Transforming Rehabilitation:

Can faith-communities help to reduce reoffending?

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In 2001 George Bush Jr. was elected president of the United States. With him came the domestic policy of 'compassionate conservatism'. Key to this policy was the creation of new federal funding structures that allowed competition for government contracts to run social services. The idea was to strengthen the capacities of local faith-based and community organisations considered well placed to meet the needs of local people. In England and Wales we are currently undergoing the coalition government's criminal justice reforms that are hoping to 'transform rehabilitation'. These reforms have instigated the breakup of the National Probation Service and the creation of 'Community Rehabilitation Companies' (CRC's or 'tier 1 providers'). These companies will aim to reduce reoffending and be paid on results. They will work through a supply chain of smaller charities and enterprises (tier 2 providers), who in turn will rely on local faith-based and community organisations (tier 3 providers). Thus we are heading into a new era for England and Wales in which the funding structures for criminal justice will depend upon the capacities of local faith-based and community organisations to meet the needs of local people. Sound familiar?

This article returns to the USA under George Bush's presidency. First, it outlines the special appeal of faith-based interventions in a market economy model of criminal justice provision and relates this to existing research on why and how faith-communities could play an important role in ex-prisoner reentry and desistance. It then describes the role that faith-communities played in life post-release for 48 ex-prisoners who participated in a faith-based programme pre-release. It presents their experiences of joining, participating in and sometimes leaving faith-communities. It describes how faith-communities had opportunities to engage with ex-prisoners and draws on sociological literature to consider the nature of community on offer. It looks at the barriers to ex-prisoners' involvement in faith communities and the steps some faith-communities took to overcome these barriers. Finally it outlines how the faith-communities that were most successful in coming alongside ex-prisoners were not those that prioritised individual transformation through communal engagement, but those that embraced communal transformation through engaging with individuals.

The appeal of faith-community support in reentry

America has more prisoners, and more people leaving prison each year, than any other nation. Accompanying their unusual enthusiasm for incarceration, Americans also lead other advanced industrial societies in the extent to which they profess attachment to religion.[1] Research examining life after prison in the USA has suggested that the 'faith factor'[2] could have an important role to play in ex-prisoner reentry.[3] Reentry scholars have argued that 'the services provided via the church are vital to increasing public safety'[4] and have called for partnerships between state agencies and churches to 'systematically reduce the risk of failure around the time of reentry'[5] and 'share the responsibility for transitioning offenders to the community with the community.[6] Church communities are said to have resources of human capital (volunteers), social capital (pro-social interactions) and spiritual capital (the development of personal faith) all of which could be of assistance to ex-prisoners if made available, capacitated and nurtured.[7]

1. Sullivan, W. F., 2009, *Prison Religion: Faith Based Reform and the Constitution*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, at p. 2.
2. Johnson, B. and Larson, D.B., 1998, The Faith Factor, *Corrections Today*, 60.
3. La Vigne et al., 2009, One Year Out: Tracking the Experiences of Male Prisoners Returning to Houston, Texas. *Returning Home Study*. Urban Institute, Justice Policy Centre; Johnson, B., 2008, The Faith Factor and Prisoner Reentry. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, 4.; Mears et al., 2006, Faith-based efforts to improve prisoner reentry: Assessing the logic and evidence. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 34, 351-367; Petersilia, J., 2003, *When Prisoners Come Home: Parole and Prisoner Reentry*, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press; McRoberts, O., 2002, Religion, Reform, community: Examining the Idea of Church-based Prisoner Reentry. *Reentry Rountable*. The Urban Institute.
4. Hercik, J. 2003, Prisoner Reentry, Religion and Research. Department of Health and Human Services USA, at p. 3.
5. Travis, J. and Visher, C. (eds.) 2005. *Prisoner Reentry and Crime in America*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press at p. 255-256.
6. Petersilia, J., 2003, *When Prisoners Come Home: Parole and Prisoner Reentry*, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, at p. 246.
7. Watson et al., 2008. The Role of Faith-Based Organizations in Ex-Offender Rentry. *Journal of Health Promotion*, 6, 25-35, but see also McRoberts, O., 2002, Religion, Reform, community: Examining the Idea of Church-based Prisoner Reentry. *Reentry Rountable*. The Urban Institute, on whether the churches really want this role.

