

Who Is My Neighbour:
The Church Through the Eyes Of Former Inmates

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Certificate of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal:

AST REB File number:	0162019
Title of Research Project:	Who Is My Neighbour? The Church Through the Eyes of Inmates
Faculty Supervisor:	Dr. Jody Clarke
Student Investigator	Shirley Cole

and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and Atlantic School of Theology's relevant policies.

Approval Period: 22 November 2019 to 1 May 2020

Dated this 3rd day of April, 2020 at Halifax, Nova Scotia _____

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By Shirley J Cole

Abstract: This Qualitative Research study examines the data collected from former inmates of provincial and federal jails and prisons. Using a phenomenological research method, having completed one on one direct interviews with five participants, this study focuses on how former inmates have experienced the church and what the church can do most accurately to engage with individuals upon release from custody and return to community. This study identifies five overall themes which ultimately relate to accurate engagement by the church with former inmates: hopelessness, aloneness, time, connection and hope. Based, on the findings, literature review on the subject and theological consideration, the implications for the church as well as general conclusions are drawn. Most notably, it is argued that accurate support from the church relates to ongoing contact, connection, and relationship, all requiring a very limited draw on time or human resources. This is a hopeful outcome indeed.

April 2020.

Introduction

It was a great privilege to spend three months over the late spring of 2018 in Pictou Nova Scotia, completing a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) Unit at the Northeast Nova Scotia Correctional Facility. As a student attached to the Chaplaincy Program, there was tremendous opportunity to simply spend time talking with the men in the units in which I was assigned, and to worship together with men from various units across the overall incarcerated population. I listened and learned a lot about what their lives were like while in prison and the challenges they faced upon release into the community. There were many stories offered about past experiences of incarceration in various facilities and what life was like for them living in the community before and in between periods of imprisonment. Some presented with what appeared to be a sense of fear or at least anxiety, about release, whether acknowledged as fear or not. My interest

in the pattern of their lived experiences, especially of leaving jail then returning to jail a short time later began to grow. I found myself drawn to the idea of bringing the voices of those who seemingly needed assistance in breaking the cycle of recidivism forward. I reasoned that this would both enhance my understanding as a church leader of what the challenges were for former inmates attempting reintegration into the community and would be of interest and value to others, especially church members interested in or already working in some aspect of prison ministry.

Further, prior to and during the time in CPE and following, I participated in various activities within my own Anglican Church, more broadly and ecumenically, related to the needs of the marginalized and how the Church responds. It appeared to me often, that without any meaningful direct contact with those in prison, along with the overwhelming and seemingly growing needs of so many in the community who are disadvantaged, there is little focus on the unique circumstances of those being released from jail or prison and their specific wishes or requirements. My own antidotal experiences, confirmed with the literature, indicates we as a church do not always know how best to respond and can even have competing viewpoints.

In his work in the area of church and charities generally, Robert Lupton argues that much of the charity provided by churches not only never reaches the intended individuals but is not even the best way to offer support.¹ Essentially, while full of good intentions, the church can not claim to know whether what it offers is most helpful, necessary or accurate regarding what its members do, individually or collectively, for those in prison and especially for those returning to community from prison. However, the church does continue to recognize itself as having an important role in providing care, services and supports to those in jail and upon release.

¹ Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 1.

Currently, there are nearly 140 per 100,000 adults incarcerated in federal and provincial correctional institutions in Canada according to Statistics Canada.² The vast majority will eventually be released from custody and return to their home communities. Many will do so without natural resources like family, friends and neighbours in place. Often thought, with church still active in many areas, they return to locations where diverse communities of faith are present. Within faith communities, there is a recognition of the important role, even mandate the Church has regarding the marginalized, including current and former inmates and their families. As well as references in the Old Testament and The New Testament Epistles, Jesus himself speak about care for those in prison.³ This is the reality of the church where there is so much need in the community overall and seemly fewer and generally aging church members to draw on.

With all that in mind, essentially, this research initiative appeared to be an opportunity for me, as a Priest and Church Leader in parish ministry, to both more accurately understand the needs of former inmates living in community and offer that understanding to the church. At a time when it seems church resources are becoming increasingly scarce; it seems critical to consider how to most accurately direct energy and time. This line of reasoning will now be outlined further before discussing the research itself.

With an instinct that this was not a new or even modern dilemma, that of wanting to help and not knowing how to most accurately, I reviewed the literature to determine the overall thinking in the area of the churches response to the inmate and former inmate population. From the Literature Review completed for this project, which is attached, it is noteworthy that some of

² “Adult Correctional Statistics in Canada 2015/2016,” assessed October 7, 2019, <https://www150.stat.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/14700-eng.htm>.

³ Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) Matthew 25:36-40, Isaiah 61:1a, Hebrews 13:1,3.

the leading researchers in this area within and outside the church have long recognized the value of what the church has to offer current and former inmates. This recognition includes American restorative justice pioneer Kay Pranis who, for more than thirty years, has been advocating for faith communities' involvement in prison ministry. She has long specifically encouraged faith communities ongoing and continuing involvement while individuals are incarcerated, as this better ensures connections in the community upon release.⁴ Also, now deceased social justice pioneer, Pastor Dr Lonnie McLeod wrote extensively about those in prison and returning to community from prison, describing them as needing the level of engagement and presence faith communities can provide.⁵ American Pastor Harold Dean Trulear, also writing about prisoners returning to community, queries "what would it look like if congregations began responding to incarceration in the same way we respond to hospitalization?" suggesting it would mean circumstances "where true reconciliation and redemption can occur."⁶

From a non faith based background, criminal justice authority Byron R. Johnson, indicates that while it has always been difficult for ex-prisoners to transition back to society, currently there are more individuals in prison and more leaving prison and returning to the community each year.⁷ Johnson reports that "About two thirds of all offenders released from prison are rearrested within three years of their release."⁸ With respect to those being released from prison, Johnson also describes the twelve times the death rate for those immediately

⁴ Kay Pranis, "From Vision To Action Some Principles Of Restorative Justice," *Church & Society* 87, no. 4 (March-April 1997): 32.

⁵ Lonnie McLeod, "A Holistic Approach to the trauma of Reentry," in *Ministry With Prisoners & Families The Way Forward*, ed. W. Wilson Goode Sr., Charles E. Lewis Jr., Harold Dean Trulear (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2011), 129-131.

⁶ Harold Dean Trulear, "Changing Congregational Culture: The Healing Communities Model," in *Ministry With Prisoners & Families The Way Forward*, ed. W. Wilson Goode Sr., Charles E. Lewis Jr., Harold Dean Trulear (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2011), 172-173.

⁷ Byron R. Johnson, *More God, Less Crime Why Faith Matters and How it Could Matter More*, (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2011), 185.

⁸ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 185.

following release compared to the general public, and the 129 times higher drug overdose death rate for former prisoners compared to the comparable population. “Prisoner re-entry is a very dangerous time for both ex prisoners and the public at large” Johnson offers in summary.⁹ Among his considerations regarding possible solutions, Johnson indicates from his own perspective that “While often overlooked...the role of religious volunteers, religious programs, and faith based organizations may be particularly consequential for ex prisoners facing so many difficult obstacle.”¹⁰ More specifically and directly, Johnson says “communities of faith have the potential to be powerful allies in confronting the re-entry crisis.” He adds “any prisoner re-entry plan including only marginal rather than a central role for the faith factor cannot succeed.”¹¹ Johnson also suggests that “congregations more than any other institution in America are volunteer-rich organizations able to leverage millions of talented people to feed these faith based efforts,”¹² and “Religious people are more likely to volunteer, give to charities-both religious and secular- and to be civically engaged.” He points out in summary that “the faith factor is undeniably important for the functioning of a healthy civil society.”¹³

Johnson advocates for direct supportive involvement with former inmates, as do other leaders and researchers in the field of re-entry from prison and restorative justice models specifically. That suggests that the type of activities required for members of the church had more to do with contact and relationship than huge investments of time and personal resources. However, in Canada at least, within the mainline churches, including the Anglican Church, there has been a growing number of individuals leaving the church and fewer individuals becoming

⁹ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 186.

