

# BREAKING BONDAGE

A VISION FOR WISCONSIN



**CHURCH  
AMBASSADOR  
NETWORK**  
an Initiative of  
Wisconsin Family Council

**Bringing churches, social workers, and  
government leaders together to serve  
communities across Wisconsin.**

# BONDAGE IN WISCONSIN

When we look at our world, we know that we are not at peace. In our souls, we do not have rest. We experience a kind of poverty, not merely in socio-economic terms, but in the very state of our being. The Bible uses a clear and fitting word to describe this condition: bondage.

*Being in bondage is being unable to escape from a circumstance or behavior. All of creation lives in some form of bondage, and all of creation is crying to be set free.*

Through the Church Ambassador Network, a ministry of Wisconsin Family Council, we aim to help people break free from bondage and prevent others from ever falling into it. **Our unique contribution to this effort is to connect leaders in the government with leaders in the church.** Our goal is to help government leaders see the church as a primary resource, and to help government and churches work together to address the issues we face today.

This booklet provides an overview of critical areas of bondage affecting Wisconsinites, including counties most impacted and ministries successfully addressing these challenges. It presents strategies for breaking the cycle of bondage across Wisconsin.

# STATEWIDE BONDAGE STATS

**147,510**  
children live  
in poverty  
as of 2024

**11.34%**  
of WI is below  
poverty level

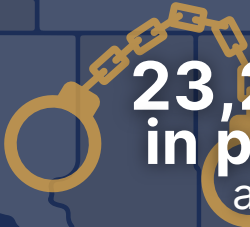
**6,143**  
children in  
foster care  
as of 12/31/23



**3,197** alcohol  
related deaths  
in 2023

**9.3%**  
statewide  
substance  
abuse rate

**23,298**  
in prison  
as of 2025



**12,312**  
divorces  
in 2023



**928**  
suicides  
in 2023

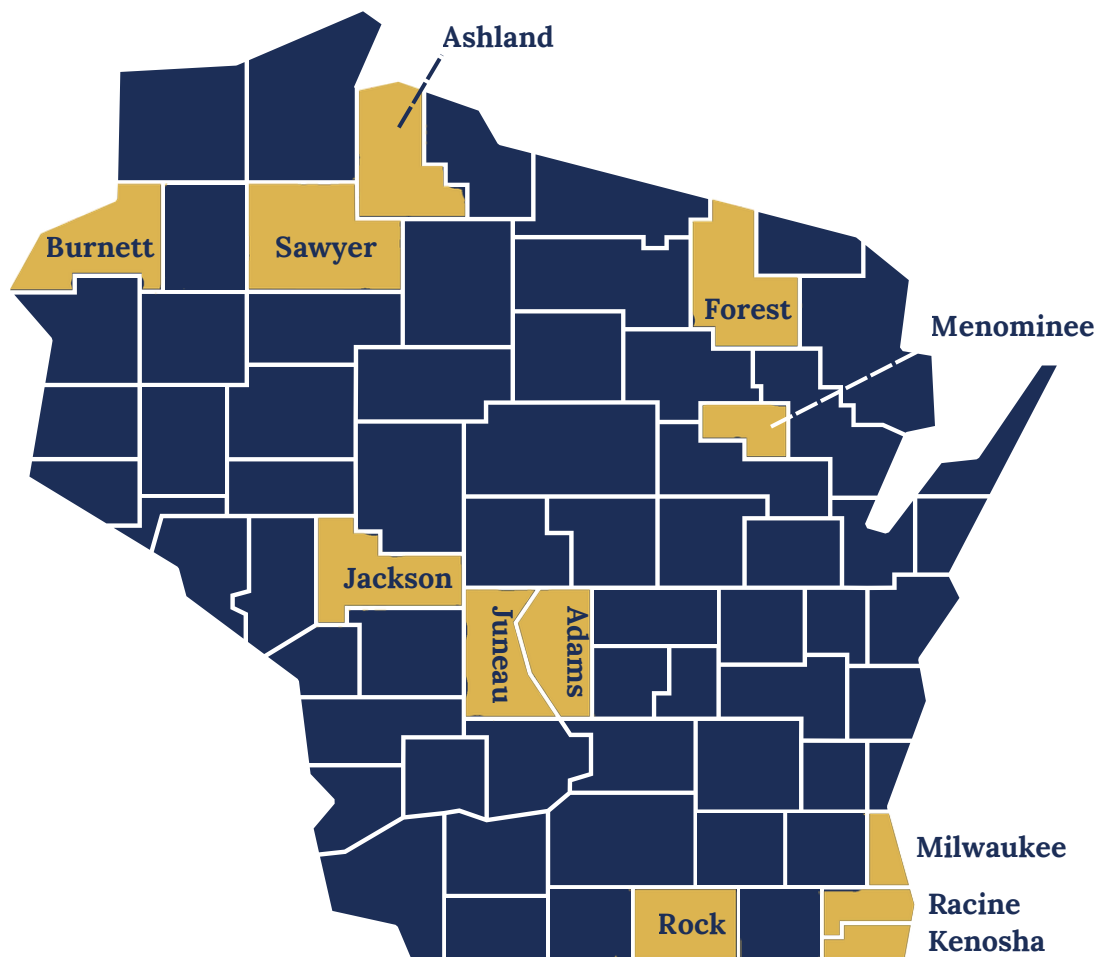
**36.58%**  
OF CHILDREN  
BORN OUT OF  
WEDLOCK  
in 2024