Several studies have suggested that religious involvement in faith-communities post-release is linked to reduced delinquency, deviance and recidivism.[8] Sumter addressed whether a prisoner's religiosity influenced post-release community adjustment. The study found that both belief in the supernatural and higher levels of religious participation were associated with fewer post-release arrests, but that the latter was the most significant determinant.[9] Tracking the experiences of male prisoners returning to Houston, Texas, La Vigne and colleagues also found that belonging to a religious organisation was associated with both lower recidivism and reduced substance abuse rates, but that 'those who left their religious organization at a later point ... not only lost these positive effects but also had a higher likelihood of substance use and recidivism.'[10] However, neither of these studies explained these findings through investigating the nature of religious participation, how it worked, or when and why it broke down.

Existing research could lead one to assume that there are faith-communities in every neighbourhood ready and equipped to welcome ex-prisoners and help them in their transition, and this appears to be one of the hopes behind the 'transforming rehabilitation' agenda and design. However, citing a study of Philadelphia congregations[11] one report on the role of faith-based reentry programmes in the USA notes the disparity between 'the thousands of groups who visit or contact prisoners while they are incarcerated' and the 'few programs geared toward helping ex-prisoners in the difficult transition of re-entry'.[12] McRobert's findings echo this dearth of transitional assistance. He warns that it is erroneous to assume that churches are 'community institutions ... somehow embedded in the social life of the neighborhoods where they happen to congregate'. Rather, he found churches are 'member serving institutions' who may not be 'eager to widen the circle to include ex-offenders' but commonly place a priority on 'the immediate concerns of congregation members or on communities of interest that transcend particular neighborhoods'.[13]

McRoberts recognised that one of the reasons why faith-based reentry is so popular in the current socio-political climate is because 'people reflexively view the matter of crime and punishment, perhaps more than any other topic of civic discourse, as a matter of individual moral reform, and organized religion is still perceived as the master alchemist of the individual moral heart'.[14] Sumter reflected this rationale in her assertion that the positive association she found between religious participation and reduced recidivism may be because religious teaching delineates moral prescriptions to live by that can provide a sense of purpose and individual fulfilment. She linked this to religious inmates' acceptance of individual responsibility for past misbehaviour.[15] The renewed emphasis on the role of faith-communities in reentry could then, at least in part, be due to the perception that they can partner with the state to reduce social insecurity and increase safety through individual responsibilisation.[16] This reflects elements of Rose's (1995) description of the advanced liberal democracy:

> [It] seeks to de-governmentalize the State and to de-statize practices of government ... It does not seek to govern through 'society', but through the regulated choices of individual citizens, now construed as subjects of choices and aspirations to self-actualization and self-fulfilment.[17]

8. La Vigne et al., 2009, One Year Out: Tracking the Experiences of Male Prisoners Returning to Houston, Texas. *Returning Home Study*. Urban Institute, Justice Policy Centre; Johnson, B., 2008, The Faith Factor and Prisoner Reentry. I*nterdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, 4; Johnson et al., 2006. Objective Hope. Assessing the Effectiveness of Faith-Based Organizations: A Review of the Literature. Waco, Tx: Baylor University, Institute for Studies of Religion; Johnson, B. and Larson, D.B., 2003. The InnerChange Freedom Initiative. A Preliminary Evaluation of a Faith-Based Prison Program. Centre for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society; Baier, C. and Wright, B., 2001. If you love me keep my Commandments: A Meta-Analysis of the Effect of Religion on Crime. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 38, 3-21. Sumter, M.T., 2000. Religiousness and Post-Release Community Adjustment, Graduate Research Fellowship – Executive Summary. U.S. Department of Justice.
9. Sumter, M.T., 2000. Religiousness and Post-Release Community Adjustment, Graduate Research Fellowship – Executive Summary. U.S. Department of Justice p.10-11.
10. La Vigne et al., 2009, One Year Out: Tracking the Experiences of Male Prisoners Returning to Houston, Texas. *Returning Home Study*. Urban Institute, Justice Policy Centre at p. 13.
11. Cnaan, R., 2000. Keeping Faith in the City II: How 887 Philadelphia Congregations Help Their Needy Neighbors Including Children and the Families of Prisoners. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society.
12. Cnaan, R. and Sinha, J., 2004. Back into the Fold; Helping Ex-Prisoners Reconnet through Faith. Baltimore, Maryland: University of Pennsylvania, School of Social Work, at p. 7.
13. McRoberts, O., 2002, Religion, Reform, community: Examining the Idea of Church-based Prisoner Reentry. *Reentry Rountable*. The Urban Institute, at p. 8.
14. Ibid. at p. 10.
15. Sumter, M.T., 2000. Religiousness and Post-Release Community Adjustment, Graduate Research Fellowship – Executive Summary. U.S. Department of Justice at p. 8.
16 . For more on this argument see Hackworth, J., 2010. Faith, Welfare and the City: The Mobilization of Religious Organizations for Neoliberal Ends. *Urban Geography*, 31, 750-773.
17. Rose, N., 1995. Governing "advanced" liberal democracies. In: Barry, A., Osborne, T. & Rose, N. (eds.), *Foucault and Political Reason*. London: UCL Press at p. 41.