¹⁰ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 187.

¹¹ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 187.

¹² Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 216.

¹³ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 204.

involved. More specifically, in the Anglican Church of Canada alone, the monthly national magazine recently quoted statistics from 2018 data compiled from the Canadian Anglican Dioceses by the Rev. Neil Elliot while seconded by the national church. His data, presented graphically in the magazine, shows the decline in Anglican church membership from 1, 358, 459 in 1961 to 282, 412 in 2017; predicting no members by 2040.¹⁴ How do we look toward churches as a critical component of prison ministry and post prison ministry specifically, if in reality there are fewer and fewer church members to draw on while need is growing exponentially? As will be developed further below, clearer accuracy in church members responses to those in need would ensure the best use of limited resources and potentially a sense of success or gratification for what is offered.

Purpose and Question

This research is not intended to be about shrinking church membership. However, it is a significant consideration. The church is viewed as important, as noted in the above review of the literature, with respect to its engagement and support to the prison population and for those upon release. At the same time, as also noted above, there are fewer church members to work with the marginalized generally and therefore inmates and former inmates specifically. This increases the necessity of providing accurate services, and a seemingly clear way of doing that is to ask those potentially in receipt of the services about what they need. This leads to asking former inmates directly about what they need or needed to support their reintegration into the community.

Further, and related, this leads to asking them how they view the church, including asking about

¹⁴ Tali Folkins, "Gone by 2040?," in *Anglican Journal*, Vol.146 No 1 January 2020,1, 6-8, Anglicanjournal.com. https://www.anglicanjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/aj-jan2020_web.pdf . Assessed February 3, 2020., 6-7.

what the church can offer to support their reintegration. This, of course, is in addition to a simple desire to respond most accurately with former inmates and their families with whom I will become directly involved, as a component of Parish Ministry.

This accumulated in the decision to call this research project ‘Who is my Neighbour: The Church Through the Eyes of Former Inmates.’ As implied in the title, the question of inquiry is how former inmates view the church and, with that in mind, specifically: How can the church respond accurately? This is in keeping with the overall purpose of the study: that of determining how best the church, with diminishing resources, can most accurately respond to its Christian mandate regarding the imprisoned and recognized essential role with former inmates. The determination is made by asking former inmates.

Methodology

For a new researcher, as I am, basic qualitative research, the most common type of research methodology, seemed a manageable place to begin. Further, it has as its purpose to “understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences,”¹⁵ which is essentially what I set out to discover. Qualitative research in general allows for data to be collected through interviews, with the specific method and questions to be asked dependent on the specific study.¹⁶ Upon further exploration, I determined that the phenomenological qualitative approach would be applied. Essentially, this type of qualitative research describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experience ...of a phenomenon,¹⁷ in this case release from correctional facilities, return to, and therefore integration of some sort into the community, and interface (or

¹⁵ Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research A Guide to Design and Implementation* 4th ed., (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 23-24.

¹⁶ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 25.

¹⁷ John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design Choosing Among Five Approaches* 4th ed., (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2018), 77.

not) with the church. One of the defining characteristics of this model is that it ends with incorporating what individuals have experienced and how they have experienced a certain phenomenon.¹⁸ It is therefore about understanding experience rather than imposing ideas and theories on those involved. Further, it is recognized that this form of inquiry both offers “a structured approach for novice researchers” and can offer valuable descriptions for both service providers and policy makers.¹⁹

I reasoned that as a spiritual care service provider myself and one who would influence policies and practices regarding outreach ministries at least in my Parish, this was important to consider. The approach of hearing about the direct lived experience of incarceration and release and church would effectively limit the biases and preconceived assumptions I might have, whether positive or negative, without realizing about former inmates. Further, it would not only avoid influencing me as the inquirer but also limit the potential biases of those whom the data might be presented to, essentially members of the church.

That led me, within a phenomenological qualitative approach, to develop a standard set of questions to use for interviews with former inmates. The questions related to the experience of incarceration, that of anticipating and leaving the institution, what life is like now and what dreams, plans, goals are set for the future. Woven into the questions were ones about the church broadly: the participants sense of, knowledge about, or experience with faith- based organizations and individuals from the church prior to, during incarceration, re-entry into, and living in community. With an interest in starting with individuals who had knowledge or actual involvement with the church, I made general inquiries among colleagues about individuals they

¹⁸ Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 77.

¹⁹ Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 80.

might know professionally, socially or in community who were former inmates, somehow connected with some aspect of church and might be willing to speak of their experiences. Numerous names came forward and the selection of participants was essentially made based on whom I was able to reach and connect with most readily. Those who became involved had no hesitation regarding an openness about their experiences, nor about wanting to ensure anonymity. Interviews were all conducted in person, in quiet public spaces.

Of the former inmates I spoke with, all were men. The age range was twenty-seven years through to seventy-two years. Collectively, they were incarcerated in provincial and or federal institutions from the east coast to the west, as far as Edmonton, Alberta, in all levels of sentencing from maximum security with significant time spent in solitary, to several years in medium or minimum security through to several months of weekends in provincial jail. All were either released on sentence expiry date or release was combined with pre-release farm or work settings, day parole in a treatment center or halfway house, or day parole with nights spent in custody for up to a year following release from the institution. Some will remain on parole for a lifetime. Time in custody varied from six months to nine years for one sentence, and the participants had from one to several past sentences. All are from and currently now living in the Maritimes and, rather coincidentally, I spoke with at least one resident of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and PEI. They ranged from having a period of a few months to nearly four decades since incarceration. While not a prerequisite for participation, all had at least a marginal connection with the church growing up, with both Roman Catholic and various main line protestant denominations represented.

On March 12, 2020, as a component of a public presentation at the Columba Chapel at the Atlantic School of Theology, I presented the findings of the research project. Although aware

of the date and invited to attend, none of the participants were able to attend. While not part of formal proceedings, I do have an audio tape of my presentation and the questions and answers which followed. I intend to send this to the participants. Two have contacted or approached me since, inquiring about how it went, expressing genuine interest in how their stories were received. I am delighted to be able to offer them the taped presentation directly and how very engaged the audience members were with their stories.

Themes

The interview questions for this project focussed on ones that would lend themselves to the query about how the church could most accurately respond to inmates returning to community. The stories each told, when reviewed through the lenses of determining themes arising overall, proved rich in descriptions of their own lives overall from early memories to time in jail and the hopes and dreams they have and are living into. As well, in describing their own experiences, especially of life in prison, their stories involved others within whom they were doing time. At some points, each story was difficult to hear as the pain and hopelessness was palatable. At other times, I felt uplifted by the hope each carried for themselves and for others. I have therefore determined the themes emerging can be captured under the headings: hopelessness, aloneness, time, connection and hope. There are certainly not firm boundaries around these themes, as one area bleeds into the next. This will become more obvious as the themes are described, primarily through examples of direct comments made by the former inmates interviewed.

Theme 1: Hopelessness

In each of the interviews, there were points of the expression of what can best be described as “despair and hopelessness.” This came across in describing early life experiences and trauma and long practiced lifestyles prior to and for some following incarceration. With respect to early life circumstances attached to a sense of hopelessness, it was noted generally that many, including themselves, started out with parents who had problems themselves, often drugs or alcohol. This meant “falling into the wrong crowd or being in and out of foster care and group homes and losing connections with family and community.” One noted of his first contact with his father which was when he was a young teen as “I was watching this man shoot drugs into his arm and then later he stole my car from me, I was told he was my father.” Another noted, about those he has met along the way that “a lot are abused in youth facilities and such.” Regarding sexual abuse specifically, one participant spoke about four years of childhood sexual abuse and said about the inmates talking among themselves: “I was being honest about what happened to me and 95% were saying the same things happened to them as me. But there’s no help for it; you can get a drug program but if you have other demons you don’t get to address before you get out, you’re no further ahead. Most people who have drug addictions were abused, they’re not talking about it in groups, but 1-1 would talk about it, and are haunted by it.”

