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Major Study of Mississippi Prison Programs is Underway

JACKSON – Mississippi’s state prisons, inmates, and programs will be under a microscope for the next two years by two of the country’s leading research universities.

The President of Pepperdine University, Jim Gash, and renowned criminal justice researcher, Dr. Byron Johnson at Baylor University, are teaming up to study MDOC Commissioner Burl Cain’s changes to Mississippi’s prisons. The intensive 2-year research project will include Gash, Johnson, and their teams looking at the prison system from different perspectives. The researchers are meeting with inmates, corrections officers, and Commissioner Cain to observe how re-entry and seminary programs are helping inmates improve their lives.

“Too often, those who are incarcerated and those who aren’t look at themselves and define themselves by their worst choices on their worst day. And they become ostracized and marginalized by others but it’s also an internal thing,” Gash said. “It’s also a failure to believe that they are capable of being forgiven, that they are capable of this redemption, of being restored.”

This research project will be a continuation of past examination of Commissioner Cain’s legacy of improving prisons with tough histories. Baylor and Pepperdine chose Mississippi as a follow-up to a previous 5-year study of Commissioner Cain’s success in seminary, reentry, and faith-based programs. Cain’s programs were credited with turning Louisiana’s notorious Angola Prison from America’s bloodiest into a model of calm, order and education.

The two project leaders said their research will be as beneficial to society as to inmates.

“Ministers coming out of the prisons actually can help us figure out what’s wrong with society and add to it, so in many ways the prisoners can help us just like they’re helping each other. That’s what we want to learn,” Johnson said.

Gash is in his eighth term as the eighth president and chief executive officer of Pepperdine University. In addition to being the first alumnus to lead the university, Gash’s credentials include authoring books, serving as a law professor, and providing oversight for many signature development initiatives among other credits.

Dr. Johnson serves as senior fellow at the Religious Freedom Institute and is a Distinguished Professor of Social Sciences at Baylor University. Johnson is a leading authority on the scientific study of religion, the efficacy of faith-based organizations, and criminal justice. His most recent publications have examined the impact of faith-based programs on recidivism reduction and prisoner re-entry.

To view a related video, please use the following link/address:

<https://we.tl/t-X3cWK8S5LL>

Media note:

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