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news release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Ministry Leaders Address Prison Issues at International Gathering of 900 in Toronto:

Chuck Colson, Ron Nikkel Open Prison Fellowship International Convocation

TORONTO, June 29, 2011 – Nearly 900 representatives from more than 130 countries gathered last night to kick off Prison Fellowship International’s quadrennial convocation, with speakers discussing some of the most pressing issues facing those who work with the more than 9.8 million individuals incarcerated around the world today.

The conference opened with performances by the Toronto Children’s Concert Choir and Prime Dance while flags from every participating nation were paraded in by prisoners’ children and their caretakers – usually grandparents – from here in Canada. Themes of hope, forgiveness, restoration and freedom were interpreted while unity was displayed among the members of [Prison Fellowship International](#) (PFI) organizations around the world.

Ron Nikkel, PFI’s president and CEO, acknowledged and welcomed Rick Burk, Director General of Chaplaincy for Correctional Services of Canada, which is meeting concurrently with PFI this week. Bishop William McGrattan of the Archdiocese of Toronto brought a blessing expressing a common purpose in “doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.”

“We recognize that the work that needs to be done in the prisons of the world, and with those who are coming out of those prisons, and with the families of prisoners, and the work of reconciliation and restoration in our communities, is a bigger task than any organization can complete on its own,” Nikkel said. “Prison Fellowship is absolutely committed to working in partnership with the chaplaincy and other organizations and agencies who have a concern and compassion for the people that Jesus cares for in prison. This is a work we must do together.”

Prison Fellowship founder Chuck Colson spoke on the topic of justice. While an ancient subject of debate among Greek philosophers, Colson said its simplest definition

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in the world today is “getting what you’re due. If you violate the law like I did and you go to prison, you do wrong and you’re punished, that’s justice.”

Colson contrasted this idea – man’s understanding of justice – with God’s view. The word justification comes from the same root word, he continued, and the concept means being made right. “Justice is being right with God, being right in His sight,” Colson said. “The world’s view of justice is ‘give people their due and if they step out of line, they are punished.’ But God’s view of justice is He wants us made whole again.”

Colson equated this with the Hebrew greeting “Shalom.” “Shalom is the state of ultimate justice that God seeks for all of His people,” Colson said. “It means not just the absence of hostility, or peace, the way it’s generally translated. It means concord, harmony, people living together in the perfect conditions by which humans flourish.”

That principle of “restorative justice” is one of the key concepts behind PFI’s ministry to prisoners, their families, victims and communities, as will be highlighted throughout the convocation.

This kind of encouragement and inspiration is in store for attendees all week – former prisoners, chaplains, volunteers, politicians and prison officials, also here to learn best practices and new ideas for beginning or furthering their work. Everything from prison conditions and humane treatment to promoting forgiveness and reparation among criminals and their victims is up for discussion.

In addition to the topical and practical workshops, plenary session speakers throughout the convocation include Pierre Allard, prison chaplain and former president of the International Prison Chaplains’ Association; John Rucyahana, retired Anglican bishop and president of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission in Rwanda; Theary C. Seng, human rights activist, lawyer and founder of the Cambodian Centre for Justice and Reconciliation; and Philip Yancey, author, journalist, and Editor at Large for Christianity Today magazine.

As in previous meetings, this year’s convocation includes a prisoner art exhibit, with more than 100 paintings, sketches and sculptures on display beginning this morning, with exhibit winners to be announced later in the week. While incarcerated, prisoners often find a creative outlet in arts and crafts, and many have discovered new and hidden talents. National and regional competitions have already been held, with those winners competing for top honors this week.

PFI is the world’s largest prison ministry with 124 member countries, working to improve the moral, social, physical and spiritual well-being of prisoners, ex-prisoners, their families and victims of crime. The most extensive international criminal justice ministry with more than 50,000 volunteers, Prison Fellowship International is active in every region of the world. More information is available at <http://www.pfi.org>.

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Note to Editors: Media are invited to attend the PFI Convocation at the Sheraton Centre, Toronto, through July 2. For more information, to acquire on-site media credentials or to arrange an interview with PFI representatives, please visit <http://www.alrcnewskitchen.com/pfi> or contact Kristin Cole via Kristin@alarrayross.com or 416.947.4980.