

# Offender-led religious movements: Why we should have faith in prisoner-led reform

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## **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**

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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**

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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 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 ORMs may provide rich insight into how virtue and character are developed inside correctional facilities through inmate-led religious groups.

## **Offender-led Religious Movements: A Discussion**

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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 ORMs, however, presents policymakers with a dilemma. ORMs, 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 have 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 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.<sup>(15)</sup> 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.

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