For some, it was not family alone that contributed to the sense of hopelessness and it was prior to that which can worsen once in prison. One, who indicated having been still active in the church, along with his family as the time of sentencing, summarized this well in saying: “I was abandoned by the church. I was 30 days local [provincial jail] before sent off [to federal prison] and desperately needed to talk to someone. I’m harder today because of it, because of the church

turning their back. My wife and children were not supported either. No one from the church darkened the door.”

Using only slightly different wording, each spoke of their own addictions and the hopelessness attached. Without prompting, each in only slightly different language noted that 95%-99% of those in prison are addicted to something. One, who has now been out of prison now for several years said specifically “It was addictions for me, alcohol and cocaine, I never committed a crime sober. I’ll be clean 10 years in May.” Another said “even though that is what put me inside, I got out and got hammered. That went on for another year.” And another “After years of heavy drinking- your mind can’t comprehend right from wrong. You know it’s there, but you can’t validate the damage you are doing. Sometimes your system is so screwed up you do it anyway and sometimes you don’t even remember what you are doing.” And another indicated “I can’t drink a drop. I thought I could, I convinced myself, I was right back and worse.”

The sense of hopelessness worsening when facing release from prison was also described. It was noted specifically by one: “Not many make it. I researched it a bit, and only 12% on first parole are successful in getting out and staying out to completion of their sentence.” Two others also offered the view that no more than 10% stay out for any length of time, with one saying “Before, I was always just going back...the same thing...this is life... this is how I grew up.”

Theme 2: Aloneness

Somewhat similar and related to hopelessness, but at the same time a distinct theme, were descriptions of being alone and the loneliness, isolation and even fear that came with this both in

prison and upon release. I heard about going into prison first from one: “I was scared so bad I was afraid of being raped because of my size. I saw those big gates and wire fences and wondered why me? Am I such a bad person?” There was also a sense of the aloneness felt by family. I heard, about one mans wife when he was sentenced “the first week was so traumatic someone came every night and slept on the couch- because she was scared to stay alone. Their message was “you love him, we love him, God loves him, and God will do something with this.”

Of the aloneness of prison life itself, the participants stories were particularly painfully described and painful to hear, as well as being incredibly consistent. From one I heard “ It was horrifying, I was lonely and depressed, full of anxiety, worried about family at home, about the disgrace brought to the family, community, self, friends. I had every thought that would drive one insane. I was bored, desperate, living on the edge and had absolutely no one to talk to. I had to deal with all this on my own for two years and I was scared to death, not just for myself but for whoever took me on, because then I’d have to respond and I’d be in even more trouble.”

This sense of aloneness, even when surrounded by others in the prison unit, or ‘range,’ was apparent whether talking about themselves or others. One described “for many, if it wasn’t for the churches going in, there would be no one to one connect with anybody. You can talk when it’s one to one, its not like a group because no one can go back to the range and talk about what you said.” Another said “there was one guy on the range who [was] never out in thirty-five years. He came to church [in the prison] Christmas Eve because he respected me and didn’t want to disappoint. I wish there was someone he could connect with.” I also heard “Mail is such a big deal. Like Christmas cards, there were guys in there thirteen years who had never gotten a card.” And another added “My wife got a guy involved in her football pool from work. This guy

was in fifteen years and had never spoken to a woman and she'd call him about that pool, and he came alive, so many have nothing, nobody." Another noted "Some on the inside are just existing, waiting to die and they live knowing they are going to rot inside and are a total burden on society."

Regarding the fear that can come with aloneness, another spoke about what "you won't find in a book." He stated "Its intense, you walk down a tunnel for food. Its enclosed and dangerous, and you have to do it every day for food. You don't make eye contact with anybody. If you make eye contact it means you want to have a problem with them. Even today I look at the ground when I walk."

I also heard about aloneness, regarding those getting out, " God love them, I seen guys when it was time to get out, especially a second time round, who wanted to stay in. They had so much anxiety they'd have to go into the Pen hospital. They knew they'd be going back, that they couldn't stay straight on their own."

The stories of life on the outside after release made it understandable why there would be such concerns, as one could be still or even more alone. A good summary of comments was " you get out and its like ID, Bank Account, Licence, when you do time, you don't know how to do this stuff and you feel intimidated to try, and there's no one to guide you, to help, everything costs, you get overwhelmed, it becomes overwhelming and we find a pathway back [inside], start hanging out with somebody, its just easier." And from another, describing his life now: "Like it's hard alone, out here still I'm alone and its really hard. I get lonely and don't know what to do."

Theme 3: Time

This theme relates to how time works and what time means and is connected to the aloneness and hopelessness described. It seemed that, often, the sense of time for those interviewed was different from how we might experience it. One offered the poignant comment: ‘For me this started nearly forty years ago with a two-year sentence, and I did my time; but I was really sentenced to life. I still meet people who still refer to then, what they knew of me then.’ And another offered “People like me that are institutionalized, like I know I got problems right, but being in jail so long, living a certain way, how do you go from that to this? I know how to be inside. I’ve been inside pretty much since I was 17, 9 of the past 10 years. Its hard to understand how hard it is for me even to leave the house. Anything that is easy for normal people is hard for me. Doing things for me on the inside didn’t prepare me. I’m just so tired of taking the wrong bus and ending up on the wrong side of town.”

I also heard, of someone returning to prison: “This last sentence was completely different. I had found God before I went back to Springhill. I was already free for the first time. Before, going back never really affected me. This time it was a challenge because I had to go from who I was before, to step away from all that, I had to just do what I felt was right, go to church, be kind, be there for others, talk to others, try to help them see my new way, how God had opened my eyes.”

Theme 4: Connection

The comment by the former inmate described above blends into this theme and the one following. It relates to the connections that are made among outsiders, both former inmates and sometimes the church with those still serving time, and how significant these are. One described:

“There was a church in New Brunswick that sent cards, Birthdays and Christmas, every once in a while, on Sunday I’d call, and they would pass the phone around. And there were letters from them. You can’t really be yourself on the inside, writing and receiving letters is a connection with the real world, enough to keep you going.” And from another, I heard “I had the church this time, fifteen to twenty people wrote me letters on a regular basis. An eleven-year-old boy started writing to me and continued to for three years. His parents knew what I did and allowed him to communicate with me for three years-That was ‘wow’, who in their right mind would let that? I never had that kindness before.”

Of direct connection, as well as the appreciation of being able to talk one on one with someone who comes in without the information going back to all the men on the range, I heard about how meaningful direct contact from the outside really is. One participant described in great detail the experience of the one visitor he had in two years, remembering it as vividly and emotionally as though it were yesterday, rather than several decades ago. Likewise, another participant who spent several years in a prison in central Canada spoke about a member of a faith-based program from back east, who when traveling through the area where he was, visited twice more a year apart. His gratitude to her and memories of the visits were clearly the high points of his time incarcerated. He noted making contact on occasion, just to continue to extend his appreciation to her.

There were several comments about staying connected with those still on the inside. One noted that a guy he knew and did time with for several years had “just picked up a life sentence and we have been in touch. I’ll stay in touch. He needs that.” One mentioned how he and his wife now made a point to send cards to a number of guys, as “it’s the only contact they have, and it will help keep them going.”

