

Towards a Missiological Approach to Carceral Ministry

Jonathan Cantarero*

Abstract

The United States criminal justice system impacts millions of people every day. There are over two million people incarcerated, over four million people in community supervision programs such as parole and probation, over one million victims of crime annually and millions more employed in law enforcement, court operations, corrections, legal services, and reentry programs.¹ Although Christians have long recognized the need to minister to these individuals, there has been little focus on developing what we might call a theology of carceral ministry.² In this paper, I discuss the potential for a missiological approach to carceral ministry grounded in the indigenous church principle. First, I overview the criminal justice system and current ministries within that system. Next, I outline the basic elements of the indigenous church principle. I then discuss the benefits of applying the indigenous church principle to carceral contexts. Finally, I conclude by noting some practical limitations of such a proposal.

Introduction

I am a former criminal prosecutor. I am also a Christian. Over the years I have reflected deeply on how the church should operate within the carceral context to build up those who have oftentimes been forgotten (prisoners), neglected (victims), and/or misunderstood (correctional staff) by society—indeed, even by the church. This paper represents, in part, the

* The author is the Co-Founder and Director of the Legal Navigator Program at La Cosecha Community Center in Hempstead, New York, a faith-based ministry that provides legal resources to the immigrant community on Long Island. The author also serves on the Board of Directors of the Central American Refugee Center, a non-profit providing direct legal services to immigrants on Long Island. The author previously served as a criminal prosecutor with the Manhattan District Attorney's Office and is current a MATS student at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary.

fruits of that reflection, and places a particular emphasis on practical steps that the church can take to bring about Christ-centered change within the criminal justice system.

The Criminal Justice System

In the United States, the criminal justice system operates at the federal, state, and local levels. At each level, the government is tasked with supervising individuals serving sentences for criminal offenses. The government exercises this role in two contexts: facilities (prison and jail) and communities (parole and probation).³ In this paper, I use the term “carceral ministry” to encompass all actors within the carceral community—not only those who are inmates and under community supervision, but also other actors in the criminal justice system, such as victims, correctional staff, and community partners.⁴

Carceral Ministry to Defendants

Defendants who are inmates in facilities have access to chaplains and support staff for spiritual formation and growth. While chaplains should be commended for their work, several practical limitations exist which hinder their effectiveness. First, chaplains are employees of the government, not the church. Indeed, chaplains are hired as part of the prison staff and are thus trained, first and foremost, as correctional workers.⁵ As such, chaplains naturally serve in competing roles as prison employees against being prisoner advocates. For example, while a chaplain may offer counseling to defendants under the privacy of clergy-penitent privilege, the chaplain may also feel compelled to disclose certain aspects of those conversations as employees of the prison, especially when a prisoner conveys the presence of an imminent risk of harm to themselves or others. Similarly, while chaplains may seek to develop trust and rapport with inmates, that confidence is often undercut by institutional policies, such as the requirement in some facilities for chaplains to carry pepper spray.⁶

Second, chaplains generally do not reflect the communities they serve. According to the most recent available data, the overwhelming majority of state prison chaplains are male (85%), white (70%), middle-aged (82%, 50 or older), and graduate degree holders (62%). Most inmates, in contrast, lack a college education (87.3%), are under 45 years old (68%),

and are only nominally majority white (57.9%).⁷ From the defendant's perspective, such stark demographic disparity engenders additional suspicion and reservation towards chaplains, further impeding any progress that defendants could make. From the chaplain's perspective, the question arises whether that person can meaningfully relate to the prison populations served.

Distinct from defendants in facilities, defendants in community programs enjoy relatively greater access to religious support than their counterparts in prison. Individuals on parole and probation are not limited to the chaplain staff who are employed by correctional institutions and are thus at liberty to attend churches, serve under pastors, and fellowship with communities of their choosing, all more easily. As one might suspect, those in community programs naturally gravitate towards churches in communities that reflect their own backgrounds. This does not mean that defendants in such programs are without obstacles or barriers to (re)establishing their faith; rather, it simply means that their accessibility to appropriately tailored religious support is greater than it is for inmates confined to prisons.