# COUNTIES MOST IN BONDAGE

Understanding the state of bondage in Wisconsin requires a clear, data-driven approach. To achieve this, we conducted a per capita analysis of all 72 counties, examining 21 indicators of social risk and well-being, including family structure, poverty, child abuse, foster care placements, food insecurity, prison admissions, bankruptcy, and substance abuse.

We scored the counties by totaling each county's rankings across all 21 indicators into a single composite score. The county with the lowest total was ranked as most in bondage, the second lowest as second most in bondage, and so on.

The following counties rank as the most in bondage:



The two common denominators across all 12 of these counties are **addictions and the breakdown of the family.**



## #1 MENOMINEE

- 1<sup>st</sup> in alcohol related deaths per 100k
- 1<sup>st</sup> in alcohol related hospitalizations per 100k
- 1<sup>st</sup> in drug overdose deaths per 100k
- 1<sup>st</sup> in single-parent to married-parent household ratio
- 1<sup>st</sup> in food insecurity rate
- 1<sup>st</sup> in child food insecurity rate
- 1<sup>st</sup> child-birth-out-of wedlock rate
- 1<sup>st</sup> in children below poverty rate
- 1<sup>st</sup> in child abuse rate
- 1<sup>st</sup> in suicide rate
- 3<sup>rd</sup> in % of adults below poverty



## #2 MILWAUKEE

- 1<sup>st</sup> in bankruptcy rate
- 2<sup>nd</sup> in drug overdose deaths per 100k
- 2<sup>nd</sup> single-parent to married parent household ratio
- 2<sup>nd</sup> in food insecurity rate
- 2<sup>nd</sup> in child food insecurity rate
- 2<sup>nd</sup> in % adults below poverty
- 3<sup>rd</sup> in child-birth-out-of-wedlock rate
- 3<sup>rd</sup> in children below poverty
- 4<sup>th</sup> in alcohol related hospitalizations per 100K
- 7<sup>th</sup> in child abuse rate
- 7<sup>th</sup> in prison admission rate per 100k
- 10<sup>th</sup> in alcohol related deaths per 100k



## #3 JACKSON

- 2<sup>nd</sup> in child abuse rate
- 3<sup>rd</sup> in prison admission rate per 100k
- 3<sup>rd</sup> in divorce rate
- 4<sup>th</sup> in % of children in foster-care
- 5<sup>th</sup> in suicide rate
- 11<sup>th</sup> in alcohol related hospitalization per 100k
- 12<sup>th</sup> in % of children below poverty
- 14<sup>th</sup> in child food insecurity rate



## #4 FOREST

- 1<sup>st</sup> in prison admission rate per 100k
- 1<sup>st</sup> in % children in foster care
- 2<sup>nd</sup> in alcohol related deaths per 100k
- 2<sup>nd</sup> in children born out of wedlock
- 3<sup>rd</sup> in drug overdose deaths per 100k
- 5<sup>th</sup> in food security rate overall
- 6<sup>th</sup> in child food insecurity rate
- 6<sup>th</sup> in single parent rate
- 6<sup>th</sup> in % adults below poverty
- 7<sup>th</sup> in alcohol related hospitalizations per 100k
- 7<sup>th</sup> in % of children below poverty



## #5 ASHLAND

- 3<sup>rd</sup> in child food insecurity rate
- 4<sup>th</sup> in alcohol related deaths per 100k
- 4<sup>th</sup> in food insecurity rate
- 4<sup>th</sup> in child-born-out-of-wedlock rate
- 6<sup>th</sup> in drug overdose deaths per 100k
- 6<sup>th</sup> in child abuse rate
- 7<sup>th</sup> in suicide rate
- 8<sup>th</sup> in children below poverty
- 10<sup>th</sup> in % adults below poverty



## #6 SAWYER

- 3<sup>rd</sup> in alcohol related hospitalizations per 100k
- 4<sup>th</sup> in single parent rate
- 4<sup>th</sup> in child food insecurity rate
- 4<sup>th</sup> in suicide rate
- 5<sup>th</sup> in drug overdose deaths per 100k
- 5<sup>th</sup> in % adults below poverty
- 6<sup>th</sup> in food insecurity overall
- 6<sup>th</sup> in child born out of wedlock rate
- 9<sup>th</sup> in % children below poverty
- 12<sup>th</sup> in child abuse rate