However, research on the positive association between religiosity and life satisfaction suggests that its power lies not in providing individual religious meaning but in the opportunity it proffers for participating in community. Lim and Putnam found that collective experiences of religion in a congregation, including making friends (religious belonging), are more closely linked to life satisfaction than private practices and individual experiences of religion (religious meaning). Thus they concluded that for life satisfaction 'praying together seems to be better than either bowling together or praying alone'.[18] They suggest this is for two reasons: because support offered through religious communities is based on a shared belief system about both the practice and meaning of helping behaviour,[19] and because a shared sense of social identity makes it more likely that individuals will receive and interpret social support 'in the spirit in which it is intended'.[20] Thus, a shared faith could provide a basis for the formation and maintenance of pro-social relationships, an important element of rehabilitation and reentry.[21] This resonates with Wolff and Draine's research.[22] They found that in order to form and mobilise social capital, ex-prisoners needed social relations willing and able to provide assistance, and prisoners needed to have the capacity to motivate these social relations to help, but integral to this was the social context of these relationships. Contrary to Sumter's assumptions of the links between reduced recidivism and individual responsibility, purpose and fulfilment through religion, Lim and Putnams' research supports a Durkheimian understanding of communality as the essence and substance of religion[23] — an essence reflected in Polanyi's argument that 'our believing is conditioned at its source by our belonging'.[24]

In search of 'community'

If this is the case, the nature of 'community' offered in faith-communities could be important to the reentry process. One of the problems in reentry according to Bazemore and Erbe is that the role of 'community' has been largely neglected.[25] They describe disconnects between empirical findings on desistance emphasising the role of the community in offender reform[26] and ex-prisoner supervision policy and practice characterised by a 'highly individualized focus on the needs and risks of offenders'.[27] Greater involvement of community groups in reentry, they argue, will not only provide forums of informal social control whereby community groups act on offenders, but offenders will also act on community groups in the reentry process because community engagement is reciprocal.[28] O'Connor and colleagues[29] also identify the need for faith and state reentry partnerships to move away from an individual needs-based approach and take a 'community justice' approach to address issues of justice and safety within their neighbourhoods. McRoberts echoed this when he argued that the role of the church should not be merely one of individual moral reform, but also one of social reform strategies.[30]

One problem with these suggestions is that they use the term 'community' but do not define what it means, or to whom. In his book 'Community', Bauman argues this 'feel good term' is often used as a generic description for everything we would like to experience, but in this insecure world of 'liquid modernity', we often feel that we miss.[31] Bauman argues that the desired 'community' means something quite distinct for those who comprise the 'global elite' and those who are 'left-behind'.[32] For Bauman, 'global elites' are those

18. Lim, C. and Putnam, R.D., 2010. Religion, Social Networks and Life Satisfaction. *American Sociological Review*, 75, 914-933, at p. 927.
19. Ellison, C.G. and George, L.K., 1994. Religious Involvement, Social Ties and Social Support in a Southeastern Community. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 33, 46-61.
20. Haslam, et al., 2009. Social Identity, Health and Wellbeing: An Emerging Agenda for Applied Psychology. A*pplied Psychology: An International Review*, 58, 1-23, at p. 11.
21. Ward, T. and Maruna, S., 2007. *Rehabilitation: Beyond the Risk Paradigm*, London, Routledge; Sampson, R. and Laub, J., 1993. Crime in the Making, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; Braithwaite, J., 1989. *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
22. Wolff, N. and Draine, J., 2004. Dynamics of Social Capital of Prisoners and Community Reentry: Ties that Bind? *Journal of Correctional Health Care*, 10, 457-490.
23. Durkheim, E., 1912. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
24. Polanyi, M., 1958. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a post-critical philosophy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, at p. 322.
25. Bazemore, G. and Erbe, C., 2003. Operationalizing the Community Variable in Offender Reentegration. *Youth Violence in Offender Reintegration*, 1, 246-275.
26. For more recent research on this see Farrall, S., Bottoms, A. & Shapland, J. (2010). Social structures and desistance from crime. *European Journal of Criminology*, 39, 253 – 268.
27. Bazemore, G. and Erbe, C., 2003. Operationalizing the Community Variable in Offender Reentegration. *Youth Violence in Offender Reintegration*, 1, 246-275, at p. 248.
28. Ibid at p. 265.
29. O'Connor, T.P., Duncan, J. and Quillard, F., 2006. Criminology and Religion: The Shape of an Authentic Dialogue. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 5, 559-570.
30. McRoberts, O., 2002, Religion, Reform, community: Examining the Idea of Church-based Prisoner Reentry. *Reentry Rountable*. The Urban Institute.
31. Bauman, Z., 2001. *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
32. Ibid. at p. 63.

