

RECIDIVISM: THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

A major problem or controversial issue that is obviously present but avoided as a subject for discussion because it is more comfortable to do so

Recidivism has long been a significant challenge for the correctional industry since the inception of prisons as a form of punishment. Some attribute the rise in recidivism to the increasing inmate populations, suggesting that as more individuals are incarcerated, the number of those returning to prison proportionately rises. A 2007 reentry strategy proposal by the Governor Corzine Administration in New Jersey indicates that the correctional community has had minimal impact on reducing recidivism.

Each year, nearly 16,000 adult and juvenile offenders are released from state correctional facilities and return to communities across New Jersey. Ensuring public safety necessitates every effort to prevent these individuals from committing new crimes. Unfortunately, the majority of those released from New Jersey's prisons do not lead law-abiding, productive lives. In fact, nearly two-thirds (65%) of adult offenders are rearrested within five years of their release.

This alarming statistic of 65% continues to drive the corrections industry, law enforcement, and the judicial system to seek solutions to reduce recidivism. A report by the MTC Institute, "Programs that Help Inmates Stay Out of Prison," identifies a key ingredient to reducing recidivism through rehabilitation. The report emphasizes the importance of designing interventions that provide services to offenders, aiming to change them in ways that make recidivism less likely. Unlike punishment-oriented goals such as retribution, deterrence, and incapacitation, which focus on inflicting pain or confinement, rehabilitation seeks to cure, fix, or otherwise improve offenders.

This conscious effort for rehabilitation aligns well with religious programming in prisons. Chaplaincy not only aims to correct inmates but also focuses on the total transformation of heart, soul, and mind as the ultimate goal of each religious program. Too often, chaplaincy is seen as a necessary program mandated by legislative and correctional guidelines. However, even the most secular administrations must recognize the added value that chaplaincy brings to correctional programs. Few secular programs have proven capable of connecting with inmates' motives for change. This added value for rehabilitation fosters not only cognitive change but also a genuine desire to make the transformation needed to break the cycle of crime.

One might expect that the added value found in religious programs would significantly reduce recidivism rates. The religious community often cites this transformative characteristic as a reason to safeguard their programs from removal. Although religious inmate populations tend to commit fewer crimes and show slightly lower recidivism rates, the results are not always as significant as expected.

A closer examination of current faith-based programs suggests that the lack of results in reducing recidivism is not due to the effectiveness of evangelism, worship, and religious study programs that address the effects of sinfulness. The real issue lies within the broader evangelical faith community.

There appears to be a disconnect between the desire to change lives and the actual implementation of building transformative relationships through discipleship. George Barna, in his work *Growing True Disciples*, provides valuable insights into this issue. In his chapter, "The State of Discipleship," Barna addresses the failure of churches to create true disciples, a problem also evident in correctional settings. He writes:

"Unfortunately, our research shows that most small groups excel in fellowship but falter in facilitating transformation. Even the teaching delivered in most small groups has little enduring influence on participants' lives.

Churches have done well in promoting the importance of spiritual maturity but have largely failed to provide an environment where spiritual growth is a lifestyle. This is partly due to our focus on providing programs rather than fostering relationships that support growth. Although there is openness to spiritual coaching, relatively few people are engaged in mentoring relationships. Our interviews with churches indicate that few are intentionally raising mentors and strategically matching them with congregants.”

There is a tremendous need for a more intentional focus on the discipleship process and a clear definition of the desired outcomes. With proper motivation, it seems that most believers would be willing to commit to a more rigorous regimen of spiritual development.

If this lack of substantial relationship-building for transformational ministry is prevalent in most faith communities, it is unsurprising that this dynamic is also missing in the religious programming of the correctional system. For religious programs in corrections to become more effective and dynamic, there must be a conscious effort to create programs that demand a regimen of spiritual development and transformation that endures beyond prison walls.

This lack of deliberate purpose in designing religious programs suggests that the church has regressed in its historical efforts to transform prisoners due to its own leadership deficiencies in key areas of the transformed Christian life. Historically, religion in prisons has been a significant cultural element of transformation. Some argue that religious efforts to reform criminals laid the foundation for the current correctional models, once known as reformatories.

One major reason for the church’s historical and cultural significance in corrections is its inherent motive and desire to bring elements of forgiveness, repentance, and transformation, which the correctional industry lacks in the process of incarceration and restoration. Additionally, the community’s expectation to seek clergy during life crises underscores the impact of religion. In the courses of Pastoral Crisis Intervention, produced and taught by the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Dr. Mitchell, a leading authority on treating post-traumatic stress, cites several reasons to include pastoral intervention during a crisis.

According to ARC (2001, Ripple Effect), 59% of individuals are likely to seek support from a spiritual counselor, compared to 45% from medical doctors and 40% from mental health professionals.

When a person is incarcerated, their stress and crisis levels often reach a critical stage. Dr. Mitchell suggests that this period often becomes a “crisis of faith.” Effective chaplaincy programs are designed to help inmates discover or rediscover a spiritual connection to a faith group at this critical juncture. It is during this time that many inmates seek religious activities to normalize their incarceration experience.

