

# Reentry and the Faith Community: Briefing Paper

Many prisoners are released with only a bus ticket and a small amount of pocket money (Travis, Solomon and Waul 2001). In addition to this lack of material resources, most have limited education and few employment skills. Released prisoners face the immediate challenges of obtaining food, clothing, housing, and health care. The longer-term reintegration needs of returning prisoners range from finding and maintaining employment to reestablishing strained relationships with family members to accessing needed community services. Community organizations are a key part of ensuring successful and enduring reintegration outcomes for former prisoners and their families (Rossman 2002). Faith and institutions of faith can play an important role in easing the reentry process for returning prisoners and their families both before and after release from prison.

Although there has been little systematic study of the effectiveness of faith-based reentry and other services, there has been recent emphasis on expanding the opportunities of churches, temples, mosques, and other faith institutions to provide a wide range of social services. In early 2001, President Bush established the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives to remove bureaucratic barriers to faith-sector initiatives in social services. The underlying notion is that faith-based and community-level services should have increased access to federal social service funds because they typically have close ties to the community and can therefore be more efficient than traditional government agencies in helping those in need.

Faith institutions and other community groups have historically played a critical role in providing support for both incarcerated and released prisoner populations. Thousands of faith-based and community organizations currently provide emergency and long-term shelter, job training, substance abuse treatment, and mentoring for released prisoners and their families. All of these services can ease the reintegration of the former prisoner. Faith-based institutions typically have strong neighborhood ties, putting them in a good position to help returning prisoners and their families in a way that is grounded both in the individual and in the community.

## Religious Programming in Prisons

The faith community has a long history of interaction with incarcerated populations. Prison chaplains have long been available to inmates for spiritual guidance. In fact, prison inmates have a constitutional right to religious participation in prison (Clear 2002). From the perspective of prison administration, officials see religious programming as critical to maintaining an orderly environment and managing the idle time of prisoners. Some research has linked participation in religious programming in prison with improved behavior while incarcerated. Still other sources have linked in-prison religion with improved outcomes upon release.

Our nation's prisons have a considerable range of religion-based activities. At a minimum, every prison has at least one prison chaplain available for inmate counseling. At the other end of the spectrum, some states are experimenting with religion-based prison models offering a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week intensive Bible-based rehabilitation program. When discussing the range of religious programming, it is important to note that Christianity is the dominant religion in American prisons, as it is in American society. The other religions with a strong presence in prison are Islam and various Native American religions. While we know little about the rehabilitative effects of programs with a Christian orientation, we have even less information about the effects of other religious practices in a prison context (Clear 2002).

Some studies have found that prisoners who participate in religious programming while incarcerated receive fewer disciplinary infractions than those who do not (Johnson, Larson, and Pitts 1997). The Florida Department of Corrections has found religious services to be one of the least expensive forms of programming and one that is linked to improved inmate behavior as measured by the number of

disciplinary infractions (Florida Department of Corrections 2001). Despite these positive findings, however, the relationship between religious participation and in-prison behavior needs further study. From the current research, it is not clear whether religious attendance is directly correlated with fewer infractions or whether those who are more likely to attend services are the same people who would be less likely to break the rules for other reasons.

Religious programming is very popular with prisoners. Florida found that 38 percent of inmates are interested in attending religious programs or activities—a number higher than the participation rates for other activities. Several theories explain the popularity of religious programming. Religion can serve many purposes among incarcerated individuals (Clear 2002). Religion can be an expression of true remorse for the crimes prisoners have committed and the ways in which they have hurt or disappointed their loved ones. Time spent in chapel or reading religious texts can be a practical response to the monotony and lack of privacy in correctional institutions. On a more skeptical note, in some cases “finding religion” in prison may be motivated by a desire to present a more favorable case for an early release to the parole board.

