

The Natchez Democrat

Church leaders see opportunity in proposed prison facility

By Joan Gandy

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NATCHEZ — Church leaders polled Tuesday agree that a federal prison in Natchez brings benefits to the community.

The Rev. David O'Connor, pastor at St. Mary Basilica and Assumption Catholic Church, said prisons are a part of society and must be accepted as such.

"It's an amazing opportunity for ministry, as well," O'Connor said. "I've been to Woodville many, many times. Those people need ministry in a big way. We can help them find direction with their lives."

O'Connor referred to the federal prison built in Wilkinson County near Woodville, where several Natchez churches have regular ministries among the inmates.

The Wilkinson County facility is a Corrections Corporation of America prison. CCA is seeking a site to build a prison in Natchez, estimating that it will house 1,500 mostly nonviolent inmates.

The prison is estimated to be a \$90 million construction project. When completed, it would employ about 300 people.

O'Connor said the jobs are important. "If a prison brings jobs to the community, I'm in favor of that," he said.

The Rev. Steve Pearson, pastor at Community Chapel Church of God, agreed.

"I'm for the prison for several reasons — first of all, for all the job opportunities," he said. "The economic opportunity is tremendous, and it's long term."

Pearson also believes a community that has a prison has a chance to offer special ministries within the prison.

"I'd love to have the opportunity for that

kind of ministry," he said.

"Third, I think having the prison here would be a way to give back to our country," Pearson said.

"Prisons often are looked at as negative, but I think they're important and make a contribution to our nation."

Prison ministries already exist at First Assembly of God, the church where the Rev. Doug Wright is pastor.

Wright said a prison in Natchez "would be a wonderful opportunity for the churches to reach out and share Christ's gospel with the inmates."

His church has ministries at the Wilkinson County prison as well as at some prisons in Louisiana, Wright said.

"Many of the inmates realize their need to get right with God," Wright said. "They can be transformed and rehabilitated and, when they are released, they can become productive members of society."

The Rev. Dennis Flach, pastor of New Covenant Presbyterian Church, said he has seen advertisements on cable TV stations that put the construction of a prison in positive light.

The ad centers on "who goes to prison," referring to the several hundred employees there, he said. "It's a very positive and sound message about the real opportunity for Natchez and Adams County," Flach said.

Prisoners will prompt a need for ministry, Flach said. "We'll have a need to respond to prisoners to let them know their situations are not hopeless."

O'Connor said his time spent in the Wilkinson County prison convinced him that such new prisons are totally safe for a community.

"There is just no way for inmates to get out of these new prisons. You'd have to be a miracle worker," he said.

O'Connor has seen the transformation that can take place through prison ministry.

"There is great ministry to be done there," he said. "They are very vulnerable. I would like to see prisons with major rehabilitation programs. My heart would be comfortable with that."

O'Connor believes the Natchez Ministerial Alliance will take an active part in ministering to prisoners if the CCA facility or another one is built in Natchez.

The Rev. Dr. John Larson, pastor of First Presbyterian Church, said the most immediate impact on the community would be the construction of the facility.

He noted the sadness of the need to continue building more prisons.

"I don't think prisons are a threat, but I do think it's sad that we don't have enough prisons and have to keep building them," Larson said.

CCA is one of two prison companies vying for the federal contract to build a federal prison in the area. Pike County voters have rejected their county as a site. Walthall County is a possible alternate site.