

Spirituality, Religion and What Works

Spirituality, Religion and What Works: Religious Outcomes This Side of Heaven

Introduction: Spirituality, Religion and "What Works"

This paper is about the interplay between spirituality, religious programming and the "what works" research movement in corrections. The question that dominates interest in every correctional program is "does it work"? Because we live in a world of performance-based budgeting and outcomes, when we ask whether a correctional program works, we mean something like does it reduce recidivism or does it reduce infractions in prison, and does it reduce costs? In this paper we will examine how two different Departments of Corrections, one in South Carolina and the other in Oregon, assisted by the Center for Social Research, have integrated religious programming and spirituality into a research framework that considers program outcomes. In an era when some state correctional systems have already chosen to and some are contemplating the elimination of their prison chaplains, it is important for correctional religious services to be able to document their successes and evaluate their ministries. The search for "what works" has turned many minds toward spirituality and/or religion. "Spirituality" usually describes a personal or individual sense of connectedness to other people, to a "higher power", and to some overall sense of meaning in the world and history. "Religion" on the other hand tends to refer more to an organized effort by a specific synagogue, church, mosque, or temple tradition to live out its particular understanding of a group or shared relationship to God which is scripturally based. While it is possible to discuss spirituality and religion separately our approach links both concepts, because, for most people, religion without a deep personal spirituality is ultimately barren and spirituality without a connection to some religious tradition and community is too lonely and uninformed.

Does spirituality and/or religion in a correctional setting help in the rehabilitation process of offenders and ex-offenders? We shall approach the answer to this question in four steps. First, what do religion and spirituality look like in prison? Second, do religion and spirituality "work"? Third, if they work, why or how do they work? In addition to a description of the program, the evidence to show that it works, and the theory to explain why it works, we pose a fourth question about the quality and authenticity of religious programming. Some programs that work can also be poorly implemented. So we need a way to guard against programs that work but whose implementation is so inadequate as to render them ineffective. Religious programs like all other programs must reach a certain level of quality. We will use examples from the South Carolina Department of Corrections to explicate our answers to the first three questions. Then we shall turn to the Oregon Department of Corrections to see its systematic approach to ensuring the quality of its religious services.

I. What Do Spirituality and Religious Programming Look Like in Prison?

Lieber Correctional Institution is a large medium/maximum security prison for men in South Carolina. A joint project between the South Carolina Department of Corrections (SCDC), Prison Fellowship Ministries, and the Center for Social Research has been studying religious programming and spirituality in Lieber. The study has found that over the course of one year, almost 50% of the inmates attend at least one religious service or program (779 out of 1,597). This level of religious attendance is high; a nationwide study found that about 32% of state inmates were involved in religious programming. On average, those who went to religious services in Lieber went to about 6 meetings every month. In all there were 23 different kinds of religious services or programs operating in the prison. Amazingly, there were more than two religious meetings every single day of the year (a total of 869 meetings). The spiritual implications of this religious activity can be discerned in a comment from Shawn, one of the inmates at Lieber - "I guess when I was out in the worldI was raised where I went to church, was in the church. The difference is out there I didn't have the time to stop, think, study, get a chance to know who Jesus was, and what He was about. Whereas back here you got nothing but time." The type of spiritual reflection taking place here seems to be about personal transformation or spirituality and not just religious attendance.

The religious activities at Lieber were made possible through the services of two full-time prison chaplains, four inmate clerks to the chaplains, several inmate religious leaders, and approximately 232 volunteers from the community. The 232 volunteers donated about 21,316 hours of work to the prison: the equivalent of 10.2 full-time paid positions. This combined religious services "staff" provided services for all religious persuasions including Protestants (many denominations), Muslims, Catholics, Jehovah Witnesses, Hindus, and spiritually-oriented twelve-step groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. The estimated yearly cost of these religious services could be considered a bargain at about \$150 to \$250 per inmate served. In contrast, Joan Petersilia estimates that programs that work to reduce infractions and recidivism, cost about \$14,000 per inmate per year.

Religious and spiritual involvement in prison is extremely varied and extensive, and it costs very little.

II. Do Spirituality and Religious Programming Work in Prison?

To examine whether or not these programs worked in Lieber we compared the religiously involved inmates to the non-religiously involved inmates and found no differences between the two groups on race, marital status, having children, having drug/alcohol problems and employment before prison, and number of prior sexual and violent offences. Religiously involved inmates, however, were slightly younger, more educated, were more likely to have suffered physical/sexual abuse and have a current sexual conviction, and they had more prior convictions. Controlling for all these differences, and other important variables like seriousness and type of crime, the study found that as the rate of attendance at religious programs increased the incidence of infractions decreased. The more a person attended Prison Fellowship and other religious programs, the less likely he was to have an infraction. For example, 21% of inmates with none or a low level of religious involvement had an infraction compared to 11% of inmates with a medium or high level of involvement. We are currently doing a study of the released members of the two groups to see if the same pattern exists in terms of recidivism.