In addition to these traditional religious resources—chaplains on the inside and churches on the outside—a third group exists which perhaps provides the greatest source of spiritual support to both groups of defendants: volunteer faith-based organizations. In the age of mass incarceration where states have reduced or eliminated funding for job training and educational programs, volunteer faith-based prison ministries have grown exponentially throughout the country.⁸ Educational institutions such as the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, which has over twenty extension sites, offer college degrees in prison as well as a myriad of programs specialized in spiritual formation.⁹ Likewise, non-profit organizations such as Prison Fellowship, Kairos Prison Ministry, and Horizon Prison Initiative support not only prisoners but also their families, the correctional staff, and the victims of crime through ministry, counseling, education, job training, and re-entry services.¹⁰ As discussed further below, these programs are integral towards developing a holistic vision for carceral ministry.

Limitations on Religious Exercise

Notwithstanding the availability of religious support in and outside of prison, defendants seeking to exercise their faith within the criminal justice system must operate in a structure of controlled freedom. For inmates in facilities, federal and state laws generally prohibit government infringement on the exercise of religion. In 2005, for example, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that federal law prohibited an Ohio prison from imposing a “substantial burden on prisoners’ religious exercise,” unless the burden furthered a “compelling government interest.”¹¹ In 2015, the Supreme Court applied that precedent in determining that an Arkansas prison could not enforce a “grooming policy” that would prohibit a Muslim inmate from growing a one-half inch beard for religious reasons.¹² Yet, despite these protections, inmates still face severe restrictions in practicing their faith. For example, inmates must generally request and obtain approval to meet with a chaplain, secure religious books, wear religious clothing, and partake in a religious diet. Within the state jail system, a survey for over 700 chaplains reported that requests for religious texts are denied up to 17% of the time and requests to meet with faith leaders are denied up to 29% of the time.¹³ My purpose here is not to question the policy rationale behind these limitations but simply to shed light on the practical limitations inmates face to practicing their faith within the criminal justice system.

Defendants under community supervision face a distinct set of barriers in exercising their faith. Probation curfews are commonplace and can significantly limit one’s ability to attend church services, vigils, conferences, and retreats. Violent offenders in many states have limited access to the Internet, possessing an email address, and even cell phones, which may hinder their communication with a local church as well as their spiritual growth. Beyond those points, repeat offenders are frequently granted supervised release on the condition that they move away from the hometown that led them to a life of crime. This stipulation is particularly common in drug cases. While the purpose of this last requirement is to insulate defendants from the cycle of recidivism, it also runs the risk of closing them off from faith-based support that might be familiar to them. Consider the following standard parole condition in New York:

A releasee will not be in the company of or fraternize with any person he knows to have a criminal record or whom he knows to have been adjudicated a youthful offender except for accidental encounters in public places, work, school or in any other instance with the permission of his parole officer.¹⁴

Under this requirement, defendants who return to their hometown following a period of incarceration can have their parole revoked merely by contacting a childhood friend who also happens to have a criminal record. Worse yet, defendants might unwittingly violate parole by attending a church filled with other ex-offenders. Such stringent requirements effectively require parolees to relocate to avoid reincarceration and attended churches with no members of similar backgrounds. Again, the point here is not to question these regulations but simply to recognize the circumstances that defendants face because of their involvement with the criminal justice system.

Ministry to Other Actors

Up to this point we have focused exclusively on one actor within the criminal justice system: defendants. Indeed, access to chaplaincy services in prison is generally limited to defendants serving sentences. What this point means, however, is that analogous services are not commonly available to victims of crime, correctional staff, and community partners.¹⁵ This defendant-exclusive approach to chaplaincy within prison is problematic for several reasons. First, the approach closes off opportunities to incorporate faith-based restorative justice practices anchored in the biblical principles of forgiveness, redemption, and restoration, because such programs require the participation of other individuals in addition to the defendant. Second, the degree to which faith-based groups outside of prison are prepared and capable of dealing with the stress and trauma associated with one's involvement in the criminal justice system, particularly for victims of crime, remains an open question. Thus, victims of crime have much to gain from engaging in restorative justice programs that bring them in direct contact with those who have been accused, convicted, and sentenced for crimes. While this is certainly a challenging proposal, it is precisely for this reason that the church, guided by the Holy Spirit, must maintain a strong presence in the carceral context. As I will argue below, a missiological approach to carceral ministry

grounded in the indigenous church principle may serve as a launching point to address these concerns.

