

What's good for the goose . . .

A federal judge has held that the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI) program in Iowa violates a constitutional ban on government establishment of religion because it uses state money for religious conversion. U.S. Dist. Judge Robert W. Pratt arrived at this decision despite the fact that inmates enter the program voluntarily.

"Though an inmate could, theoretically, graduate from InnerChange without converting to Christianity," Judge Pratt wrote, "the coercive nature of the program demands obedience to its dogmas and doctrine."

I wish the judge could have been with me on a Tuesday night in 2002. That night, I led what is called a Huddle-Up group at the IFI program at the Carol Vance Unit in the Houston suburb of Sugar Land. It is the original one, started by Prison Fellowship in 1997 and now replicated in Iowa and four other states.

Before we volunteer mentors went onto the unit that night, a staff member gave us the usual briefing. This time, he told us, "A lot of these guys are making their release date their idol. If you want to give them something to think about, ask them what they're going to do the *second* 24 hours they're out."

In my Huddle-Up group, composed of eight men within weeks of release, I picked out a lean, amiable fellow named Reggie who said he was a boxer and asked him what he would do in his second 24 hours of freedom.

"Well, I don't know if I'll do it my second 24 hours or not," Reggie said, smiling, "but one thing I got to do right away is find me a mosque."

It seemed Reggie had resisted the "coercive nature of the program" without much wear and tear. So have others I've met over the years.

The judge is certainly correct in finding that IFI puts the inmates who volunteer for it through 18 months of immersion in Christian doctrine. That's what it is designed to do. One difficulty in discussing the matter is that the conversation is going on in two languages. A non-Christian sees the program as a propaganda assault. An evangelical believer holds that conversion can only take place through a work of the Holy Spirit.

"But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14).

All that any Christian program, IFI included, can do is present the claims of Christ and pray that the Holy Spirit will move in that context and open the hearer's understanding. Conversion cannot be coerced.

In Texas, unlike Iowa, IFI has accepted no state money since its inception. The program at the Vance Unit, thus, appears to be in no jeopardy in the courts. The Iowa decision, however, will have an impact on faith-based programs in prisons, and perhaps in other institutions, across the nation.

It is undeniably true that society has no interest in promoting any religion over others in prisons and does have an interest in seeing that religion is not forced upon anyone. It's also true that IFI works. An independent study of the Texas program, which has operated long enough to track graduates for a period of years after release, shows a significant difference in the recidivism that exacts a staggering price on America in terms of physical, emotional and financial affliction. In apples-to-apples numbers, the rate for IFI graduates was 8 percent compared to 22 percent for all inmates who met the same criteria.

That's good news for everybody in America. Prison Fellowship has appealed Judge Pratt's decision. A better outcome might be a system that already exists on a de facto basis in Texas and other states: Allow any religious group the same access to inmates who volunteer and to the same state support, if any, that others receive. If Muslims, Hindus or atheists can slash recidivism numbers by way of voluntary programs, society wins and no one's rights are damaged.