There have been three other studies on this topic which did not find a relationship between religion and infractions. However, a similar kind of positive relationship between personal religiosity and infractions was found in a study by Todd Clear and his colleagues. The Clear study looked at self-report religiosity among 769 men in 20 prisons across 12 states in the U.S. The study found that religiosity was associated with fewer infractions controlling for other factors like age and number of priors.

What about religion and recidivism? To date, the Center for Social Research has been involved with at least three studies on religion and recidivism. The first study found that a group of federal inmates who had taken part in a Prison Fellowship program had a significantly lower rate of recidivism (40%) than the rate of recidivism (51%) for a matched control group of federal inmates up to fourteen years after release. The religiously involved women in this study did particularly well. The second study found no overall difference between a group of religiously involved inmates and a carefully matched comparison group in New York, but did find some evidence to suggest that the highly involved religious inmates were doing better than those who were not involved or involved at a low level. The third study found that a group of inmates in Sing Sing prison who had taken part in an intensive religious education program run by the New York Theological Seminary (NYTS) to prepare them for prison ministry had a 9% rate of recidivism compared to a 37% rate for a comparison group after twenty eight months of release. The inter-personal or spiritual nature of the Sing Sing program is reflected in the following quote from one of the alumni: "I have good memories of the 1987-1988 class and realize it was a great turning point in my rehabilitation.... The year at NYTS was very important to me to not lose faith and that I could and would be redeemed from that sin of the past. The faculty were important in this development. Here I was a student - a person - and not just a convict. This is very important."

Together these studies add up to encouraging evidence to suggest that religious programming "works" in that it is associated with lower levels of in-prison infractions and recidivism. Like most correctional studies, however, these studies have various methodological limitations that prevent us from demonstrating conclusively that religious programming causes reduced infractions or recidivism. Our research is not yet at that level of precision. This is a new field of study in corrections, and it will take a while to build up a body of literature that is more conclusive in its findings. Forthcoming studies, like our study on recidivism among the Lieber inmates and planned research in Oregon, promise more definitive findings. In summary, the scientific evidence suggests that there are religious program outcomes this side of heaven. When controlling for demographics and risk of recidivism, religiously involved inmates, especially those who are involved at a substantial level, seem to have fewer in-prison infractions and lower rates of recidivism than non-religiously involved inmates.

III. How Do Spirituality and Religious Programming Work in Prison?

In our opinion authentic religion has spirituality as its core. Saint Paul gives us a theological way of understanding spirituality - that sense of personal connectedness or belonging with other people, a higher power, and the world - in his letter to the Romans where he says "The love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rm:5:5)." This passage, like similar passages from other Holy Scriptures, basically informs us that we are spiritual beings and suggests that our spiritual nature must be integrated with our physical, emotional, and intellectual natures.

When people in prison get involved in religious services and begin to lead a richer spiritual life along with their physical, emotional, and intellectual life then they have more inner resources available to them. Because spirituality is essentially about love and connectedness a person who is spiritually alive will be less likely to hurt other people or to do wrong. One inmate at Lieber involved in religious programming put it this way: "Before it was all me. Now I know life is also about relationships. I have to think of others and God. If you're serious about God, you have to take on the nature of God, and God cares about other people too." Another inmate who was not religiously involved insisted that "life is dog eat dog" and went on to say "I will do anything I have to - lie, cheat, steal, - to stay out of here when I get out." Religious involvement can free up a part of who we are, and these inner resources can lead to changed attitudes and behaviors.

The life experience and skills of the chaplains and volunteers also contribute greatly to bringing about this change from "before it was all me" to "now I know life is also about relationships." A national study found that 79% of prison chaplains had a Masters degree or higher. In addition, they have an average of 10 years of experience and passionately support a philosophy of rehabilitation. The chaplains spend most of their time counseling inmates and use methods of counseling that treatment studies have found to be effective in reducing recidivism. Thus, chaplains are highly-skilled advocates for inmates. Moreover, not only do the chaplains have a great deal to offer to inmates but they are responsible for coordinating the work of the thousands of religiously motivated volunteers who work in prisons.

In South Carolina we studied 82 ministry volunteers and found they were moved to work in the prison system by two major motivations: 1) to act on their faith; and 2) to make a difference. When we compared these volunteers to the general population of the Southeast region, we found that the volunteers had the same gender and ethnicity demographics as the general population, but tended to be older. The volunteers were also more involved with the major social institutions of life. For example, the volunteers earned more than the general population, were more likely to be married (80% versus 54%), had more education (57% versus 23% had some college education), were more involved in politics (86% voted versus 64%), and 90% of the volunteers compared to 30% of the general population went to church once a week or more.

