

OFFENDER-LED RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS: WHY WE SHOULD HAVE FAITH IN PRISONER-LED REFORM

Byron R. Johnson and Sung Joon Jang, both from Baylor University and Pepperdine University, suggest that the solution to criminal justice reform could lie in the prisoner-led faith programmes, which provide positive, cost-efficient rehabilitation



Image: © AdobeStock_665976690

An emerging body of evidence documents the ways in which religious involvement is linked to different types of physical and mental health outcomes.⁽¹⁾ A growing subset of this research demonstrates how religious involvement helps to decrease crime,⁽²⁾ promote prosocial behaviour among offenders,^(3,9) and help to foster sobriety among addicts.⁽⁴⁾ Moreover, research shows the effectiveness of faith-based programmes in reducing recidivism among former prisoners.^(1,2,9) In sum, there is increasing evidence religiosity can help change an offender's

identity, and be linked to other important prosocial outcomes.^(5,17)

Correctional facilities tend to be intensely religious places, and this is reflected in recent scholarship suggesting religion can engender human flourishing even within prisons.^(1,6) In fact, an emerging "positive criminology" literature may inform how scholars, professionals, and volunteers regarding approaches to offender treatment and justice system reform more generally.^(7,18,19)

Studies examining the effectiveness of faith-based prison programmes support the notion that inmate participants fare significantly better than non-participants.^(1,8,9) An evaluation of Prison Fellowship's faith-based programme known as the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI), found participants to be significantly less likely to be arrested than a matched group of prisoners not receiving this intervention (8% to 20%, respectively) during a two-year post-release period.⁽²⁾ Duwe and King examined recidivism outcomes among

732 offenders released from Minnesota prisons between 2003 and 2009. They found participation significantly reduced the likelihood of recidivism.⁽¹⁰⁾

In *The Wounded Healer* Henri Nouwen states: "The great illusion of leadership is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there."⁽¹¹⁾ This line of reasoning suggests that prisoners may best be suited to foster inmate rehabilitation.

Prisoner-led reform: Establishing prison seminaries and shifting the focus to inmate-led prison ministry

In 1995, Burl Cain was appointed warden of the Louisiana State Penitentiary (aka Angola). Knowing the history of this under-resourced and notorious prison, Cain helped to establish a Bible College as a means of providing educational programmes for prisoners.

We found significant linkages between participation in the prison seminary as well as participation in inmate-led congregations on desistance from misconduct, rehabilitation, and prosocial behaviour within the prison.⁽⁶⁾ Ethnographic accounts of inmate ministers highlight their role in establishing their own congregations and serving in lay-ministry capacities such as hospice, cellblock visitation, tier ministry, and officiating inmate funerals.

In a separate study, we examined whether inmate exposure to Field Ministers is inversely related to antisocial factors and positively to prosocial ones at three maximum-security prisons where the Field

"Cost-effective solutions to criminal justice reform often remain difficult to find. Research in the sub-field of positive criminology suggests that positive and restorative approaches that cultivate social connectedness and support, service to others, spiritual experience, personal integrity, and identity change – may be more effective than traditional approaches to punishment."

Ministry programme operates. We found inmate ministers play an important role in fostering virtuous behaviour,⁽¹²⁾ and contributing to the goal of offender rehabilitation.⁽¹³⁾

A new line of research is necessary that focuses specifically on religious groups indigenous to the cellblocks – what we are calling Offender-led Religious Movements (ORMs). Though nearly invisible to scholars and co-religionists on the outside, studying ORM's may provide rich insight on how virtue and character is developed inside of correctional facilities through inmate-led religious groups.

Offender-led Religious Movements: A Discussion

Today there is widespread consensus on the need for criminal justice reform. Research on offender-led religious movements suggests prisoners may be a key factor in rethinking some of our approaches to correctional programmes and rehabilitation.

An important question regarding the potential replication of ORM's, however, presents policymakers with a dilemma. ORM's, like those led by inmate ministers, pose a legal challenge to correctional agencies. The well-documented trusty system dating back to the early 1900s, allowed inmates to wield authority over other prisoners.

The legal case of *Gates vs Collier*⁽¹⁴⁾ ended the flagrant abuse of inmates under the trusty system at the Mississippi State Penitentiary (aka Parchman) that had existed for decades. Other states using the trusty system were also forced to give it up under this ruling. Following the *Gates vs Collier* decision, states adopted policies preventing prisoners to hold positions of authority over other prisoners.

This legal decision and subsequent policy change has made it virtually impossible to organize and establish inmate-led congregations in most state prison systems. In spite of this, at least twenty states have launched prison seminaries. As far as we know, Louisiana (Angola) and Mississippi (Parchman) remain the only states so far to allow inmates to form and lead their own religious congregations.

Interviewing inmate pastors at Angola and Parchman, as well as correctional officers and other prison administrators, it is apparent that inmate ministers do not wield "authority" over other inmates. A more accurate description is that ministers simply serve other prisoners. Indeed, the varied acts of service that our research uncovered at Angola, suggests that inmate pastors can best be described as "servant leaders," who played a central role in the institutional



Image: © AdobeStock_179250545

transformation from Angola's earlier years of corruption and abuse where inmate trustees wielded power and abuse over other inmates.

