REFLECTION ON RESPONDING TO THE NEED AT STATEVILLE

COVID-19 awaits no background check and requires no gate pass. Its life is sustained through shakedowns and handshakes, time slowly passing and the passing of styrofoam trays, tight quarters, and close proximity. It is as inclusive as it is intrusive. It makes a place usually protected from inside and outside harm, like Stateville Correctional Center outside of Chicago, now one of the deadliest places to be.

As of this writing, the Illinois Department of Health confirmed 43 cases of COVID-19 at Stateville, the facility where North Park Theological Seminary offers certificate courses and a Masters degree to over 80 inside and outside students. Another update detailed the expedited spread of symptoms from loss of taste and smell to coughing and fevers which affirms the reality that there could be many more than just 43 cases. With an inability to socially distance, little-to-no access to soap and hand sanitizer, and under-resourced medical support, residents and staff at Stateville and correctional centers across the nation are left wondering not “if” but “when” the virus will reach them and what will be the damage.

How can we respond as the Evangelical Covenant Church? How do we lament broken systems that see little value in our sisters and brothers who are incarcerated? What can we do when we feel helpless? Hebrews 13:3 calls us to “continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you were suffering.” We can remember our brothers at Stateville by praying and engaging in the following ways:

1. Pray
   - Pray for health and protection from the virus for those who are incarcerated and for officers/staff members.
   - Pray for the loved ones of those incarcerated, as interaction is limited and communication is slow.
   - Pray for decision-makers at the local, state, and federal government to remember those in prison when considering the prevention and spread of the virus.

2. Engage
   - Donate funds to support our students through the supply of soap and hand sanitizer into Stateville as well as other needed resources and supplies.
     Link: https://connect.northpark.edu/pages/npopuprisoneducation
   - Write letters of encouragement to inside students at Stateville.
     Email Melissa Pavlik at mpavlik@northpark.edu for more details.

3. Advocate
   - Call your Governor and State Officials with this brief statement:
     “Hi my name is _________ and I am a resident of [your state]. I am calling to ask that Governor _________ take prompt action to release as many people as possible from prison as soon as possible in light of the threat that COVID-19 poses to incarcerated populations. Thank you.”

   - Reach out to local reentry organizations and prison ministries to support their efforts during this crisis and see how you can help. State by state list of reentry programs:
     https://lionheart.org/prison/state-by-state-listing-of-re-entry-programs-for-prisoners/


Sincerely,
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