Ed Cottrell posits that religion often acts as a “neutralizer of pain,” allowing inmates to confess and find forgiveness for their actions. Religion provides a “community of acceptance” that is genuinely interested in their transformation. Special chaplaincy skills are required to respond effectively in the corrections environment, providing a venue for effective transformation. A highly trained and experienced chaplain in religious programming within corrections can design programs that help inmates connect or reconnect with their faith, offering support during their crisis and initiating a dynamic life transformation to interrupt their cycle of crime. Successful chaplaincy programs are quickly recognized by administrative professionals for the significant added value they bring to correctional transformation.

One significant added value is the immediate community connection that religious volunteers bring with their faith community, which is not present in other programs. As inmates mature and grow in their faith, the religious community can be accessed and challenged to provide necessary resources at the time of the inmate’s release.

Another noteworthy added value of chaplaincy is the agape, unconditional love of Christ found in weekly programs. It is remarkable that in the twenty-first century of social media, many offenders have never experienced a loving, supportive, and forgiving community. The idea that total strangers would care and show concern for a convicted criminal is often hard to accept and understand. However, this very support from the religious community sets chaplaincy apart from other programs.

Religious programs not only facilitate total transformation but also provide the “model of transformation” that corrections seek. The Journal of Community Corrections notes that religious volunteers “are a group of people who have learned how to successfully negotiate and derive satisfaction from the five major areas of social life: work, family, education, politics, and religion.” Their religious tenets of faith provide the foundation for inmates’ life transformation.

Once offenders connect with their faith and find an atmosphere of acceptance and transformation, they are introduced to the weekly group experience or fellowship of faith, where they study and model the basic precepts of their faith.

Once an offender connects with their faith and finds an environment conducive to acceptance and transformation, they are introduced to weekly group experiences or faith fellowships. Through studying and modeling the core principles of the faith group, inmates begin to rethink and reframe their worldviews. These weekly communities provide opportunities to practice and embody their newly learned life patterns, with ample forgiveness and acceptance available when they falter or succeed.

Thomas P. O’Conner emphasizes the importance of these weekly studies, stating they “provide a set of governing rules and practices for its followers” and create “an environment where they can live out these guidelines.” In this community fellowship, trust becomes the most crucial element that develops over time as groups interact within a transformational setting. Trust is a vital trait for inmates to learn and experience.

Chaplaincy, more than any other correctional venue, fosters this bond of trust that inmates recognize during worship, study, and rehabilitation. This trust is not one-sided; chaplains also trust inmates who demonstrate genuine transformation. This mutual trust builds accountability, evident when inmates intentionally change their behavior to prove their commitment and sincerity to their faith in Jesus Christ.

The motivation for change extends beyond seeking parole or early release. It is the love of Christ that drives Christian inmates to make these changes. Their love for Christ helps them choose righteousness over crime through the divine presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

This trust and loyalty, demonstrated by the inmate’s love for Christ, will be tested almost daily during incarceration. The ultimate test occurs upon their release back into the community. Returning to their old environment often reveals their true motives for participating in the programs. Unfortunately, many churches have become disheartened by inmates who have “taken advantage” of them.

Overcoming a lifetime of learned corrupt behavior requires time, patience, forgiveness, and a true commitment to transformation. Often, chaplains, volunteers, and churches may feel that an inmate is disqualified for assistance due to dishonesty. However, we must consider how many of the less fortunate we help daily exhibit similar traits and patterns.

Chaplains must view practical care as an added value to their ministry. Practical needs accompanying release, such as housing, food, and employment, are often key elements of successful reentry. Our nation’s religious communities

have repeatedly demonstrated their value and significance in responding to local and national disasters. Chaplaincy is uniquely equipped to mediate access to these resources for inmates.

Many Protestant chaplains may feel their efforts have failed if an inmate has not truly been redeemed. However, reducing crime and recidivism is a comprehensive process.

Redefining success in the context of criminal life involves recognizing that what is often seen as failure can be a crucial element in achieving true success, which goes beyond merely "saving souls."

The Epistle of James provides clarity on what constitutes genuine success in combating crime. As stated in James 2:14-17: *"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."*

Meeting the needs of inmates has a significant impact on crime and the community. While it may not directly reduce recidivism, success can be measured by the reduction in the severity and frequency of crimes committed, as well as the underlying reasons for committing them. Incorporating these concepts into chaplaincy can lead to a notable decrease in recidivism among those whose needs are met by the church. Proving this and understanding the significance of the results will require time and research.

With advancements in technology, chaplaincy can continue to demonstrate the value of religious programming. More research is needed to substantiate the role of religion in reducing recidivism. Tracking post-release inmates would provide the necessary data to validate the need for religious services, as current unofficial statistics suggest a sufficient reduction in recidivism to financially support Protestant chaplains' efforts.