I heard about the value of connections for those released. Specifically, one participant described a faith-based group he is connected with now on the outside, whereby a group of eight guys meet bi-weekly and “connect really well.” He laughingly added “and one of them is a police officer.” Also, of the value of church connection, one said: “the importance of church support they will never know. The first week back was overwhelming, then the pastor stands up, starts talking, sees me and says is that you? Welcome home.”

Theme 5: Hope

All the participants described themselves as being in the absolute minority in the reality of not just being out of prison and staying out, but also living productive lives now. One, who is now working with individuals on the margins and coming out of jail noted, as a summary of the comments about lives changed, “I know mine got changed big time and I know it’s not everybody. Some people will use you to the extreme, but it’s try, trying to reach them with the same message you received.” Another, who has been out about five years now noted about his last sentence and time following release, “I was determined before I even went in of following through. But they sure put up a lot of roadblocks. Never once did I hear ‘hey you are doing well.’ It was always ‘we know you are up to something; we’ll find out.’ I’m in a different group of people now with some that offered support. If it wasn’t for them, I don’t know what I would have done.”

All, with great humility, suggested a combination of inner personal resources, learned tools, and external supports often coming from individuals connected with spiritual programs and or the church with whom they connected while still inside or upon release as making a difference and they each expressed a yearning to see others helped. This demonstrated a great sense of hope for both themselves and others. This also indicated a connection between them and

God, faith, and members of faith communities offering and instilling a sense of hope or at times, restoring hope.

Each of the participants indicated having an early in life connection with a mainline Church, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant. These connections ranged from memories of attending church at least around Christmas and Easter with parents or grandmothers, to receiving a Gideon Bible in the fifth grade, through to ongoing regular attendance along with Baptism and Sunday School or Catechism. In some situations, these connections were long forgotten before incarceration, while for others there was ongoing and active church involvement at the time of sentencing. Either way, and whether inside prison or upon release, there was a hopefulness attached to these connections. One noted: "I stepped away from Church at about 12 years of age. But it never leaves you. God has a way of coming around and knocking on your door." And another said, "I rejected Him, but God kept knocking...I was beat up, busted, did time...and God kept knocking." A third offered, grinning, "It was hard being tested. I'd think 'I just became a Christian and now I'm inside and I'm not ready for all this yet'." And another, "I'm not sure if I'm a Christian but I believe in God and lots that's in the Bible and Psalm 91- I know it by heart- God is everywhere and protecting me and keeps showing up in my life all the time."

For another, hope was related to being welcomed by the church following release from prison. He said "I got an invitation from an alcoholic who was sober and going to church- a rough guy. I went in the doors of the church and thought what these people have is what I am looking for. An elder put her arms around me and gave me a hug and said I was welcome. I never forgot that. I found God there. And acceptance. And kept going."

For some, there was a sense of hope for how their own lives could still turn out and for those who were still in prison or released, and in both cases, whether in or out, still struggling.

The hope was based on a perception or a glimmer about what a little human help or support could do. Of himself, one noted “It’s like I need to be told where to go and how to get there almost. I know where I want to go- I know what my dreams are- but knowing how to get there seems so dark almost. I can’t see that far- you know what I mean? I could sure use some help.” Another said, “I’m not sure what support looks like but its hard to do alone- I think interdependence is the key.”

To this point about interdependence, and related to themselves and others still struggling, several talked about not pushing religion but simply the value of and hope about the offering of support. One said “Have contact. Come talk to me. Not about religion- not a hard sale about religion- come chat three to four times one on one, gradually build ground and you give me respect and you gain respect and the church gets respect- it’s a domino effect.” And another said “I think a lot of people would get involved if without having to commit to God. Like if they knew you helped everybody- where you don’t have to sign up- maybe the background is the church- but let them know you just want to help.”

Also, on a hopeful vein, one who felt he had received help from the church noted “I was in a bike gang creating chaos. Now I’m someone you can look up to. I’m not 100% but I’m on a completely different path. I just want others to be getting what I’ve gotten.” Another noted “Sometimes when things are falling apart, I turn to God and I pray. But things don’t fall in place right at that moment. That’s where I need the support of some humans- right?” The most hopeful comment was perhaps: “Really, if we just look after our fellow man, all the rest will take care of itself.” Or, the most hopeful comment, which related to a former inmates current relationship with the church, might have been “ its important to recognize that any one of us at any time

could really need the church and for someone to say ‘you and me and God will walk together through this.’”

Implications for the Church

Any time the Church can hear a diversity of voices about itself from inside and out, there is a potential for spiritual growth within individual church members and collectively, an opportunity to become more inclusive and welcoming of those who were perceived as different. I learned a great deal about the lives of individuals who have very similar backgrounds to some church members and their family members, with whom I interact. What I have learned has greatly enhanced my ability to sensitivity yet directly offer support. It also raises questions about whether there are former members of the church who have left because they were not offered accurate support when they or a loved one became an inmate or when returning to community. I feel I am better equipped to respond more accurately when opportunities like this arise. And finally, what I have learned puts me in a better position to interface accurately with those who do not have a church who may be seeking a spiritual community upon release from prison and a return to the community. I also believe that what I have learned will lead to developing prison and community ministry within my Parish, recognizing the value in contact, connection and relationship, as will be explored further in the conclusions section.

I also believe many of those who heard these stories at the public presentation, most of whom are affiliated with a church, gained a level of awareness about those in jail and those released from jail that they did not previously have. It is hoped they will pass on what they learned to others, and that I will have an opportunity to share this information more broadly within my own church connections. The implication for the church is a heightened interest from church members in various congregations toward prison ministry.

Related, with an interest in determining what former inmates themselves identify as helpful from the church, and the responses from those interviewed, those wishing to offer support will now be better equipped to make a meaningful difference within limited resources. This project is convincing in the value attached to simple indirect and direct human contact and relationship with individuals in prison and upon release.

Conclusions

As implied above, I have concluded that while there is a great deal of hopelessness and aloneness being experienced by many in prison and formerly imprisoned, there is even greater level of hope about what could be achieved by the offering of ongoing direct and indirect connections, contact and relationships. I started this project concerned about the amount of effort and resources that would be necessary to make a difference in the lives of former inmates. I am finishing the project convinced that within our existing limited human resources in the church, very small commitments of time, stretched over a period of time, could change the experience of hopelessness and aloneness that is felt by countless individuals in prison. Further, these commitments could hold over though the same inmates release and reintegration into community. The experience of many inmates could become that of knowing they matter, that someone cares; ultimately that God loves them. Individual letters, cards, phone calls and visits could instill a reason to look toward a future outside prison. Even indirect ongoing contact could be the difference of someone quickly going back to jail or developing a meaningful life in the community. This would seem consistent with the mandate given across scripture, from Matthew 25: 36b and 40, where Jesus speaks of our visiting those in prison, to Isaiah 61:1a which speaks of proclaiming release to prisoners, to Hebrews 13: 1 and 3 which speak of remembering those in

prison as though in prison with them.²⁰ As Christians we are to love those in prison and by implication also those returning to community from prison. This research has provided the direction about how best to do just that.

I have also concluded that this is an area where much further work could be done. There has been much written about regarding programs for inmates and programs for reintegration. Much of that has not been in Canada though, and I did not find much by way of hearing the voices of former inmates themselves. As well, this project has been focussed on men, and it is likely that a study directed toward interviews with women who are former inmates would reveal additional and unique considerations.