people who have the social power to consider themselves *'individuals de facto'* — 'masters of their fate in deed, not merely by public proclamation or self-delusion'.[33] *'Individuals de facto'* seek what he called an 'aesthetic community'; a 'community of dreams', of the 'like-minded' and 'like behaving', a 'community of sameness' which services the construction and dismantling of identity.[34] Such communities provide a desired sense of belonging, but perform a trick of 'transform[ing] 'community' from a feared adversary of individual freedom of choice into a manifestation and (genuine or illusory) reconfirmation of individual autonomy'.[35] He argues that 'aesthetic communities' aim to form 'bonds without consequences', to avoid ethical responsibilities and long-term commitments and 'tend to evaporate at the moment when human bonds truly matter — that is, at a time when they are needed to compensate for the individual's lack of resourcefulness or impotence.'[36]

In contrast, he argues that *'individuals de jure'*, those 'who are not able to practice individuality *de facto*' have a different vision of community.[37] He calls this an 'ethical community' that involves 'fraternal sharing'. It is 'the kind of community which could, collectively, make good what they, individually, lack and miss'.[38] This kind of community is, he argued, 'woven from long-term commitments, from inalienable rights and unshakeable obligations' and warrants 'certainty, security and safety — the three qualities they [individuals de jure] miss most sorely in their life pursuits and which they cannot provide while they are going it alone and relying only on the scarce resources at their private disposal.'[39] Bauman believes that these two different versions of community, aesthetic and ethical, are often collapsed in fashionable 'communitarian discourse' and thereby depicted as philosophical problems rather than 'as the products of genuine social conflicts that they really are'.[40]

Bazemore and Erbe's arguments can be analysed in light of Bauman's observations. They argue that the increased involvement of 'community' in ex-offender reintegration will increase the likelihood of desistance and reintegration through three main pathways: facilitating fora in which offenders can make visible reparations that will 'garner community support'; providing a focus to strengthen relationships between offenders and community members playing the role of 'natural helpers'; and contributing to offender identity transformation that can 'enable offenders to view themselves as persons who contribute to the well-being of others and the community.'[41] The type of 'community' they envision is therefore one that Bauman would class as ethical — it goes beyond a forum that offers belonging through a sense of shared identity, and includes reciprocal exchange: community members involving in 'fraternal sharing' through playing the role of 'natural helpers' and offenders 'making visible reparations' through their contributions to the community. One result they forecast as a result of this reciprocal exchange in communities is an increase in 'collective efficacy'[42] through engagement with larger issues of social justice.

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33. Ibid. at p. 72, emphasis in original.
34. Ibid at pp. 63-66, emphasis in original.
35. Ibid. at p. 70.
36. Ibid. at p. 71, emphasis in original.
37. Ibid. at p. 58.
38. Ibid. at p. 72.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid. at p. 73.
41. Bazemore, G. and Erbe, C., 2003. Operationalizing the Community Variable in Offender Reentegration. *Youth Violence in Offender Reintegration*, 1, 246-275 at pp. 254- 256.
42. For an explanation of this term see Sampson et al., 1997. Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A multi-level study of collective Efficacy. *Science Magazine*, 227, 918-927.

desistance post-release. Research on the desistance process would seem to support this. Over time most people involved in crime desist. Research on the early stages of desistance shows that the majority of people convicted of a criminal offence desire to leave a life of crime behind, but despite their conformist views, many people commit offences along the way.[43] Desistance is difficult. A desire to change is a common first step, but is not, in itself, sufficient.[44] An optimistic outlook and self-belief are important,[45] but require sustenance through positive associations and structural support.[46] Desistance involves an interrelational dynamic. Religion and spirituality can benefit desistance through bolstering self-belief, providing meaning and models of pro-social identities, as well as through providing forums and practices that help to change routine activities and restructure social networks.[47] But how does this happen in practice? The findings below describe both how and whom faith-communities supported post-release, and when and why this support was either unavailable or inaccessible. They shed light on the potential of faith-communities to support desistance, the limitations they face, and how the involvement of ex-prisoners in faith-communities can also shape the nature and theology of these social institutions.

