they are guilty -- they still need to be embraced by the love of God. This is not a judgmental work."

Pat Nolan, a Prison Fellowship vice president who served 29 months in federal custody after pleading guilty to corruption charges as a California state legislator, knows what it's like. He maintained his innocence and says he accepted a plea deal to avoid the possibility of a long imprisonment.

"When you're in prison, it's like you're an amputee," Nolan said. "You're cut off from your family, you're cut off from your job, from your community, from your church."

"I still have every letter that was sent to me (in prison)," Nolan told attendees at the screening, his voice breaking with emotion, "Within each of your churches are people who have sons, brothers, wives, sisters in prison. They suffer alone."

Prison Fellowship, which was founded by Watergate ex-con Charles Colson, currently partners with about 8,000 U.S. churches, but says it needs more. Some churches are reluctant to join prison work because it involves "stepping out of your comfort zone and going to a place you haven't been to before," Alleyne said.

But she said it's not just about hardened criminals inside the walls, but what happens to them when and if they rejoin society on the outside.

"The local church is the backbone of our re-entry process," Alleyne said. "People from the churches and the community are there waiting on the outside so that when a prisoner comes out, he or she has somewhere to go for clothing, to get housing, to get help with jobs."

It's what happens at Shiloh Baptist Church, which hosted the film screening. Because inmates often serve sentences far from home, Shiloh runs a teleconferencing ministry to allow families to talk to incarcerated loved ones.

"I've done teleconferencing with prisoners who haven't seen their family in 16 years," said volunteer Lionel O. Smith, a 30-year veteran of the federal prison system. "They have just an emotional period of about 10 to 15 minutes where they're just so emotional they can't even speak."

Shiloh's pastor, the Rev. Lee A. Earl, said serving prisoners and their families is part of the church's mandate to address all aspects of human need.

"Like Miss Swank said, it's a tremendous love story. This is about love. That's what Christ was about, that's what he died for -- receiving people that proper Christians or church folk didn't think he ought to be receiving. If we're not careful, we'll get into that same kind of religion."