In the recidivism process, chaplaincy serves as a divine bridge of trust and faith between the community, staff, and family. The journey to rehabilitation, transformation, and healing is long and arduous, requiring more than cognitive skills. It involves developing physical, emotional, and spiritual values collectively with community resources to support efforts in reducing recidivism.

Establishing a religious community that mirrors the current model for inmates requiring physical and psychological treatment post-release would provide a valuable reentry resource. The medical community has found that inmates who continue to receive similar treatment in a reentry "therapeutic community" have a significantly higher success rate, reducing both treatment costs and recidivism rates. Chaplaincy services could achieve similar results within a "religious community."

The correction industry is filled with valuable programs that, if attended and taken seriously, will provide the released inmate with the tools they need to overcome any and all obstacles. The problem is that most inmates fail to recognize their value and simply choose not to participate. Because of this it must be reemphasized that the one aspect of religious programming is that it is unique and different from the other programs being offered to the inmate prior and post release, is the *value-added* aspect of aiming at and transforming the entire person for all eternity. The physical, the mental as well as the heart/soul are targeted for transformation. And the most influential and dynamic person to bring this type of programming to corrections is the chaplain with strong God anointed leadership.

The history of correctional chaplaincy proves that the added value of the chaplain's presence historically, currently and in the future continues to be the essential element of corrections for total inmate transformation and reducing recidivism.

This concept is supported in *Prisoner Reentry, Religion, and Research*: [Prisoner Reentry, Religion and Research | Office of Justice Programs \(ojp.gov\)](#)

"The historic role of the church, combined with its potential for volunteer resources, uniquely positions the faith community to support the successful reintegration of returning prisoners. Those consistently involved in religious programs while incarcerated are 50% less likely to be re-arrested if involved in a therapeutic/religious community one to two years post-release."

RESOURCES

Reentry, A Strategy for Safe Streets and Neighborhoods, accessed June 27, 2009, <http://www.nj.gov/oag/crimeplan/safe-reentry-plan.pdf>

MTC Institute, Programs that Help Inmates Stay Out of Prison, (Centerville, UT), November 2003. The article cites, Cullen, F. T. (2002).

Rehabilitation and Treatment Programs, in J.Q. Wilson & J. Petersilla (Eds.), "Crime: Public Policies for Crime Control" (2nd ed.). Oakland, CA: ICS Press, p. 256. Accessed June 27, 2009 at, <http://www.mtctrains.com>.

George Barna, Growing True Disciples, (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBook Press, 2001), p 54-55.

Allen, Harry E. & Simonsen, Clifford E. Corrections in America An Introduction. fifth ed. (New York, NY: Macmillan Pub., 1989) The text traces the infrastructure of the current prison systems to the efforts of religious groups seeking to induce repentance and a transformed Godly lifestyle. <http://www.icisf.org/>

George S. Everly, Jr. Pastoral Crisis Intervention, (Chevron Pub., MD), 2007

Ed Cottrell, Prison Ministries in Public Policy, March 29, 1999 accessed June, 2009, p.10 <http://www.edcottrell.com/downloads/prisonpolicy.pdf>
<http://biblehub.com/greek/26.htm>

Journal of Community Corrections, Vol. XIV, No.1, Fall 2004, p. 18, accessed June 2009,
https://www.oregon.gov/doc/OMR/religious_services/docs/rs_articles_of_interest/rs_article_what_works_1.pdf

Rethinking and Reframing have become mantras for the correctional industry with entire courses designed to disrupt the inmate's routine of "seeing things their way" and making the only choice that know how to make. The redemption and transformation of the protestant faith is the most powerful means of opening their eyes to the reality of God and His desired choices for them with the blueprint, the Bible, to follow to make those choices.

2 Corinthians 5:14, "For the love of Christ constrains us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead?"
http://biblehub.com/2_corinthians/5-14.htm

Jeanette M. Herick, Ph. D, Prisoner Reentry, Religion and Research, Caliber Assc., p. 4. Accessed June 2009,
https://peer.ta.acf.hhs.gov/resource_library?search_api_views_fulltext=prison+reentry%2C+religion+and+research&=Search

[The-Church-And-Reentry.pdf \(connectministries.net\)](#)

REVIEW

COURSE SCHEDULE

CHAP 101

CORRECTIONAL CHAPLAINCY

2	<p>Assigned Reading:</p> <p><i>Recidivism: <u>The Elephant in the Room.</u></i></p> <p>Research:</p> <p>Research several web sites that describe recidivism in corrections.</p> <p>Discussion Question:</p> <p>Briefly research and discuss: How does recidivism influence/impact chaplaincy?</p>	<p>Written Submissions:</p> <p>Write a brief reaction paper of 250 words or less containing what you consider to be important.</p> <p>Research several web sites that describe recidivism in corrections. Provide three major areas each site includes. Explain why you believe they are necessary.</p> <p>Respond to the discussion question with 250 words or less.</p>
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