Methods

This ethnography of life post-release for 48 formerly incarcerated men involved one Muslim, and 47 Christians. The average age of participants was 40. Most (28) participants were black, 16 were white and 4 were Hispanic. The majority had served their most recent sentence for a serious violent offence (26) or a drug offence (14), with only 3 property offenders and 5 others for firearms or drink driving offences. Most of them had previous convictions (43) and had previously served time (38). The participants were released from prison over a six month period, and only three of the prisoners released in this time frame opted not to take part in the study. Observations and interactions began in prison three months prior to the first release and continued throughout their first year post-release. This included leaving prison with participants, attending parole meetings, AA meetings, faith-community gatherings, family gatherings, shopping for new clothes, visiting work places, new business ventures, rehab centres and transitional houses. Participants were interviewed on three occasions; immediately pre-release, within two weeks post-release and an average of 7.5 months post-release.[48] For the purposes of data analysis of field notes and interview transcripts, participants were divided into three outcome groups: those who did not reoffend (20), those who did re-offend but were not detected (13) and those who were re-imprisoned (15).[49] This was done on the basis of both self-report offending during the study, and a two year official reconviction study.

Findings[50]

Joining a faith-community

Pre-release all but one participant said they intended to join a faith-community when they got out. Most participants attended faith-communities and this was true across all outcomes (attended=42, unknown=6). The majority of participants (28) attended the same faith-community regularly, 23 participants said they attended once a week or more and 26 said they had made friends within faith-community. What this shows is that faith-communities do have the chance to engage with ex-prisoners. However, by the time of the third interview, a third of those questioned (12) were no longer attending religious services.

Participants said it was easier to join a faith-community where they were welcomed and accepted. They appreciated being able to be honest

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43. Shapland, J. and Bottoms, A., 2011. Reflections on social values, offending and desistance among young adult recidivists. *Punishment and Society*, 13, 256-282.

44. Farrall, S., Bottoms, A. & Shapland, J. (2010). Social structures and desistance from crime. *European Journal of Criminology*, 39, 253 – 268.

45. Maruna, S., 2001. *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild their Lives*, Washington DC, American Psychological Association.

46. Shapland, J. and Bottoms, A., 2011. Reflections on social values, offending and desistance among young adult recidivists. *Punishment and Society,* 13, 256-282.

47. Warr, M., 1993. Age, peers and delinquency. *Criminology*, 31, 17-40; Warr, M., 1998. Life Course Transitions and Desistance from Crime. *Criminology*, 36, 183-216; Wright, J.P. and Cullen, F.T., 2004. Employment, peers, and life-course transitions. *Justice Quarterly,* 21, 183-205; Shapland, J. and Bottoms, A., 2011. Reflections on social values, offending and desistance among young adult recidivists. *Punishment and Society,* 13, 256-282; Sharp et al., 2006. Everyone's Business: Investigating the Resettlement Needs of Black and Minority Ethnic Ex-offenders in the West Midlands. *A report commissioned by the Prisoner Resettlement Strategy Group*. West Midlands: Centre for Criminal Justice and Policy Research, University of Central England; Maruna et al., 2006., Why God is Often Found Behind Bars: Prison Conversions and the Crisis of Self-Narrative, *Research in Human Development,* 3, 161-184; Giordano et al., 2007. A Life Course Perspective on Spirituality and Desistance from Crime. Centre for Family and Demographic Research; and Marranci, G., 2009. *Faith, Ideology and Fear: Muslim Identities Within and Beyond Prisons*, London, Continuum.

48. I lost touch with 6 participants during the course of the study. Interview numbers were 48 at time one, 45 at time two and 36 at time three.