The Indigenous Church Principle

A missiological approach to carceral ministry makes sense given the strong connections between carceral ministry and traditional missions. In the traditional sense, both forms require the church to move from one place to another. Both require learning new customs, cultures, and traditions. Both have inherent risks and limitations. Both require contextualizing the gospel to meet the needs of the people being served. And both must be open to serving not merely one group but the entire community as well. In the same way that missionaries to the Middle East minister to both men and women, rich and poor, so too should carceral missionaries include defendants as well as other actors within the criminal justice system. And, just as missionaries to Latin America convey themes of hope and liberty in expressing the gospel, so too should carceral missionaries express the Gospel through similar themes of empowerment. The question remains, however, what missionary model best fits within this vision. While several models have significant merit, I argue that the indigenous church principle allows for a holistic approach to carceral ministry that fosters a space for authentic self-empowerment at the individual level as well as a collective harmony at the community level.

The indigenous church principle can be summarized by the three-self formula which calls on missionaries to establish churches that are self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting. This formula arose in the nineteenth century largely in reaction to the growing paternalism of Western missionaries existing and serving within non-Western or “indigenous” churches. During this period, Western missionaries largely mimicked the authoritative approaches of Western politics towards non-Western countries. For example, all too often Western missionaries would establish churches in non-Western countries only to install their own leaders, impose their own Western customs and practices, control all funding, and direct all administrative activities. Unsurprisingly, and as a direct result of this paternalism, newly established churches frequently fell into a cycle of dependence on

Westerners for leadership, direction, and money in ways that mirrored the political and economic dependence of foreign nations on Western superpowers.

In response to this Western paternalism, missionary pioneers such as Rufus Anderson, Henry Venn, and John Livingston Nevius called for a new missionary model that empowered rather than subjugated indigenous churches in the mission field. Anderson, for example, recognized that churches in the New Testament had their own leaders even in the early stages of the church-planting process.¹⁶ Viewing this New Testament paradigm as normative for the contemporary church, Anderson grew concerned with paternalistic leadership models in the mission field and sought to ensure that Western missionaries did not merely establish churches but also trained and installed indigenous leaders as well. Venn, in turn, focused largely on the importance of financial self-support.¹⁷ In that regard, he counseled Western missionaries to promote a spirit of self-responsibility and self-support in newly-established churches so that they too could become fully and confidently autonomous.¹⁸ Nevius developed the views of Anderson and Venn with what is commonly known as the “Nevius Plan.”¹⁹ For example, Nevius rejected the traditional model of using foreign funds at the beginning stages of a missionary endeavor, and instead stressed the importance of financial independence and self-reliance at the onset of each missionary project.²⁰

While the indigenous church principle, as embodied by the three-selves formula, grew primarily out of the Western missionary movement, it was eventually promoted and embraced everywhere from China and South Korea to Africa and Latin America.²¹ The indigenous church principle also crossed denominational lines, perhaps finding its strongest expression within the Pentecostal movement of the twentieth century. In 1921, Alice Luce, an Anglican-turned-Pentecostal missionary from Britain, wrote a three-part series for *Pentecostal Evangel* that explained the three self-formula through the lens of Paul’s missionary journeys.²² That same year, the General Counsel for the Assemblies of God—the largest Pentecostal denomination in the world—issued a missionary statement declaring that it would actively seek “to establish self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-governing native churches.”²³ Several decades later, Melvin Hodges, a Methodist-turned-Pentecostal from the United States, authored a series of influential books discussing the indigenous

church principle from a more robust theological perspective.²⁴ Unsurprisingly, with the tradition's shared emphasis on missions, Pentecostalism in general, alongside the Assemblies of God in particular, remain two of the fastest growing religious movements in the world today.²⁵