## #7 KENOSHA

- 2<sup>nd</sup> in bankruptcy rate
- 5<sup>th</sup> in prison admission rate
- 7<sup>th</sup> in single-parent rate
- 8<sup>th</sup> in % children in foster care
- 9<sup>th</sup> in drug overdose deaths per 100k
- 9<sup>th</sup> in child born out of wedlock rate



## #8 JUNEAU

- 4<sup>th</sup> in % adults below poverty
- 8<sup>th</sup> in food insecurity rate overall
- 11<sup>th</sup> in child born out of wedlock
- 11<sup>th</sup> in prison admission rate per 100k
- 12<sup>th</sup> in divorce rate
- 13<sup>th</sup> in alcohol related deaths per 100k
- 15<sup>th</sup> in child food insecurity rate



## #9 ADAMS

- 3<sup>rd</sup> in child food insecurity rate
- 4<sup>th</sup> in alcohol related deaths per 100k
- 4<sup>th</sup> in food insecurity rate
- 4<sup>th</sup> in child born out of wedlock rate
- 5<sup>th</sup> in bankruptcy rate
- 6<sup>th</sup> in drug overdose deaths per 100k
- 6<sup>th</sup> in child abuse rate
- 7<sup>th</sup> in suicide rate
- 8<sup>th</sup> in children below poverty
- 10<sup>th</sup> in % adults below poverty



## #10 ROCK

- 4<sup>th</sup> in drug overdose deaths per 100k
- 4<sup>th</sup> in bankruptcy rate
- 8<sup>th</sup> in child born out of wedlock rate
- 13<sup>th</sup> in divorce rate
- 13<sup>th</sup> in single parent rate
- 15<sup>th</sup> in prison admission rate per 100k



## #11 BURNETT

- 5<sup>th</sup> in child abuse rate
- 5<sup>th</sup> in % children in foster care
- 6<sup>th</sup> in prison admission rate
- 7<sup>th</sup> in food insecurity rate
- 7<sup>th</sup> in child out of wedlock rate
- 8<sup>th</sup> in child food insecurity rate
- 9<sup>th</sup> in alcohol related deaths per 100k
- 10<sup>th</sup> in single-parent rate
- 11<sup>th</sup> in % adults below poverty



## #12 RACINE

- 3<sup>rd</sup> in bankruptcy
- 5<sup>th</sup> in single parent rate
- 5<sup>th</sup> in child born out of wedlock rate
- 8<sup>th</sup> in prison admission rate per 100k
- 10<sup>th</sup> in child food insecurity rate
- 12<sup>th</sup> in drug overdose deaths per 100k



# BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES ON BONDAGE

The Church Ambassador Network, a ministry of Wisconsin Family Council, holds to the biblical teaching that God created the world and it was good.

*“God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good...” ~ Genesis 1:31*

## How Was It Good?

It was good in Adam and Eve’s....

- **Relationship with God:** intimacy, trust, and obedience
- **Relationship with each other:** unity, love, and compassion
- **Relationship with themselves (inward well being):** peace, integrity, and contentment
- **Relationship with creation:** stewardship, care, and fruitfulness

Therefore, they were free from bondage, living in the harmony God intended.

## What Went Wrong?

The Christian worldview holds that the world is broken because of Adam and Eve’s rebellion against a holy God, recorded in Genesis 3. Sin entered the world through their disobedience and spread to every human being, as the Bible declares, *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6 ESV).*