Even though coming from the American perspective, the literature I reviewed offers consistent messages to that which I heard from the former inmates themselves. Pastor Dr Lonnie McLeod says that many returning to community from prison or jail spent times in foster care and or juvenile justice systems or were raised in a single parent home or by grandparents as caregivers. He also acknowledges the reality of the trauma of incarceration itself, and that of transitioning back to community.²¹ Byron Johnson, while he does not describe the return to community in the language of hopelessness or aloneness, Johnson does acknowledge the realities of returning as including “difficulty finding and keeping jobs, still needing substance abuse treatment and other forms of mental health counselling, returning to disadvantaged communities and neighbourhoods where poverty and crime are especially concentrated.” Johnson also notes,

²⁰ Coogan, ed., *NSRV*, Matthew 25:36-40, Isaiah 61:1a, Hebrews 13:1,3.

²¹ McLeod, “A Holistic Approach to the trauma of Reentry”, 129-131.

about those returning to community that they, generally “lack the education, skills, or positive social supports to assist this difficult transition period.”²²

What is significant about that is these are two of the same authors who speak about the critical role the church can play with former inmates re-entering the community as was referenced earlier in this paper and described in more detail in the literature review attached. This brings me full circle to the point of the church playing a role and what that role can be most accurately.

From this project, the role or work that can be done more immediately and locally is that of canvassing individuals or groups who have an interest in the area and determining the path to indirect and direct connections with both current and former inmates. This would mean connections with prison chaplaincy as well as community chaplaincy. This is an area to which I believe I am being called and I look forward to pursuing it.

²² Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 200.

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Appendix A- Literature Review

Submitted December 5, 2019

We are all keenly aware that crime exists in our community. Crime is described to us in media headlines daily, whether local sensational incidents through updates about ongoing trials nationally and internationally to overviews of activities within correctional facilities affecting inmates or staff. As members of faith communities, we read scripture reminding us of the role expected for those who follow Jesus with respect to those imprisoned. What we hear little about, generally, is specifically how individuals incarcerated and or returning to community following incarceration could benefit from faith communities. This literature review addresses questions about the needs and realities of individuals returning to community from incarceration and therefore how they could benefit from faith community responses. This will include a review of models that have proven not to work well, along with newer ones showing promise, particularly where faith-based communities support has been carefully considered. This review also looks primarily at the American as well as the New Zealand experience in this area and over the past thirty or so years specifically. There has been much attention to this area of inquiry internationally. While there are certainly indicators of this being an area of interest locally, there appears to be little in the literature, even nationally, describing systemically what is being offered. Nor is there, locally or even nationally, much research, qualitative or quantitative, indicating results. This literature review is meant to be the foundation for phenomenological qualitative research planned in this area, by this writer.

Regarding traditional relationships between those who commit crime, their victims, the larger community, and faith communities specifically, restorative justice pioneer Kay Pranis, offers an American snapshot from the later part of the last century. Pranis suggests that for many

individuals, there is a cycle whereby one moves from crime to fear, withdrawal and isolation, then more crime, which leads to a weakening of community bonds. She also notes that along with the individual who commits crimes repeatedly, victims and community members are also caught in this downward spiral, with distrust among community members added to factors of fear and isolation.²³ Critiquing faith communities she adds “Offenders are deliberately cut off from community. Faith communities have stood by silently while the United States has inflicted...harm on those who have committed crime and has erected...barriers to the possibility of offenders earning their way back into the community.”²⁴

Pranis offers, as an alternative, that faith communities have the resources needed to do the moral work necessary to replace increasing anger and isolation with restorative processes offering both victim support and offender accountability.²⁵ Further, from her direct experience with individuals involved from the various vantage points with criminal justice matters in the decades before the turn of the century, Pranis adds “Faith communities are essential to any approach to restorative justice...” and she encourages faith communities ongoing continuing involvement while individuals are incarcerated, as this better ensures connections in the community upon release.²⁶ Pranis challenges faith-based communities to “Speak about the importance of redemption and the fundamental human dignity of every individual. Everyone needs opportunities to make amends for behaviors and to be accepted back into the community.”²⁷

²³ Kay Pranis, “From Vision To Action Some Principles Of Restorative Justice,” *Church & Society* 87, no. 4 (March-April 1997): 33.

²⁴ Pranis, “From Vision To Action,” 34.

²⁵ Pranis, “From Vision To Action,” 36.

²⁶ Pranis, “From Vision To Action,” 32.

²⁷ Pranis, “From Vision To Action,” 40.

Joshua Perry from Vanderbilt University, writing at the turn of this Century, adds to this description of the landscape regarding crime and punishment thinking in the United States by the later part of the twentieth century. He does so by quoting Howard Zehr's position that 'Offenders have violated the state's laws. They must be punished.' He calls this the rights approach to criminal justice, specifically "if laws have been violated, then somebody's rights have been infringed upon. Thus, in order to satisfy justice, curb future violations, and send a message of societal expectations, a fair and universal punishment must be administered." Like Pranis, he describes the reality that this process is not having the desired effect.²⁸

American ethics scholars Wonchul Shin and Elizabeth Bounds, writing nearly twenty years after Pranis, add more to the narrative of the marginalized person being at fault. They suggest there is a culture in America "of personal responsibility that assumes every individual actor freely chooses or causes their actions for which they are consequently morally or legally liable." They add that this notion of responsibility has been evident for some time in American policies around the poor and marginalized generally, and now in welfare and corrections policies too. This is offered as a possible explanation for how this translates into lack of programming, faith based or otherwise, for inmates on release. Further, they also offer the American Public's view that behaviour is chosen and is the result of bad character, and therefore "can never be altered."²⁹

Similar attitudes may prevail In Canada as well, as indicated by the current incarceration rates. Currently, in the mid 2010's 139 per one hundred thousand individuals are serving custody

²⁸ Joshua E. Perry, "Caring About Restorative Justice: A Reflection Upon The Ethics That Inform Criminal Justice Approaches In America," *Encounter* 61.1 (2000): 62.

²⁹ Wonchul Shin and Elizabeth M. Bonds, "Treating Moral Harm as Social Harm: Toward a Restorative Ethics of Christian Responsibility," *Journal of the Society of Cristian Ethics*, 37.2 (2017): 157.

in provincial and federal institutions on any given day. A full one quarter of those incarcerated are First Nations, although overall, First Nations people make up less than five percent of the Canadian population.³⁰ Looking at the social and ethical climate, and following through on the suggestions made by scholars in the field, would help prevent the outcomes currently presenting in the United States, where the numbers of those incarcerated alone have become staggering. Douglas A. Campbell from Duke University advises that as of 2018 “The U.S.A contains 4.4% of the world’s population but 22% of the worlds imprisoned population.” Further, he indicates that this figure does not include those on Parole or under the control of Homeland Security and adding these numbers would more than triple the overall incarcerated population. There has been a 400% increase in capacity of facilities dedicated to incarceration in the United States in less than forty years, with over 4500 facilities at present.³¹

Interestingly, Campbell also reminds us of the American reality that “We are now the only county with a primarily Christian past to actively practice the death penalty....with an enthusiasm in certain areas that outstrips that of any other county including Saudi Arabia, Iran, and North Korea. The state of Texas executes more people that any where else in the world.”³² As a further note regarding race in the equation, Campbell offers “Michelle Alexander’s famous statistic, there are now more African American men under state control than were enslaved at the beginning of the civil war.” Campbell adds that African-Americans are “incarcerated at...seven times the rate of whites. They also tend to receive longer sentences.”³³

³⁰ “Adult Correctional Statistics in Canada, 2015/2016.” Assessed October 7, 2019, <https://www150.stat.statcan.gc.ca/nl/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/14700-eng.htm>.

³¹ Douglas A. Campbell, “Mass Incarceration: Pauline Problems and Pauline Solutions,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and theology* 2018, Vol. 72(30) (2018): 282.

³² Campbell, “Mass Incarceration,” 182.

³³ Campbell, “Mass Incarceration,” 183.