Hodges provides a useful rubric for understanding the three self-formula as well as the indigenous church principle. For Hodges, the element of self-government is the most important because it serves as the organizing principle for all three selfs.²⁶ In this regard, Hodges argues that local churches do not need foreign missionaries as pastors because locals should be fully capable of governing their congregations, spreading the gospel message, and controlling their financing. For Hodges, however, self-government extends beyond merely appointing officials, as it also means agreeing on fundamental beliefs, developing policies and procedures, and developing adequate plans for the departure of Western missionaries.²⁷ Next in importance is the concept of self-propagation. As Hodges explains in no uncertain terms, “[a] church that does not propagate itself will soon die.”²⁸ Here, the indigenous church is seen as the best medium for evangelism. This is because Hodges sees missionaries as essentially evangelists who bring the gospel to a new area. If the indigenous believers are truly regenerated, then they will not only have a passionate desire to share their faith, but also their neighbors will be more receptive to hearing the gospel from them as opposed to foreign missionaries. Ideally, this process will repeat itself until an entire region is evangelized. Finally, Hodges sees the third concept, self-supporting, as the means of accomplishing the prior two objectives.²⁹ In that regard, Hodges views self-supporting churches as a concept that is firmly rooted in Scripture. The New Testament paints a picture of all believers tithing, with none being too poor to participate. Examples abound, from the generosity of the Church in Philippi (2 Cor. 8:2–3) to the flexible standard of the Church in Antioch, where everyone gave according to their means (Acts 11:31). In short, an authentically indigenous church should be able to support itself financially, without the aid of an outside missionary enterprise.

Discussion

Modern approaches to prison ministry—a concept that is narrower in scope than carceral ministry—primarily address chaplain ministry towards the prison population. Within these parameters, prison ministry generally operates within two frameworks. First, some view prison ministry as essentially an application of liberation theology.³⁰ As prison chaplain Dennis W. Pierce explains,

Liberation theologies offer liberation from the dependence system that was established during the centuries of Spanish rule and North American economic dominance. The dependence system is considered by liberation theology to be economically, politically, and culturally repressive. [Liberation theology] is designed to move the poor and oppressed out of their dependency model.³¹

Pierce extends this liberative theology in his own work with the prison population through five basic themes: (1) God liberates, (2) God loves, (3) God does justice, (4) God makes a covenant, and (5) Christ is our neighbor.³² Each of these themes support the overarching goal of liberating the prisoner from the oppressive nature of the criminal justice system. Notably, when Pierce speaks of “justice,” he is referring to justice primarily for the prisoner.³³

A second view sees prison ministry through the lens of restorative justice. Howard Zehr, the father of the modern restorative justice movement in the United States, argues that the biblical picture of justice focuses not on retribution as historically understood, but on restoration through the concept of *shalom*. For Zehr, the question of whether the Bible promotes restoration or retribution is not a small issue but goes to the very heart of the nature of God.³⁴ As prison minister Joanna Hemingway explains, basic to the principle of *shalom* is the concept of “making things right for all involved,” which, in her view, offers the best hope for addressing sin and transforming the criminal justice system.³⁵ Hemenway builds on Zehr’s work and frames her theology of prison ministry as holistic ministry grounded in the principles of restorative justice.

Restorative justice considers the needs of the crime victims, it considers the accountability of the offender, the harm he or she has inflicted as well as the harm he or she may have suffered as a result of his or her own past victimization; and it considers the impact the offense has had on the community as well as the social,

economic, and political aspects within the community that may have contributed to the offense.³⁶

Against this background, Hemenway offers three restorative models of prison ministry: (1) churches partnering with prison education programs, which seek to spiritually nourish and empower the prison population (2) alternatives to violence programs, which seek to reduce violence within prisons, and (3) advocacy, which then gives the voice back to the prison population outside of the prison walls.³⁷ Yet, notably absent from Hemenway's approach is any direct ministry to the victims of crime or other actors within the criminal justice system.

While both models of prison ministry are commendable, they each fall short of fully empowering all the actors within the criminal justice system. For example, the liberative model addresses the needs of only the prisoner, while the restorative justice model operates only within the prison system. A broader model, which I call carceral ministry, should not only meet the needs of all actors within the criminal justice system—defendants, victims, government actors, and community program providers—but also meet them at different stages within the criminal justice process—pre-trial, corrections, and post-release. Viewing carceral ministry from this perspective allows the church to reach more people at different stages of their points of contact with the criminal justice system. In the process, carceral ministry becomes a practice that is preventative, restorative, and holistic in nature.