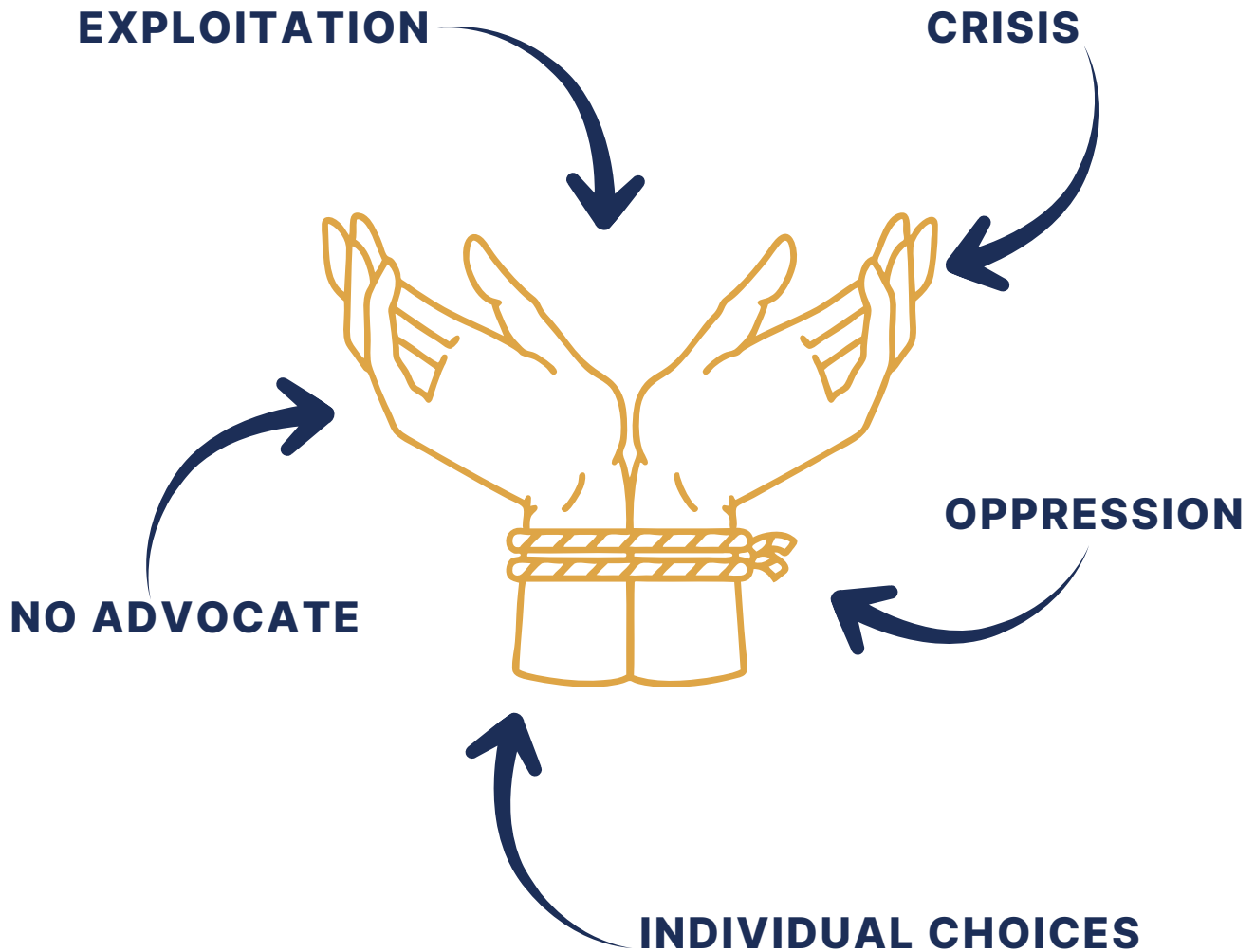
The result of sin entering the world is a loss of rest and peace, bringing hostility into every human being’s....

- **Relationship with God:** separation, distrust, and disobedience
- **Relationship with others:** division, exploitation, indifference
- **Relationship with oneself (inward well being):** anxiety, inner conflict, and discontentment
- **Relationship with creation:** abuse, neglect, and depletion

Sin has brought bondage, holding people back from the harmony God intended.