Byron R. Johnson, a long recognized American authority on criminal justice, indicates that while it has always been difficult for ex-prisoners to transition back to society, the United States is now confronting the great numbers of prisoners leaving prisons and returning to American communities each year. Specifically, since the time Pranis was offering suggestions for a change to the model that was not working thirty years ago, Johnson advises in the same time frame there has been an increase in the American prison population of 482%. One of the results of this massive increase in less than thirty years of those entering the prison system is there are about two thousand inmates being released from prison each day in the United States, which Johnson suggests is a trend likely to continue indefinitely.³⁴

Further, while there have been many initiatives implemented to help with the successful transition into community for those being released from prison, including halfway houses, intensive supervision and community reintegration, many are not showing signs of the hoped-for results. One way of measuring success is through attention to recidivism. Johnson reports that “About two thirds of all offenders released from prison are rearrested within three years of their release.” These realities in the United States are now raising concerns described as “becoming a major threat to public safety.”³⁵ With respect to those directly being released from prison, Johnson indicates that many of them are involved in new crimes from days through months after release. He also describes the twelve times the death rate for those immediately following release compared to the general public, and the 129 times higher drug overdose death rate for former

³⁴ Byron R. Johnson, *More God, Less Crime Why Faith Matters and How it Could Matter More* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2011), 185.

³⁵ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 185.

prisoners compared to the comparable population. “Prisoner re-entry is a very dangerous time for both ex prisoners and the public at large.” Johnson offers in summary.³⁶

Turning to possible solutions, Johnson indicates that among his peers of correctional experts, most would agree that “any comprehensive re-entry strategy must include the following components: close community supervision, access to substance abuse treatment, mental health services, educational programs, vocational training, and job placement. All coordinated and well resourced.”³⁷ From his own perspective then he adds “While often overlooked...the role of religious volunteers, religious programs, and faith based organizations may be particularly consequential for ex prisoners facing so many difficult obstacles³⁸ More specifically and directly, similar to Pranis more than twenty years earlier, Johnson says “communities of faith have the potential to be powerful allies in confronting the re-entry crisis...any prisoner re-entry plan including only marginal rather than a central role for the faith factor cannot succeed.”³⁹

Johnson describes the success of three faith-based re-entry initiatives, from research that has followed their initiation saying “in terms of prisoner re-entry and aftercare, Ready4Work, the Prisoner Reentry program and Out4Life represent the most positive developments in the past two decades.” About Out4Life in particular, which is a program led by Prison Fellowship and has redirected volunteers from prison based to community re-entry initiatives, along with building bridges between faith based and government initiatives, Johnson says “By intentionally focussing on re-entry and aftercare by highlighting best practices, and supporting public/private as well as sacred/secular collaborations, Out4Life has the potential to represent a serious

³⁶ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 186.

³⁷ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 186.

³⁸ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 187.

³⁹ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 187.

paradigm shift for the field of corrections and our only hope for a viable and scalable solution.”⁴⁰

This is because, Johnson offers in summary, the range of challenges facing former inmates returning to community include “difficulty finding and keeping jobs, still needing substance abuse treatment and other forms of mental health counselling, returning to disadvantaged communities and neighbourhoods where poverty and crime are especially concentrated.” In addition to all that, these are individuals who, generally “lack the education, skills, or positive social supports to assist this difficult transition period.”⁴¹

The sheer numbers as well as difficult circumstances of those in the United States incarcerated, re-entering communities and attempting to build lives that included staying out of jail are daunting and initiatives like those noted above are still few in numbers. However, elsewhere in the global west, models that promote restoration to community and all the possible benefits that can go with the sort of options Prana and Johnson have been promoting since the later part of the last century, have been showing positive results for some time. For instance, there have been restorative justice initiatives underway in New Zealand for longer than thirty years. Christopher Marshall, an early leader in the field of restorative justice in New Zealand suggests that traditionally and initially in formalizing, this was and is a particular process “which includes the various parties affected by an incident of wrongdoing coming together in a safe, controlled and facilitated meeting to talk and ...resolve together how best to repair the harm and to prevent recurrence.” He further notes though, “for others the distinctiveness of restorative justice lies in its core values or its moral commitments.” In this regard, Marshall notes the values prioritized, including “healing and respect, democratic participation, accountability, truth telling,

⁴⁰ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 200.

⁴¹ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 200.

empathy, mutual care, reconciliation and peace making.” Further, with these values in mind, this overall model “seeks to deal with the full moral, spiritual, relational and emotional consequences of offending, not simply its legal description and punitive implications.”⁴² This offers a broad framework or model that faith-based programming in Canada could develop and offer.

These are also Johnson’s identified values and models being promote in the United States now. In recognizing the various aspects of everyone’s life: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual, he suggests the need for services that address the whole person.⁴³ Noting the spiritual dimension, he suggests attention to “the often-untapped resources of churches and other faith-based organizations.” He keenly promotes partnerships among secular and sacred groups as the way forward regarding holistic interventions that would be effective as well as both “replicable and scalable in communities across the country.”⁴⁴ He continues by suggesting that “congregations more than any other institution in America are volunteer-rich organizations able to leverage millions of talented people to feed these faith based efforts.”⁴⁵ On a very pragmatic note he adds “Religious people are more likely to volunteer, give to charities-both religious and secular- and to be civically engaged. ...the faith factor is undeniably important for the functioning of a healthy civil society.”⁴⁶

Looking from within the current American faith based or Church setting, social justice pioneer Pastor Dr Lonnie McLeod, in a book chapter published after his death, writes about the Churches needing a better understanding to better provide accurate services and supports. To that

⁴² Christopher D. Marshall, “Offending, Restoration, and the Law-Abiding Community: Restorative Justice in the New Testament and in the New Zealand Experience,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27, no. 2(2007):4.

⁴³ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 207.

⁴⁴ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 207.

⁴⁵ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 216.

⁴⁶ Johnson, *More God, Less Crime*, 204.

end, he says “many of the people returning from our prisons and jails have never truly participated as adults in what is “referred to as ‘society’.” Rather, he adds that many spent times in foster care and or juvenile justice systems or were raised in a single parent home or by grandparents as caregivers. As well, many have less than high school education and limited if any experience holding steady jobs. McLeod also talks about the reality for those leaving prison that both the trauma of incarceration itself, and transitional trauma leads to ”at its root, an overwhelming fear caused by circumstances that threaten an individuals’ sense of self esteem and security,” He suggests this trauma requires in response “real engagement by individuals and communities with a secure sense of self and support;” and therefore faith communities must be able to “assist at being present as places of understanding and support.”⁴⁷

Harold Dean Trulear, also looking at current American faith-based models for congregations responding to those involved in the criminal justice system asks “what would it look like if congregations began responding to incarceration in the same way we respond to hospitalization?” He answers the question with the ‘Healing Communities Model’. In discussing two very demographically different churches, he notes that both, “in order to truly minister to those impacted by crime and incarceration...must create a climate of acceptance, openness and honesty...where true reconciliation and redemption can occur.” He stresses the need such individuals must “share their experiences, struggles, strength and hope with the congregation both in public worship and in personal interaction.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Lonnie McLeod, “A Holistic Approach to the trauma of Reentry,” in *Ministry With Prisoners & Families The Way Forward*, ed. W. Wilson Goode Sr., Charles E. Lewis Jr., Harold Dean Trulear (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2011), 129-131.

⁴⁸ Harold Dean Trulear, “Changing Congregational Culture: The Healing Communities Model,” in *Ministry With Prisoners & Families The Way Forward*, ed. W. Wilson Goode Sr., Charles E. Lewis Jr., Harold Dean Trulear (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2011), 172-173.