Pre-Trial Carceral Ministry

A missiological approach to carceral ministry must be holistic in the sense of meeting people at different stages of the criminal justice process. The mission statement of Kairos Prison Ministry summarizes this goal well, in that it seeks, “to bring Christ’s love and forgiveness to all incarcerated individuals, their families, and those who work with them, and to assist in the transition to becoming a productive citizen.”³⁸

Examples of carceral ministry at the pre-trial stage include faith-based restorative justice services that function as alternatives to incarceration.³⁹ Over the past 30 years, there has been an explosion of restorative justice programs operating at the pre-trial stages of criminal cases.⁴⁰ In one model, often called “victim-offender mediation,” the defendant and

victim meet with a therapist. Here, the victim and defendant can express themselves in a safe space: the defendant can learn about the impact of the crime, such as physical injuries and psychological trauma, and the victim can learn about societal factors, such as poverty and addiction, that may have led to the criminal activity. In another model, organizations provide mentoring services for at-risk youth. BronxConnect, for example, has Christian mentors from over 25 Bronx churches serving over 150 youth each year.⁴¹ Groups like BronxConnect are oftentimes the only faith-based alternative-to-incarceration programs serving their communities.⁴² That being the case, these types of pre-trial programs provide powerful and unique opportunities for the church to witness to at-risk communities in new and creative ways.

A missiological approach to pre-trial carceral ministry must also apply the indigenous church principles of self-government, self-propagation, and self-support. In terms of self-government, these programs should be operated and staffed with believing ex-offenders who can provide both spiritual and vocational counseling to help others address the circumstances that led them to interact with the criminal justice system. This approach mirrors the method of substance abuse programs, such as the faith-based program Teen Challenge, wherein former drug users serve as counselors for those seeking to break the cycle of addiction. For self-propagation, these programs must evangelize not only by communicating the gospel message to those sent to their programs, but also these programs establish new locations, reaching out to new at-risk populations and developing new relationships with stakeholders. Not only does this approach allow the church to share the gospel in areas of particularly high need, but it also enables the church to build up future ministers and staff members from the same communities being served. The self-sustaining principle is perhaps the most difficult of the three selfs to apply at this stage. Generally, pre-trial programs do not charge fees to the populations they serve since doing so would undercut the mission of the program. As an alternative, these programs should function as extensions of the churches they are affiliated with, and, in that sense, become self-sustaining. In that regard, carceral pre-trial ministry should not seek funding from the government or other outside sources since doing so may lead to complicated relationships with funders that oftentimes undercut the gospel-centered vision of these faith-based programs.

Carceral Ministry within Prison

For defendants who are not reached at the pre-trial stage, a missiological approach to carceral ministry calls for a robust and systemic approach within prison. While most forms of carceral ministry take place within prison, the prison setting nonetheless provides the largest terrain for improvement. For example, whereas prosecutorial offices and law enforcement agencies may be reluctant to partner with faith-based organizations at the pre-trial stage—given the separation of church and state—there is already a well-established history of partnership between prison facilities and faith-based organizations in the United States. These faith-based prison partnerships have only grown over the years with the decrease in government funding for traditional prison programs.⁴³ Therefore, governments are looking to the church to fill more practical needs that open doors to filling spiritual nourishment within the lives of defendants inside prison walls.

With respect to self-government within prison, carceral ministry means empowering actors within the criminal justice system in permanent and meaningful ways. For prisoners this intention means not merely enabling them to receive a theology degree while incarcerated but also allowing them to become ministers, chaplains, and even missionaries. At the Louisiana State Penitentiary, also known as “Angola,” there are presently around 30 inmates serving as missionaries to other Louisiana prisons.⁴⁴ Allowing prisoners to serve as missionaries and chaplains enables them to govern themselves as a truly indigenous church. Such missionary operations depend wholly on government officials granting authority and privileges to the missionaries. At the same time, we as the church should not see this pursuit as too distinct from modern cross-cultural missionary movements, in which missionaries oftentimes depend on government support to carry out programs and projects. In addition to these elevated roles for prisoners, correctional staff should also form part of the prison church to foster an atmosphere of authentic community. In a similar way, faith-based restorative justice programs within prison—in which defendants meet with their victims and other community partners—can be a mutually beneficial process, which may later serve as a foundation for early parole. In other words, a holistic approach would encourage all actors in the criminal justice system to participate in the prison church community to encourage in providing a more authentic spiritual experience.

