

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/gadsden-alabama-police-chief-john-crane-suspended-for-ministering-to-inmate/>

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06.24.13

John Crane, police chief in Gadsden, Alabama, was suspended for 15 days by the Gadsden Civil Service Board for continuing a religious outreach to a family friend who was arrested and incarcerated.

Justin Denson was a friend of John Cranes son in high school, and after he was accused of killing his mother in 2009, Mr. Crane (then a Birmingham police officer) felt called by God to reach out to the young man. He visited Justin Denson once a month in the Etowah County Detention Center for about three years. He also purchased a suit for Justin to wear in court and put money into his commissary account.

Mr. Crane, with a spotless record and standing within the community, said he spoke with Justin solely about the power of God and his Catholic faith, and merely did as Matthew 25 commanded him to do give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, and visit those in prison.

Prosecutors settled the case against Mr. Denson in November 2012, allowing him plead guilty to murder and credit card fraud. He was sentenced in February 2013 to 119 years in prison.

Justins cousin was upset when prosecutors found out about Mr. Cranes visits and called for him to be removed from his position as police chief for associating with a known felon.

At the Civil Service Board hearing that followed, District Attorney Jimmie Harp testified he did not consider Chief Crane to be associated with Justin Denson within the meaning of the rule, which is intended to keep people from getting involved in criminal situations.

Board member Jason Stinson praised Cranes performance as police chief, but said no officer of the Gadsden Police Department should visit someone in jail who has been charged with or convicted of a felony.

Chief Crane explained that he was following the will of God in ministering to this young man. If I had not done this, how would I answer the question of, Chief Crane, I sent you this man, to get him to turn his life around, and you didnt do it because its not your job?" he said.

Chief Crane continues to correspond with Justin, who has been transferred to the state prison system, and indicated his faith would dictate he continue to visit him as well.

The board found that Chief Cranes ministry to Justin Denson violated its rules and may have negatively impacted the reputation or perceived reputation of the Gadsden Police Department. Ten days of the 15-day penalty will be held in abeyance until a later hearing, and Crane will serve his suspension during the last five working days of June.

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