Prison Fellowship Ministries (PFM), a national nonprofit prison-based ministry, has conducted a number of studies evaluating the effectiveness of their in-prison programs on postrelease recidivism outcomes. Results from these studies reveal some potentially promising outcomes. In one study, inmates who attended 10 or more PFM Bible study sessions in a year were nearly three times less likely to be rearrested during the 12 months after release than a matched comparison group of inmates who did not participate in the PFM program (Johnson, Larson, and Pitts 1997). Results from an in-prison program called PFM's InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI) are also promising. Texas, Iowa, Kansas, and Minnesota have implemented the IFI model in at least some of their prisons. It is a comprehensive, Christ-based, biblically centered rehabilitation program open to any inmate who agrees to participate. According to a new study by the University of Pennsylvania, graduates of the Texas program were 50 percent less likely to be rearrested than a matched comparison group and 60 percent less likely to be reincarcerated (Johnson and Larson 2003).

## **Religiosity and Well-Being**

A number of studies have attempted to document the influence of religion and religious practices on a range of health and social outcomes (Johnson 2002). For example, in addition to being associated with fewer in-prison disciplinary problems, religion may also be associated with better physical and mental health among prisoners. Some research suggests that prisoners who identify themselves as religious have fewer health problems overall than those who do not identify themselves as religious (Johnson and Larson 1998). Since mental and physical illnesses can be barriers to successful reintegration after release, the connection between religion and health is an important avenue for research to better understand a possible link between religiosity and improved health.

Some evidence suggests that religiousness is correlated with personal and emotional well-being, especially when coping with stress (Johnson and Larson 1998). Therefore, religiousness could play a positive role in a prisoner's ability to handle the considerable stress associated with incarceration and reentry. An ability to handle the stress of reentry should have a positive impact on the chances of a successful reintegration.

Some studies have examined how individual religious involvement can reduce the likelihood that the individual will engage in crime. Research has concentrated on the role of religious involvement in preventing crime among African-American youth. One study shows a clear negative relationship between church involvement and serious crime perpetrated by young people. In particular, the influence of the church seems to serve as a buffer on the effect of neighborhood disorder, which is thought to be one of

the conditions that enable crime to flourish (Johnson et al. 2000). Further research should explore whether a similar relationship exists between religious involvement and the likelihood of former prisoners committing additional crimes.

### Role of the Faith Community in Assisting Reentry

Faith-based institutions offer a wealth of resources and services for the communities in which they reside. Many of these organizations have been involved in the work of helping individuals and families cope with the effects of incarceration and return either formally or informally for many years. Importantly, some of the most active and influential faith-based institutions are located in communities hardest hit by this cycle of imprisonment and return. Where traditional public and nonprofit programs may not be able to reach the most at-risk former prisoners in poor communities, well-established churches and other faith-based institutions may be able to fill this void with needed social, educational, and employment services. Yet there is little systematic documentation of how extensive these services are, their effectiveness, and whether they have the capacity to meet the needs of reintegrating prisoners and their families (McRoberts 2002).

With a new national focus on faith-based initiatives, it is important to develop a better understanding of the role the faith community can play in assisting reentry. In lieu of specific findings on reentry and faith organizations, lessons can be drawn from efforts in other areas. In 1998, Public/Private Ventures, a Philadelphia-based national nonprofit organization committed to improving social policies, programs, and community initiatives, launched a demonstration and research project to partner faith-based organizations with **nonreligious** public and private agencies to address the needs of at-risk juveniles. Lessons from the 10 sites selected to participate in the demonstration program may offer guidance for faith-based organizations interested in assisting in the reentry process.

Early findings from the demonstration sites suggest that there is no simple model for building effective faith-based programs for high-risk juveniles (Ericson 2001). Researchers point to three distinct steps that seem to form the foundation of successful programs: (1) building relationships with the clients or target population; (2) drawing them into available programs and services; and (3) connecting them to appropriate services. They also found that faith-based institutions are generally open to developing partnerships with other groups. The challenges faith-based institutions have faced include inadequate personnel policies, hiring practices, fiscal management, and fundraising capacities and uncertainty or inexperience in communicating with the secular world about their work. Importantly, researchers also found that participating faith-based organizations have a high degree of credibility within the community.

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