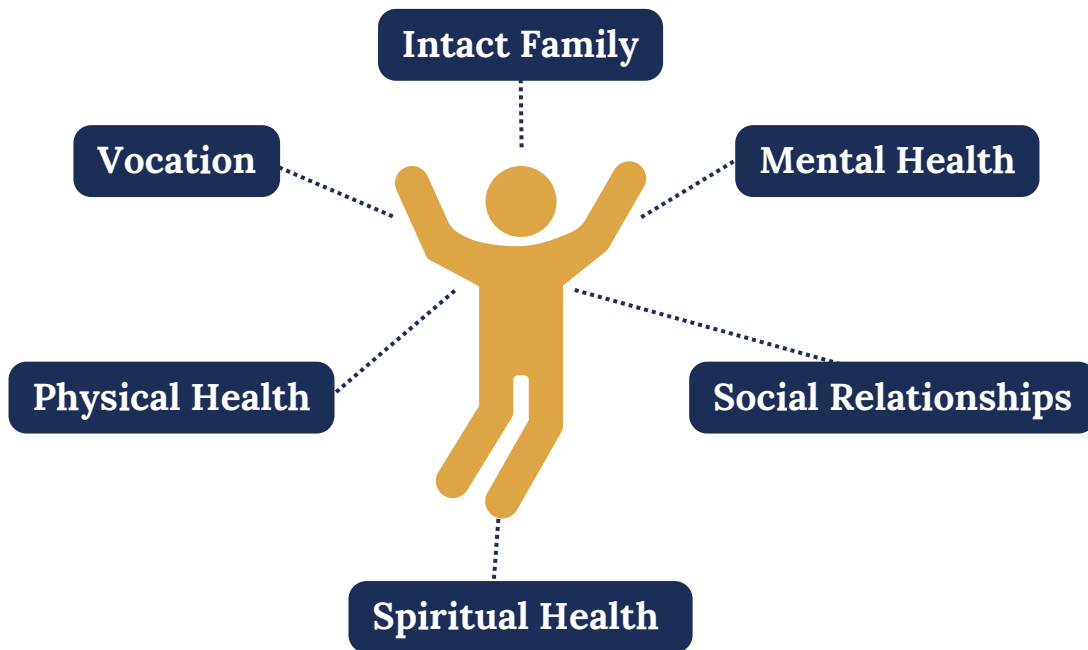


# FACTORS THAT LEAD TO BONDAGE

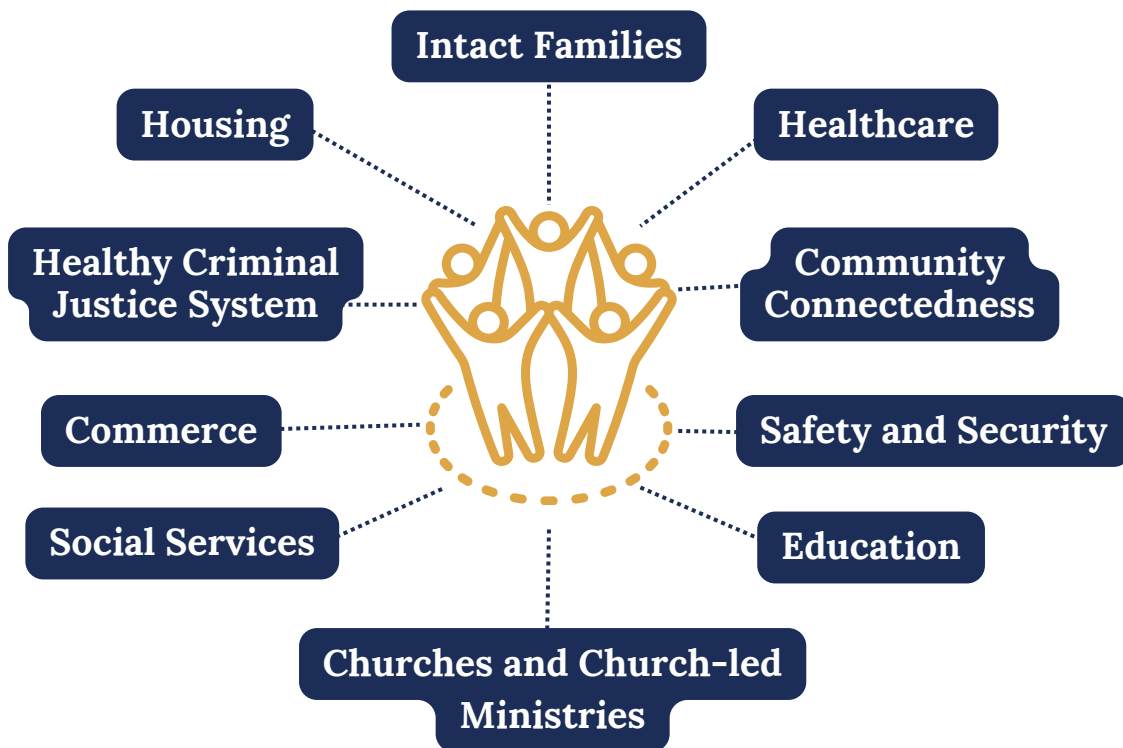


"Seeking Shalom Training" provided by Philip Herman at Highland Park Community Development Association (Des Moines, IA) and The Lupton Center (Atlanta, GA)

## WHAT DOES AN INDIVIDUAL NEED TO BE FREE TO FULLY FLOURISH?



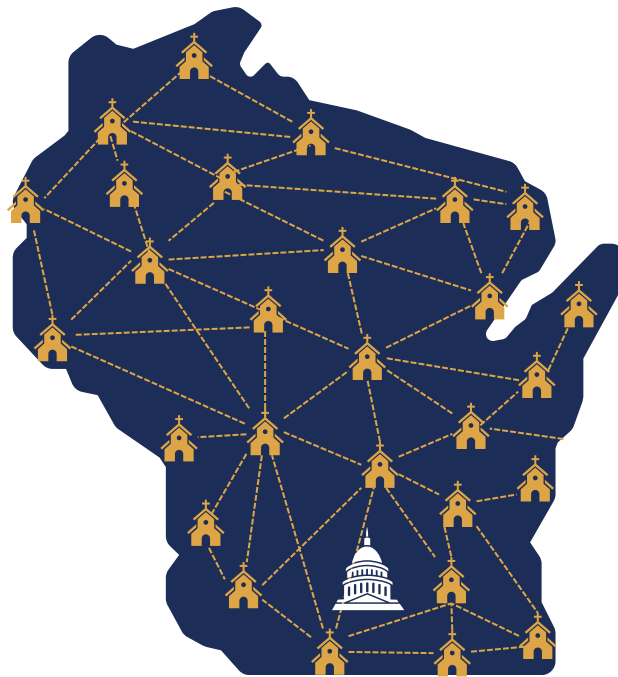
## WHAT DOES A COMMUNITY NEED TO BE FREE TO FULLY FLOURISH?



# WHY CHURCH-STATE PARTNERSHIP?

Wisconsin's communities, especially those in the twelve counties most in bondage, need hope and vision. Government can provide safety, order, and essential services, but it cannot build the relationships, belonging, and meaning that give people hope or help break cycles of bondage. It has always relied on community partners to meet these deeper needs. There is no partner better suited to meet these needs than the Church.