Cost-effective solutions to criminal justice reform often remain difficult to find. Research in the sub-field of positive criminology suggests that positive and restorative approaches that cultivate social connectedness and support, service to others, spiritual experience, personal integrity, and identity change – may be more effective than traditional approaches to punishment.⁽¹⁵⁾ If offender-led religious movements are found to foster rehabilitation as well as recidivism reduction, one can argue for the potential of offender-led religious movements to make for safer prisons and to do so in a cost-effective manner.

References

1. Johnson, B.R. (2021). How religion contributes to the common good, positive criminology, and justice reform. *Religions* 12(6), 402-413.
2. Johnson, B.R. (2011). *More God, less crime: Why faith matters and how it could matter more?* Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press.
3. Johnson, B.R. (2006). Objective Hope - Assessing the Effectiveness of Religion and Faith-Based Organizations: A Systematic Review of the Literature. Institute for Studies of Religion (ISR Research Report), Baylor University <http://www.BAYLORISR.org/publications/reports/>

4. Lee, M. T., Pagano, M. E., Johnson, B. R., Post, S. G., Leibowitz, G. S., & Dudash, M. (2017). From defiance to reliance: Spiritual virtue as a pathway towards desistance, humility, and recovery among juvenile offenders. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 4(3), 161-175. <https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000144>
5. Pagano, M.E., Wang, A.R., Rowles, B.M., Lee, M.T., Johnson, B.R. (2015) Social anxiety and peer helping in adolescent addiction treatment. *Alcohol: Clinical and Experimental Research* 39(5), 887-895. <https://doi.org/10.1111/acer.12691>
6. Hallett, M., Hays, J., Johnson, B.R., Jang, S.J., & Duwe, G. (2016). *The Angola Prison Seminary: Effects of Faith-Based Ministry on Identity Transformation, Desistance and Rehabilitation*. New York, NY: Routledge.
7. Jang, S.J. & Johnson, B.R. (2017). Religion, spirituality, and desistance from crime: Toward a theory of existential identity transformation, pp. 74-86 in *International Handbook of Criminal Careers and Life-Course Criminology*, by Blokland, A. & van der Geest, V. (Eds). New York, NY: Routledge.
8. Johnson, B.R., Larson, D.B., & Pitts, T.C. (1997). Religious programs, institutional adjustment, and recidivism among former inmates in Prison Fellowship programs. *Justice Quarterly* 14(1), 145-166.
9. Johnson, B.R. (2004). Religious programs and recidivism among former inmates in Prison Fellowship programs: A long-term follow-up study. *Justice Quarterly* 21(2), 329-354.
10. Duwe, G., & King, M. (2013). Can faith-based correctional programs work? An outcome evaluation of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative in Minnesota. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 57, 813-841.
11. Nouwen, H. J.M. (1979). *The Wounded Healer*. New York, NY: Random House.
12. Jang, S.J., Johnson, B.R., Hays, J., Hallett, M. & Duwe, G. (2018). Existential and virtuous effects of religiosity on mental health and aggressiveness among offenders. *Religions* 9, 162-180. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9060182>
13. Jang, S.J. & Johnson, B.R., Hays, J., Hallett, M., & Duwe, G. (2017). Religion and misconduct in "Angola" prison: Conversion, congregational participation, religiosity, and self-identities. *Justice Quarterly* 35(3), 412-442.
14. Gates vs Collier, 501 F.2d 1291, (1974).
15. Ronel, N. & Ety E. (2011). A different perspective: Introducing positive criminology. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 55(2), 305-325.

16. Hallett, M., Hays, J., Johnson, B.R., Jang, S.J., & Duwe, G. (2017). First stop dying: Angola's Christian seminary as positive criminology. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 61(4), 445-463.
17. Johnson, B.R., Lee, M.T., Pagano, M.E., & Post, S.G. (2015). Alone on the inside: The impact of social isolation and helping others on AOD use and criminal activity. *Youth and Society* 50(4), 529-550 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X15617400>.
18. Johnson, B.R., Lee, M.T., Pagano, M.E., and Post, S.G. (2016). Positive criminology and rethinking the response to adolescent addiction: Evidence on the role of social support, religiosity, and service to others. *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology* 5, 172-181. <https://doi.org/10.6000%2F1929-4409.2016.05.16>
19. Johnson, B.R., Grant D., Hallett, M., Hays, J., Jang, S.J., Lee, M.T., Pagano, M.E., & Post, S.G. (2017). Faith and service: Pathways to identity transformation and correctional reform, pp. 3-23 in *Finding Freedom in Confinement: The Role of Religion in Prison Life*, by Kerley K. New York, NY: Praeger.



Byron R. Johnson
 Professor
 Institute for Studies of Religion,
 Baylor University
 Tel: +1 (254) 710 7555
 Byron_Johnson@baylor.edu
 www.BaylorISR.org
 Visiting Scholar & Co-Executive Director
 Center for Faith and the Common Good
 Pepperdine University
 byron.johnson@pepperdine.edu
 www.pepperdine.edu/center-for-faith-common-good/

Sung Joon Jang
 Professor
 Institute for Studies of Religion,
 Baylor University
 Tel: + 1 (254) 710 1691
 Sung_Joon_Jang@baylor.edu
 www.BaylorISR.org
 Visiting Scholar
 Center for Faith and the Common Good
 Pepperdine University
 sungjoon.jang@pepperdine.edu
 www.pepperdine.edu/center-for-faith-common-good/