These volunteers were a group of people who had learned how to successfully negotiate the worlds of work, family, education, politics, and religion. In contrast, offenders tend to have trouble negotiating these areas of life, and we know that problems in these areas are predictive of crime and recidivism. One inmate explained that religious volunteers-some of whom were successful ex-offenders-provided him with hope by their example of overcoming adversity:

I have to come to my own place of healing...I've seen myself do some things, or think some things, or say some things, or act in a manner that I know was inappropriate. And still it makes me unhappy. And so, the question still comes to me, why did I do that? So what do they [the volunteers] do? The hope, the hope says that these people [the volunteers] have changed their lives, and if they can do that so can I.

The chaplains and volunteers are a tremendous resource as role models and teachers of the very skills and lifestyles that many offenders lack but desire. The learning that takes place between the chaplains, volunteers and offenders in each area of life, not only in the religious, helps reduce recidivism. Awakening the religious or spiritual domain in a person brings additional hope, encouragement, and resources for addressing the domains of work, family, education, and politics.

IV. How Do We Ensure Quality in Religious Programs?

As with all programming in corrections there is a need for some way of ensuring and measuring both the performance and the quality of religious programming. For three years the entire religious services division of the Oregon Department of Corrections (ODOC) assisted by the Center for Social Research has been engaged in a major review of its pastoral mission with a view to enhancing its quality and enabling the documentation of its impact. This teamwork resulted in a new mission statement and ministry plan for religious services within ODOC. The plan seeks to ensure quality and provide a foundation for a substantial and ongoing research project on the effectiveness of religious services. The mission statement incorporates both spiritual and rehabilitative goals.

The mission of the Religious Services Division is to provide a spiritual environment within the Oregon Department of Corrections that will model, promote, and encourage individuals to develop spiritually toward a redemptive and rehabilitative end.

To achieve this mission the chaplains and staff of religious services have identified five priority areas or goals, each of which have several measurable performance objectives attached to them.

1. Community: To create a stronger community of believers among the staff of Religious Services.
2. Pastoral Management: To enhance our administration of Religious Services.
3. Inmates: To awaken and/or deepen the spiritual well-being of the inmates we serve from intake through re-entry into the community.
4. Volunteers: To foster a respected and recognized volunteer community of appropriate size and quality that is capable of ministering to the spiritual, redemptive, and rehabilitative needs of the people we serve.
5. Ethics & Religion: To help make relationships and procedures within the Department more ethical and compassionate.

The first objective of creating a stronger community of believers among the staff of religious services provides a necessary condition of authenticity for the success of religious services. During the three year team process of developing the new mission statement and plan the religious services staff became more courageous, open, honest, and supportive with each other around the day to day difficulties, pains, successes and failures of their ministries. The chaplains realized that the more successfully they could provide a model for the difficult task of working together in a caring community among themselves, the more effective and authentic their ministry to inmates would be. Thus, to foster community and health, the chaplains included personal rejuvenating time in their plan and activities to increase mutual support.

At first sight the second goal of enhancing the administration of religious services has little to do with

whether or not religion and spirituality work in prisons. But the administrative skills of the chaplains who must pastor and co-ordinate the large numbers of volunteers, religious programs and inmates that we saw in the Lieber study, are crucial to programs success. To test and guide the development of the management skills of the Oregon prison chaplains we administered a "time mastery profile" to all of the chaplains. Using this instrument, which assesses a person's management skills and helps him or her to develop them, the Oregon chaplains successfully improved (tested again after six months) most of their management abilities.

The third objective -- to awaken and/or deepen the spiritual and religious well-being of the inmates we serve from intake through re-entry into the community - is perhaps the most crucial one. The Oregon Department of Corrections is in the process of creating an "incarceration plan" with specific objectives for every inmate who comes into the system. This plan will guide an inmate in the process of developing the particular skills and attitudes he or she will need to be successful upon their release. For those inmates who wish it, this incarceration plan will include a spiritual and religious component. The fourth objective concerns the quality and standing of the religious volunteers within the ODOC. Training of and measuring the quality of volunteers in terms of their counseling and ministry skills will be given greater priority under this objective. The fifth objective -- to make relationships and procedures within the Department more ethical and compassionate - seeks to increase the specific moral and spiritual role of the chaplains as the schooled voice of conscience within the Department. To document progress and refine quality in its entire ministry, religious services is developing an elaborate information tracking system. The challenge over the coming years is to set up a system of measurement that will enable religious services to answer questions about each of its five priority areas. For example, can you tell us if and how you were able to awaken and/or deepen the spiritual and religious well-being of those you served and did this deepening translate into a reduction in recidivism? As some of the first empirical studies in the developing U.S. penal system in the early 1800's were done by chaplains, it is exciting to see that states like Oregon and South Carolina are continuing that tradition in ways that promise to yield cumulative and progressive results over time.

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