**The Church is uniquely able to meet two of every human being's greatest needs: community and spiritual well-being.**



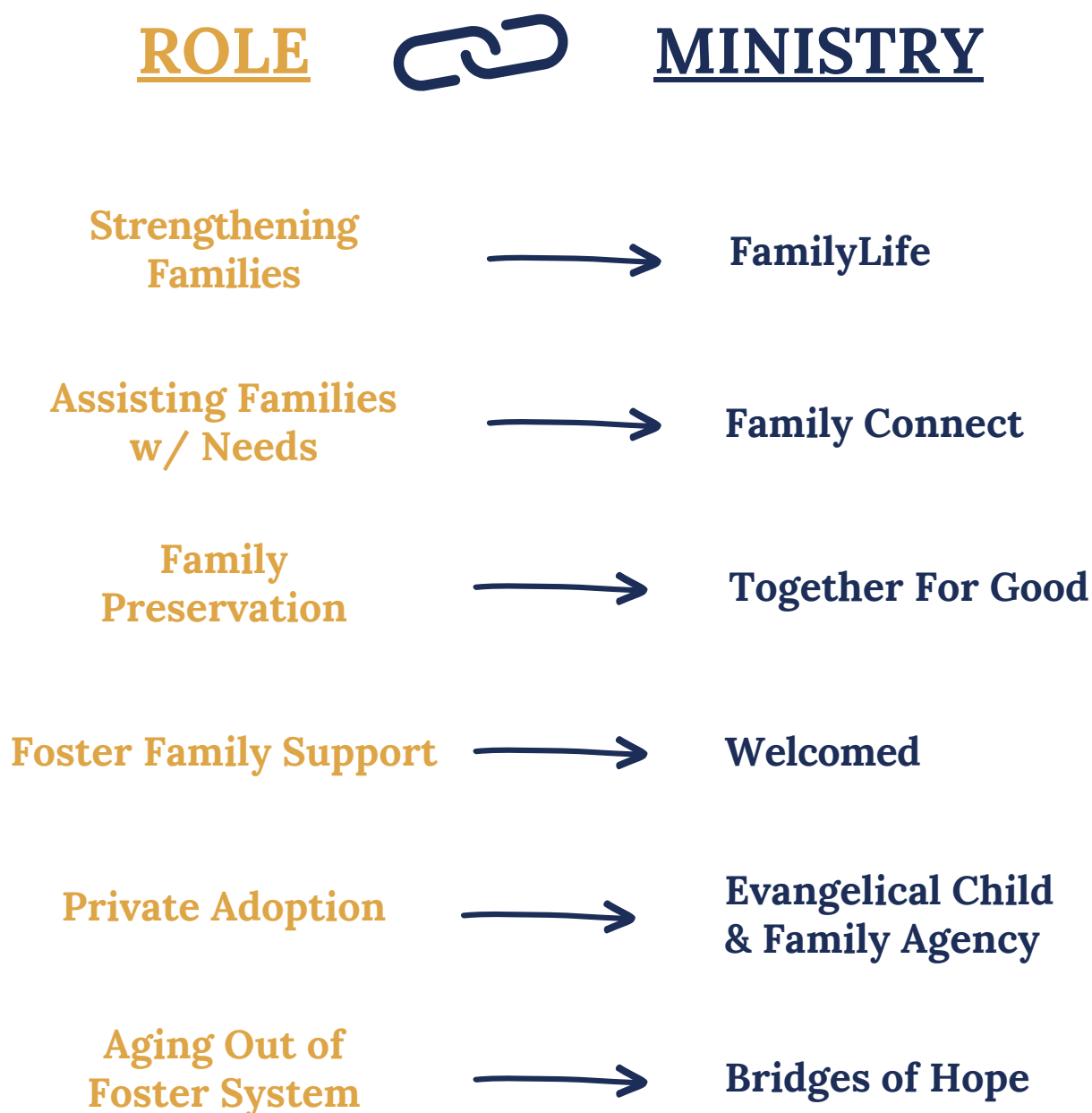
The Church provides **community** and relational support by walking alongside people, investing time in their lives, and building meaningful, trusting relationships. At the same time, the Church nurtures **spiritual well-being** by sharing the hope of the gospel and guiding people toward wholistic restoration—helping them find purpose, peace, and hope that lasts.

The Church Ambassador Network is building a statewide network of churches that are committed to making an impact. Our goal is to engage this network in a shared vision of church-state partnership that brings real help, real relationships, and real hope to Wisconsin.

*So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone.  
Galatians 6:10a*

# AN EXAMPLE OF THE CHURCH AT WORK

Each of the ministries below works together with churches to support families and children in crisis.



The goal is for churches across the state to connect with social workers and government leaders to build relationships, thank them for their service, and come alongside them in serving the community.



# APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES

The ministries on the previous page help equip local churches to bring hope, relational support, and redemptive compassion to children and families in crisis. This same church-centered model can be applied to other areas of bondage, including those shown below.



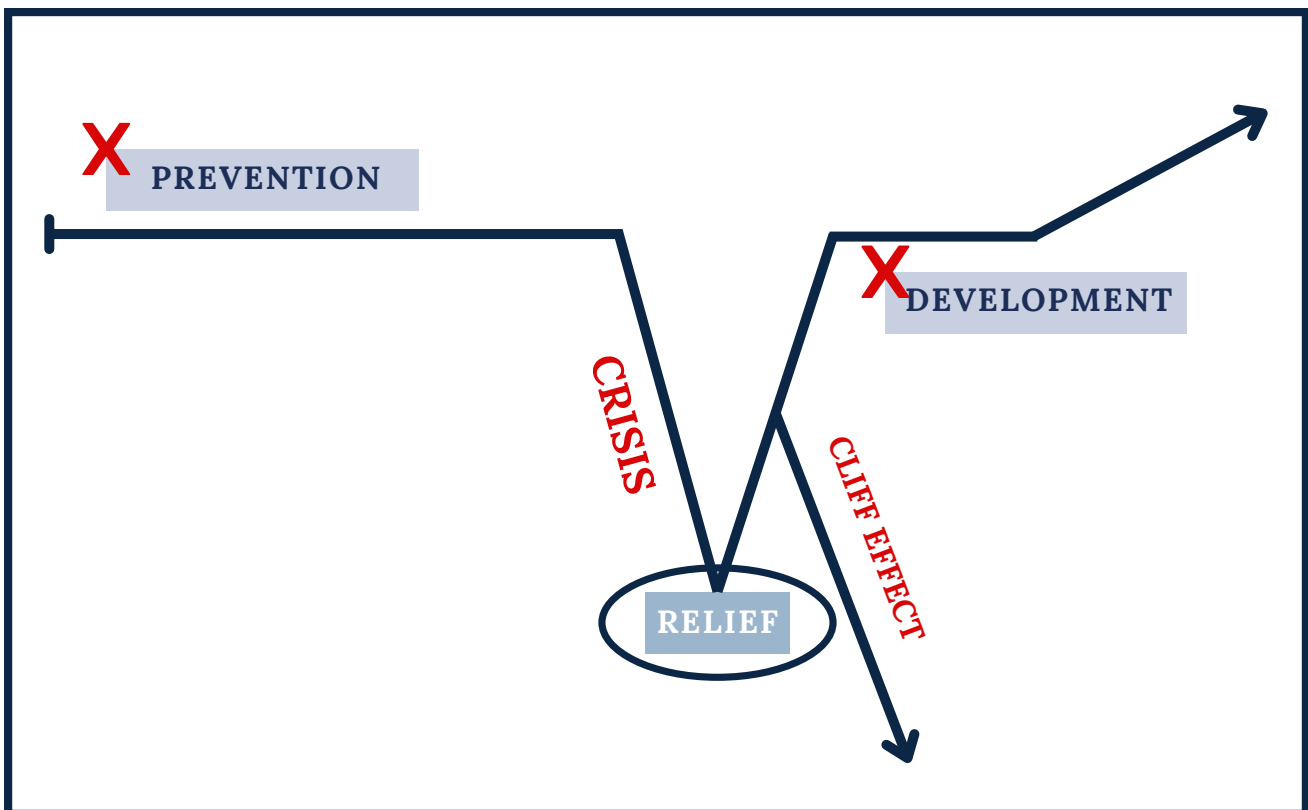
*Pursue the well-being of the city.....  
Pray to the LORD on its behalf, for when it thrives, you will thrive.  
Jeremiah 29:7*

# IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

## Principles to Consider:

- **We need to make a long-term investment into people:** Generational poverty cannot be addressed transactionally. It requires consistent, long-term, relational investment. We must walk alongside individuals to help them grow and develop. More than simply offering financial resources, the most valuable investment we can make is our time.
- **Our social service programs must get beyond relief:** Relief efforts can provide needed, temporary help, but without a path forward they can unintentionally contribute to generational bondage. We need to invest as much, if not more, in prevention, rehabilitation, and development, working closely with community partners to help people truly move ahead.