Robert Lipton offers another healing or health care analogy regarding responses toward the marginalized more generally. With much of the charity provided by churches never reaching the intended individuals, Lipton argues that traditional strategies are not the best way to offer support and offers examples of how good intentions can create challenges and even negative results. Using the analogy of the Hippocratic Oath in medicine, he suggests a six-point oath for compassionate service which could be adapted to work with individuals returning to community from prison. His points in the oath are: “ never doing for, what they have or could have the capacity to do themselves; limiting one-way giving to emergency situations; striving to empower through employment, lending, investing, and using grants sparingly to reinforce achievements; subordinating self-interests to the needs of those being served; and above all, doing no harm.”⁴⁹

This literature review has relied heavily on other countries experiences as described through professionals, both scholars and pastors, engaged in the criminal justice field. There is little formally recorded about what and to what extent services are being offered and to what end locally and nationally. From elsewhere, there is significant endorsement for restorative justice work involving faith-based communities, congregations, churches and individuals on which to develop models. Lipton’s final other oath point is about “listening closely to those you seek to help, especially to what is not being said-unspoken feelings may contain essential clues to effective service.”⁵⁰ More importantly than asking local service providers, the next step seems to be one of now asking those leaving prison their opinion, which is the intent of the research which will follow.

⁴⁹ Robert D. Lipton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How To Reverse It)* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 128.

⁵⁰ Lipton, *Toxic Charity*, 128.

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Theological Essay

Submitted: December 5, 2019

Pope Benedict XVI once said *“Among the corporal works of mercy the Church has always listed the visit to prisoners. To be complete requires a full capacity for welcoming the inmates, making room for them in our own time, in our home, in our friendships, in our laws, in our cities.”*⁵¹

With a project whose title includes reference to Church and former inmates, it may not be surprising that choices would have to be made about which passages of scripture would be used in offering biblical and historical background. After all, the theme of crime, criminals, victims and responses to perceived criminal activity is found throughout Scripture. As well, Jesus offered narrative in both parables and discourses about prisoners and how they were to be treated. There has been much speculation about what Jesus was meaning or what the Gospel writers were trying to get across in what they attributed directly to Jesus. This has led, over the generations, to a great deal of consideration of the theological underpinnings of Christian experience and response with those in prison and upon their return to community. With an interest in exploring how the church today can most accurately respond to former inmates, this theological essay will explore what Scripture, what Jesus, and what recent Christian thinking generally says about prisons, inmates and former inmates and responses to those incarcerated.

As already noted, Scripture is chalked full of stories about and reference to crime, from the lives of perpetrators through the victims of crime. As well are stories about punitive punishment through to retribution, shame, forgiveness and or restoration in the community. What

⁵¹ Pope Benedict XVI, “Speech, Visit to Rebibbia Prison, Rome, December 18, 2011” in *For I Was in Prison, and You Visited Me*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2017), 57.

may come to mind from the history of Israel is the story of Tamar, raped by her stepbrother the son of King David and told to stay silent, only then to have her beloved brother kill the one who raped her.⁵² Of course the most well known story across both scriptures is that of Jesus' trial, determination of guilt and punishment of death by crucifixion.⁵³ From the early church we hear of Stephen, the first Martyr, who was put to death by stoning. This followed his being brought before the council and accused by false witnesses of speaking against the Law.⁵⁴ He was given the opportunity to speak to the charges, and in defending himself, Stephen gave a lengthy speech about the history of the people of Israel concluding with accusations against those trying him.⁵⁵ As a result, they took him outside the city and stoned him to death.⁵⁶

As another example of one also formally tried for accusations against the Law, and more than once, we can turn to Paul. At one point in his ministry, he and Silas together went before the magistrate and were stripped, beaten with rods and thrown in prison.⁵⁷ On that occasion they were released the next day, following an apology and being advised to leave the city.⁵⁸ Later, Paul was again called to account for his actions and spent more than two years in prison.⁵⁹ In that situation, there is reference that, although in custody, Paul would have some liberties including his friends taking care of him.⁶⁰

These may sound like arbitrary, harsh, even cruel methods of determining and metering out punishment. We might wonder whether there is any reasoning to the justice system, or

⁵² Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. NRSV* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2 Samuel:13.

⁵³ Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. NRSV*, Matthew:26-27, Mark:14-15, Luke:22-23, John:18-19.

⁵⁴ Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. NRSV*, Acts 6:8-15.

⁵⁵ Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. NRSV*, Acts 7:1-53.

⁵⁶ Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. NRSV*, Acts 7: 54-8:1a.

⁵⁷ Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. NRSV*, Acts 16:20-24.

⁵⁸ Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. NRSV*, Acts 16: 35-39.

⁵⁹ Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. NRSV*, Acts 24. `

⁶⁰ Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. NRSV*, Acts 24: 23.

perhaps more accurately legal system, with its range of punitive responses we read of in Scripture. It appears though, that the consequences of crime in what we now call the early Christian church all have roots going back to the early people of Israel and carefully defined within a sense of fairness and justice. There were, prior to and by Jesus' day, several main categories of crime outlined in various Jewish texts. This included killing, with a distinct determination for murder and manslaughter. It also included physical violence, and there was a listing in order of seriousness. There was behavior that went against the family or morality. These crimes were considered particularly scandalous as the family was the key societal unit. Also included as a category were property crimes, which included robbery, removing landmarks and using false weights.⁶¹ From the perspective of the Law, the worst crimes, and least pardonable "were crimes against religion." This would be considered rebellion against God and equated in today's terms to high treason. Over time, this began to include more and more categories, such as idolatry, the practice of magic, blasphemy and "vain use of the Holy Name...breaking the Sabbath...and failing to celebrate the Passover."⁶²

With respect to punishment, it was, in a word, harsh. For all crimes against religion the punishment was death. Adultery also could warrant a sentence of death, as could using false weights and a woman who married without admitting she was unchaste.⁶³ By the time of Jesus, the *lex talionis*, the ancient tribal law that we would know as 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' was technically still in place. These laws had been put in place to "limit the excess of revenge." Over time, it was only for "wilful murder or of wounding so grave that the man could

⁶¹ Henri Daniel-Rops, Patrick O'Brian, trans. *Daily Life In The Time Of Jesus* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1962), 200.

⁶² Daniel-Rops, Patrick O'Brian, trans. *Daily Life In The Time Of Jesus*, 201.

⁶³ Daniel-Rops, Patrick O'Brian, trans. *Daily Life In The Time Of Jesus*, 201.

never work again” that this literal retaliation would be applied.⁶⁴ There is some evidence that by the time of Jesus, the *lex talionis* was no longer in force, except technically, having slowly been replaced with money compensating for wrongdoing.⁶⁵ With respect to execution, the forms most used were stoning, burning, beheading and strangling. Scourging was also used, often a stand-alone punishment or at times part of the death penalty. Stoning was only a capital punishment, and as noted above with Stephen, was “inflicted by the whole community.”⁶⁶

With crimes against God as a host of other crimes leading to a sentence of death when the accused was found guilty, it is not surprising that decision makers would carefully review the evidence and consult with one another. As a result, “for the early Hebrews, the first prisons were there only to make sure that the accused did not escape.” It was some time before “imprisonment became a form of punishment... [and] meant a banishing, that included religious excommunication.”⁶⁷

It was into this context of harsh punishment, especially cruel for those found of crime against the Law, that Jesus’ teaching took place. He was clear in his coming not to abolish the law but fulfill it.⁶⁸ He was also explicit in his coaching about loving not just neighbor, but enemy as well,⁶⁹ and with his instruction about loving God with all ones heart, soul and mind, and neighbor as self, as “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”⁷⁰

For those who might not have understood clearly how this love was to be shown for one’s enemy, even those whose behavior might have been considered criminal, Jesus also offered

⁶⁴ Daniel-Rops, Patrick O’Brian, trans. *Daily Life In The Time Of Jesus*, 202.

⁶⁵ Daniel-Rops, Patrick O’Brian, trans. *Daily Life In The Time Of Jesus*, 202.

⁶⁶ Daniel-Rops, Patrick O’Brian, trans. *Daily Life In The Time Of Jesus*, 204-205.

