

NAD NEWSPPOINTS

Adventist Church Leaders Ask for Mercy, Prayers for Death Row Adventist

Worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders have asked for mercy for an Adventist on death row in Tennessee. Leaders are asking for church members to pray for Donnie Edward Johnson, scheduled to be executed on Thursday, May 16, 2019.

Johnson is on death row for the 1984 murder of his wife, Connie Johnson. Johnson, 68, who suffocated his wife, has served 33 years on death row in a maximum-security prison in near Nashville, within 10 miles of the Riverside Chapel Seventh-day Adventist Church where Johnson has been an ordained elder for more than a decade.

In a letter hand-delivered to Tennessee Governor Bill Lee on May 13, Seventh-day Adventist Church President Ted N.C. Wilson writes, “I am told that [Mr. Johnson] has brought other prisoners to Christ, leading them to make a full surrender to God, and that this is having a positive influence throughout the prison and beyond.”

Wilson asks Lee to “prayerfully consider granting mercy to Mr. Johnson by sparing his life so he may continue providing this important spiritual ministry.”

Daniel R. Jackson, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America also sent a letter to Lee on May 13. Jackson, acknowledging the “vile crime” for

which Johnson has been sentenced, writes that Johnson “turned his life around and now serves as a Christian mentor to his fellow prisoners. . . . The multiple lives he helped transform via his prison ministry are only a glimpse into the many potential lives he can touch and help transform.”

According to a [May 9, 2019, *Tennessean* report](#) by Holly Meyer, the letters are part of a series of appeals from church members and religious leaders who recognize Johnson’s apparent remorse and transformation. This group includes the Episcopal bishops of middle and east Tennessee.

Meyer reports that Johnson, who was raised Christian, “found religion” in 1985. Five years later, two incarcerated Adventists, one who was paroled in 2007 and another who recently “made parole,” introduced him to their faith.

According to the *Tennessean* article, Johnson holds Bible studies inside prison and started a radio program called “What the Bible Says.” He works with about a dozen people who comprise Riverside Chapel church’s prison ministry team.

In a *Tennessean* video interview (by Larry McCormack, as part of the *USA Today* Network) published with the May 9 article, Furman Fordham II, Riverside Chapel pastor, says that he has seen Johnson serve and minister on the inside of the prison.

“In general, it is a little difficult for me as a Christian to ignore what I believe Jesus’ counsel is in John 8,” said Fordham. “Not suggesting at all that we should ignore a crime, or that we should have no consequences, but I do think there is a place for forgiveness and grace. And Don’s situation, as I understand it, is one that I think perfectly fits right in there.”

[Wilson letter to Gov. Lee](#) (PDF, 73KB)

[Jackson letter to Gov. Lee](#) (PDF, 50KB)

Read the two letters in their entirety below:

May 13, 2019

The Honorable Bill Lee

Governor of Tennessee

Dear Governor Lee,

I am writing you in regard to Donnie ("Don") Edward Johnson, who is scheduled to

be executed by the state of Tennessee on Thursday, May 16, 2019.

As the Governor of Tennessee, the most profound power and perhaps the most difficult responsibility God has given you is deciding whether a person is to live or die. While the legal system has spoken, finding Mr. Johnson guilty and sentencing him to death, I am appealing to you to consider life.

Over the many years since 1984, Mr. Johnson has experienced a miraculous transformation of mind, heart, and character that only God can accomplish. He has gone from being a hard-hearted criminal to a man who cares for others and seeks to share the hope he has found in his Savior, Jesus Christ, with those who do not yet know Him.

In the course of Mr. Johnson's spiritual journey, he has become a member of the Seventh-day Adventist church, a protestant Christian denomination with more than 21 million members and a presence in more than 200 countries. As Seventh-day Adventists, we uphold the Bible as the Word of God, and accept Jesus Christ as our only Savior. We teach that we are to be good citizens, obeying the laws of the land, and to honor and pray for our government leaders. We believe we are called to follow in Christ's footsteps, meeting people's needs physically, socially, and most important, spiritually. As we understand, Mr. Johnson's transformation has included his embracing of these Christian values and he is currently serving others in the spiritual leadership capacity of elder. I am told that he has brought other prisoners to Christ, leading them to make a full surrender to God, and that this is having a positive influence throughout the prison and beyond.

Sir, I would request that you prayerfully consider granting mercy to Mr. Johnson by sparing his life so he may continue providing this important spiritual ministry that only he in his unique capacity can do. His death would have no redeeming or deterrent value, and we believe he would better serve the community by leading his fellow prisoners to God.

Thank you for considering this request. Please be assured that I will be praying for you as you weigh this incredibly important decision. As the Bible says, "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, NKJV).

Respectfully,

Ted N.C. Wilson
President, Seventh-day Adventist Church

May 13, 2019
Governor Bill Lee
1st Floor State Capitol
Nashville, TN 37243

Dear Governor Lee:

On behalf of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America, I would like to appeal to you to consider a stay of execution for one of our church members, Donnie Johnson, who is scheduled to be executed on May 16. Mr. Johnson remorsefully admits he committed a horrible crime when he murdered his wife, but since that time he has turned his life around and now serves as a Christian mentor to his fellow prisoners. As a Christian, I am sure that you believe in the transforming power of Jesus, and the change in Mr. Johnson's life certainly is a miraculous example of that power. We agree that vile crimes, such as murder, carry a heavy penalty, but in the case of Mr. Johnson, carrying out his execution would only make this situation worse. The multiple lives he helped transform via his prison ministry are only a glimpse into the many potential lives he can touch and help transform. I kindly plead with you to consider issuing a stay of execution of behalf of Mr. Donnie Johnson.

Sincerely,

Daniel R. Jackson
President, North American Division of the General Conference of the Seventh-day
Adventist Church

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