## THE SHORTCOMINGS OF OUR CURRENT SYSTEM:



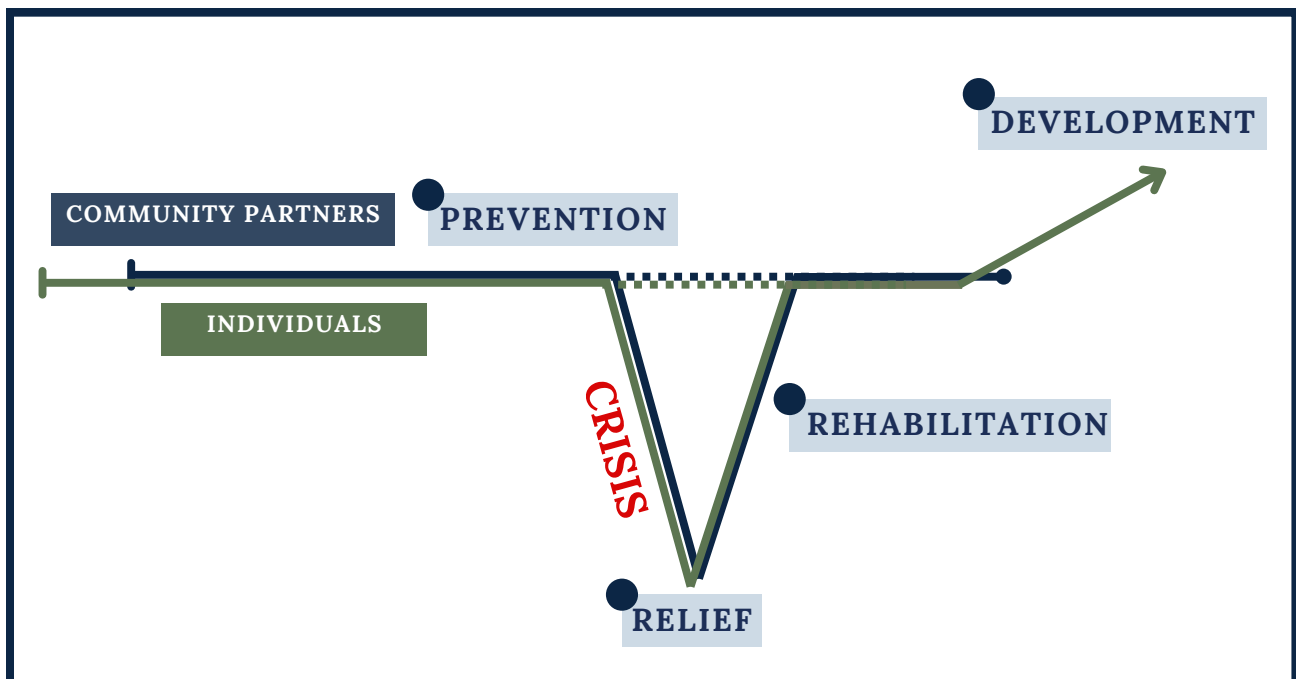


## PROPOSED SOLUTIONS:

- **Prioritizing the Family:** uplifting the family unit for the benefit of children and communities.
- **Addressing Addictions:** protecting the vulnerable in our communities from addictive and/or predatory behaviors.
- **Strengthening Community Partnerships:** utilizing community partners to help individuals out of bondage by removing barriers between the faith community and government.
- **Social Workers:** achieving a high-quality and effective social service system by attracting and retaining the best social workers.

These changes will help people be set free and save Wisconsin money in the long term.

## WALKING ALONGSIDE PEOPLE:





# THE FOUNDATION FOR LASTING FREEDOM

## THE ROOT OF BONDAGE

The challenges this paper addresses, for example, addiction, incarceration, and family breakdown, all share a deeper root. The Bible describes this root as sin. It is not merely wrongdoing, but a condition of the human heart. Because of sin, people are spiritually dead.

*“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1).*

This means they are separated from their Creator and unable to live as they know they ought. Even with good intentions, we often do what we know is wrong and fail to do what is right.

## THE PATH TO TRUE FREEDOM

The Christian gospel speaks directly to this deepest form of bondage. The cure is to be given new life in Jesus Christ. The Bible calls this becoming a new creation:

*“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).*

This new life cannot be earned. No amount of good deeds can erase guilt or pay the debt of sin. Our best efforts will always fall short before a holy and perfect God. It would be like trying to high jump the Empire State Building or long jump the Grand Canyon. The standard is beyond our reach. Because of this, we need a perfect substitute. Jesus Christ lived a sinless life and took our sins and our punishment upon Himself on the cross.

*“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).*

When we recognize our sin against God, ask Him to forgive us, and place our trust in Jesus Christ, believing that He died on the cross as the payment for our sins and then rose from the dead, we are forgiven and declared righteous not by our works, but by grace alone. Those who are made new in Christ are called to live with humility, self control, responsibility, a heart to serve others, and to support families and communities as we continually rely on God’s grace. This breaks bonds. This is freedom.

# References for Statewide Bondage Stats

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U.S. CENSUS BUREAU. POVERTY STATUS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS BY SEX BY AGE. AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY, 2024 1-YEAR ESTIMATES, TABLE S1701. ACCESSED FEBRUARY 9, 2026. [HTTPS://DATA.CENSUS.GOV/TABLE?Q=POVERTY&T=AGE+AND+SEX&G=040XX00US55](https://data.census.gov/table?q=poverty&t=age+and+sex&g=040xx00us55)

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**NOTE: COUNTY-BY-COUNTY SOURCE DATA AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST.**