⁶⁷ Daniel-Rops, Patrick O’Brian, trans. *Daily Life In The Time Of Jesus*, 204.

⁶⁸ Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. NRSV, Matthew 5:17*.

⁶⁹ Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. NRSV, Matthew 5:43-44*.

⁷⁰ Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. NRSV, Matthew 22:37-40*.

many parables. For example, Jesus offered the treasured parable of the prodigal son whose father not only forgives his repentant son upon his return, but restores him to the family and community, both practically and symbolically. The father gives the repentant son a robe, which covered his rags or nakedness and restored his dignity. He also gave him sandals to cover his bare feet, allowing him to work and be independent, and a family ring restoring him to his kinship and the rights and responsibilities that go with that.⁷¹

The most specific direction Jesus gives about love of all, including those in prison, comes in his description of the last judgment and who are the blessed who will inherit the kingdom. Along with reference to those giving him food when he was hungry, something to drink when he was thirsty, hospitality when he was a stranger, clothing when he was naked, and care when he was sick, Jesus includes “I was in prison and you visited me.”⁷² Not only does Jesus indicate the importance for eternal life inherent in visiting those in prison, he puts himself in the midst of those in prison saying further “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”⁷³

There are different schools of thought about the context of this message only found in the gospel of Matthew. There is indication, for instance, that Jesus was speaking about his disciples who had been given by him the mission and authority to go out and make disciples of others. As such, these disciples would need food, water, hospitality clothing, care and would be susceptible to hardship, persecution and even imprisonment. This offered a teaching for both the Jewish

⁷¹ Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. NRSV*, Luke 15: 11-24.

⁷² Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. NRSV*, Matthew 25: 31-37.

⁷³ Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. NRSV*, Luke 15: 40.

followers are well as the gentile converts regarding what it meant to be members of this movement.⁷⁴

Whether this was the intended immediate audience, the passage has been expanded over time to include, as a Christian imperative, the need to visit those in prison regardless of the circumstances that got them there. Pope Francis, for instance, very soon after his election as Pope in 2013, celebrated Mass at a juvenile detention center.⁷⁵ In doing so, he followed the tradition of Papal prison visitation from Benedict XVI, who is quoted at the start of this essay from a speech given at a prison in 2011. John Paul II, their immediate predecessor, said of the role of the Church in prison, during a Homily given during a prison visit in 1983:

“Who could not be ignorant of the beneficial influence that, in the course of the ages, the Gospel message has carried out by promoting a greater respect for the human dignity of the incarcerated, whose rights to equal treatment, open to the possibility of being integrated into society, were often thus so trampled underfoot. Much progress has been made in this field, but there remains much more to do. The Church, as the interpreter of the message of Christ, appreciates and encourages the efforts of those who spend themselves in order to make the prison system even more respectful of the rights and dignity of the person.”⁷⁶

The Roman Catholic Church is not the only tradition maintaining the Christian imperative toward visiting those in prison. From the Anglican Communion, Bishop Gene Robinson from the American Episcopal Church, reflecting on his time sharing the Eucharist in a woman’s prison close

⁷⁴ John Paul Heil, “The Season of Pentecost” in *New Proclamation Year A, 2002* ed. Marshall D. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002.), 181-183.

⁷⁵ Libreria Editrice Vaticana, *For I was in Prison and You Visited Me* (Washington, DC: United State Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2017), 1.

⁷⁶ St. John Paul II, “Holily, Visit to Rebibbia Prison, Rome, December 27, 1983” in *For I Was in Prison, and You Visited Me*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2017), 46.

to where he lives says “visiting those in prison is one of the few instructions he (Jesus) gave us.” Bishop Robinson adds, “Jesus reminds us that it is not those who merely call him Lord who are acceptable to God, but rather those who work for justice and do the will of God.”⁷⁷

From outside the specific theological arena, the contemporary social science field offers growing evidence of the value of one’s faith community in the lives of those involved with the now state managed justice system. American Christian criminalist and academic researcher Byron R. Johnson declares, “Based on an exhaustive and objective review of 272 studies comprising the religion and crime literature published between 1944 and 2010, there is overwhelming evidence of an inverse relationship between religion and crime...more God equals less crime.”⁷⁸ The theological explanation for these startling social science statistics may be clarified in the reasoning of Pope Francis who on reflecting about imprisonment says that it “cannot be viewed as an exclusion or as a way to distance the person who has erred from the community...if it was an exclusion the primary function of incarceration, namely the ‘effective reintegration into society’ would be lessened.”⁷⁹ It is not difficult to find comments from those who do offer faith based connections. A voice describing those in jail more than a half century ago, offering a seemingly universal message across time says:

“Convicts are people. They laugh—sometimes; they play jokes on each other; they quarrel; they think deeply while trying not to think at all; they become bored and restless; they help each other in trouble; their need for giving and receiving affection is intensified by sorrow, misery,

⁷⁷ Gene Robinson, *In the Eye of the Storm: Swept to the Center by God* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008), 105.

⁷⁸ Byron R. Johnson, *More God, Less Crime: Why Faith Matter and How It Could Matter More* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2011), 80-81.

⁷⁹ Pope Francis “Speech, July 10, 2015,” in *For I Was in Prison, and You Visited Me*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2017), 27-28.

loneliness—all inherent features of prison life. They live, if you call it living, in a choking atmosphere of abnormality and regimentation.”⁸⁰

Assuming the accuracy of the above assessment, as well as that of Church leaders and of social scientists, reintegration of former inmates into community is an important extension of the Christian imperative regarding those imprisoned. The focus of the research component of this project will be to canvas former inmates directly about their return to community, the assistance they need to do so successfully, and how they perceive the church as being able to offer such support. The appropriateness of asking those directly affected and working together as visitor and prisoner seems more apparent now as this essay has been prepared. Giving the last word to the current Pope who captured well this direction to all of us to work together, he said to a group of inmates “The challenge is social integration. And for this, you need an itinerary, a route, whether outside, in the prison, in society, whether inside oneself, in the conscious and in the heart.”⁸¹ I think he means, as Christ says, we need heart, which means love of God, self and neighbor.

⁸⁰ Walter G. Taylor, “Of Time and Crime” in *The Christian Century*, 64, no 1 (January 01, 1947):13.

⁸¹ Pope Francis, “Speech, Meeting with Detainees in the Local Prison, July 5, 2014.” in *For I Was in Prison, and You Visited Me*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2017), 31.

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Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. What was your time as an inmate like, as you look back now?
2. Do you recall what sort of things you were concerned about and wanted to have sorted before release?
3. Once released, how did or could the church have helped you get better established or established sooner?
4. What is your life like now for you?
5. If you were to imagine your best life situation going forward in the future, what would it look like?
6. And, what sorts of supports (church or otherwise) would help you get there?
7. A. Could you tell me about church attendance and/or a sense of your being spiritual prior to being incarcerated? B. While an inmate, what was chaplaincy and chapel like for you?
8. How did prior church experience or chaplaincy help prepare you for life following release?
9. What question did I not ask?

Appendix D: Informed Consent

I acknowledge that I have been given a description of the research project, “Who Is My Neighbour? The Church through The Eyes Of Former Inmates.” I am aware that my participation is strictly voluntary, and that I can end my participation in the project at any point in the process. I am aware that my participation is confidential. An audio recording of the interview will be made, and field notes may be taken. This recording along with the transcript of the interview and field notes will be destroyed following the completion of the research project. My name and any other personal identifiers will be changed in order to maintain confidentiality. This consent form will be stored separately from the research data in order to maintain confidentiality.

The Research Ethics Board of the Atlantic School of Theology has approved this project. Any ethical concerns about this project may be taken to this Research Ethics Board.

By signing below, I am consenting to participate in this research study.

Name and Signature of Participant and Date