With respect to self-propagation within prison, carceral ministry places an emphasis on evangelism that begins and ends with the prison population. Thus, all religious programming, whether theological education, restorative justice counseling, or traditional worship, must be anchored in the larger mission of sharing the gospel. With respect to self-sustenance, carceral ministry advocates for prison wages that go beyond the meager cents-on-the-dollar approach we also see today. Significantly, while carceral ministries have historically relied on outside support, that dependence has been largely attributed due to how prisoners do not presently earn a sufficient income to support those programs independently, and because other actors, such as correctional staff and community partners, have not been viewed as part of the prison church community. At the same time, we must be mindful of the biblical examples of church members simply giving according to their means (e.g., Acts 11:31). Thus, perhaps a true form of carceral ministry requires us to reexamine whether we can reduce the cost of current faith-based programs in prison to foster a self-sustaining atmosphere. Moreover, perhaps this point of analysis requires a reexamination of whether the prison church should move beyond the prison walls to include family members and friends outside of prison. In that regard, we would do well to consider Kairos' goal of bringing "Christ's love and forgiveness to all incarcerated individuals, their families, and those who work with them."⁴⁵

Post-Release Carceral Ministry

A missiological approach to carceral ministry at the post-release stage must empower all actors within the criminal justice system in holistic ways. Although the term "post-release" applies mainly to prisoners released from prison, there thus remains opportunities for authentic collaboration with other actors. For example, correctional staff and community partners should be actively involved in faith-based re-entry programs that begin in prison. Once the prison church model is embraced as a collaboration of all actors within the criminal justice system, this type of involvement by non-defendants should occur organically. Indeed, correctional workers should feel invested in the empowerment and success of defendants, viewing them not merely as prisoners but as their brothers and sisters in Christ. Outside of prison, defendants, victims of crime, correctional workers, community partners, and faith-

based organizations should encourage the establishment of “prison churches” where they can serve in positions of leadership and unapologetically embrace the carceral community as part of the body of Christ. Such church communities should then position themselves at the forefront of faith-based re-entry efforts, which would then be staffed with employees that truly reflect the communities they serve. This model creates a system in which believers both on the inside and outside of the prison walls work together for the mutual building up of the Church.

Conclusion

It is not difficult to anticipate objections to the missiological approach to carceral ministry. First, some might argue that the view of defendants, correctional staff, and victims working together is idealistic and unrealistic for the church. However, there are already analogous collaborative approaches operating in the secular context. Inside Criminal Justice, for example, is a program that involves defendants from Queensboro Correctional Facility and prosecutors from the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office.⁴⁶ The seminar encourages in-depth and respectful conversations about the criminal justice system and collaboration through the presentation of jointly authored policy proposals. In short, if defendants can work together with those who prosecuted their cases in a wholly secular context, how much more can defendants, victims, and other actors of the criminal justice system develop a sense of spiritual community when they share the same faith in Jesus Christ?

A second possible objection might be that the self-sustaining aspect of carceral ministry is untenable. It is true that the prison church generally depends on outsiders for financial support. However, meeting that need should only encourage us to push for advocacy measures that enable and empower defendants to become ministers and missionaries within prison, receive better wages for their labor, and obtain greater access to religious resources. In short, the church is already present in and outside of prison. A missiological approach to carceral ministry simply seeks to expand that vision to include all actors within the criminal justice system at all stages of the criminal justice process. By doing so we can embrace a truly holistic approach to carceral ministry that empowers the entire church community.

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2 Sadie Cantone Pounder, “Prison Theology: A Theology of Liberation, Hope and Justice,” *Di* 47.3 (2008): 279.

3 Prison refers to facilities holding defendants convicted of serious offenses, whereas jails refer to facilities holding defendants awaiting trial or serving sentencing for minor offenses. This paper uses the term “prison” for both groups.

4 The inspiration for this term comes from Sarah Jobe, “Carceral Hermeneutics: Discovering the Bible in Prison and Prison in the Bible,” *Religions* 10.2 (2019): <https://doi.org/10.3390/re110020101>.

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