49. All detected reoffending resulted in reincarceration.

50. All names used in the findings are pseudonyms.

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about their ex-prisoner status, but did not want this to become too prominent a feature of their persona. They found it helpful to have a small number of people who could come alongside them and offer them 'accountability' in the form of support within a forum of honesty, acceptability and common struggles. These elements were more prevalent in faith-communities that established contact with ex-prisoners pre-release, that already had a number of ex-prisoners or similarly situated socially excluded congregants, and where friends or family members of ex-prisoners were part of the faith-community. So, for example, Mark said:

> I've been to four different churches since I've been out. I like [the one I'm at now]. Going there, you're accepted for who you are, what you are, how you are, whatever … you get to see people from all walks of life there.

A socially mixed community rather than a homogenous one was important to Mark feeling accepted. These elements were emphasised more by participants that were not re-incarcerated. What this indicates is that the most needy ex-prisoners either were not finding these elements in the faith-communities they attended, or for some reason they were not able to connect with them.

Benefits of involvement in a faith-community

Faith-communities provided a conducive environment for ex-prisoners to demonstrate a new character both to themselves and others. Involvement yielded an escape from the degraded social status of 'offender', imparted useful wisdom on life instruction and sometimes rendered encouragement to ex-prisoners dealing with the difficulties of reentry. Religious services provided a routine activity that was relatively incompatible with the many lifestyles participants felt had led them down the wrong paths. Rock said that he stopped going out drinking with his friends on a Saturday night when he started teaching Sunday school to kids at church because he wanted to be fresh for his lessons. Jerry went to church meetings three times a week. He said he did not open up to people easily and had few friends and no family nearby. Church meetings provided a structure to his week outside work and were a positive social activity he looked forward to.

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Communal gatherings for acts of worship and study offered an escape from the realities of reentry, a counter-cultural re-messaging and a sense of inclusion. The social capital of faith-communities from which participants benefitted were the sense of belonging offered through communing with 'like-minded' invididuals who shared their beliefs and accepted them despite their pasts. Although this belonging was occasionally demonstrated through tangible assistance such as providing employment, financial help or accommodation, it was not the tangible help in itself that was important to the participants, but the message of worth that such actions communicated. For example, Norman, who was homeless, said the best thing about church was simply that it provided a forum where people spoke to him. While his needs for food, clothing, housing, reading glasses and assistance in navigating social services were not met by his church community, he did not mention these things when I asked him about his experiences in church. Rather, he pointed out the value of a conversation to his sense of self. This illustrates two things: First, that Norman's expectations of his church were very low, and second, that his sense of humanity was bolstered within community and diminished in isolation. He went to church looking for connection, not provision.

Participants mentioned the benefits of faith-communities in helping them deal with difficulties they faced in life after prison. Notably, none of these comments were made by participants who were re-imprisoned and arguably faced some of the more challenging difficulties in reentry. Rather than practical help to overcome difficulties, help came in the form of encouragement delivered through inspirational sermons, confiding in a leader, or through sharing difficulties in small group settings. Faith-communities offered a place and a ritual through which participants could re-ground a sense of self that struggled to survive in the realities of their lives outside of prison. In his second interview, just after release, Garrett expressed his dismay at returning home after over 10 years in prison to find he was 'right back into that dead same environment' where his friends were 'still poor' or 'churned out on drugs' or 'got AIDS and HIV'. He was sure now that 'my thinking is different' but was scared, because he said 'when you are in the midst of people, either you're gonna be engulfed by their ways or you're gonna be the influential factor for them. There ain't no other way to take.' Garrett used the physical entity of a

church community to re-affirm the validity of his non-criminal self-identity that struggled to feel relevant in his every day life. In his third interview he explained how he had continued to use this strategy to counteract the frustrations he felt at his lack of material worth and the temptations of dealing drugs:

> I've been frustrated and I'm kind of looking at material things … I'm like man, I'm [in my 30's] and I ain't got no pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. Man, because I know before when I used to sell drugs I used to have a lot of money … you know, so I'm struggling with that — one foot in, one foot out, shall I do it, shall I not? I'm going to church every Sunday, I'm going to church praying and praying and you know, just continue to pray and have faith.

For Garrett, going to church offered an escape to a vantage point from which the temptations of the criminal lifestyle could be reassessed. Faith-communities offered ex-prisoners the potential to keep 'one foot out', when the difficulties of life sometimes made it seem inevitable that sooner or later they'd be head and shoulders under. These benefits of belonging are arguably most important for the most needy, the individuals who were the most economically and socially isolated, but they are also the participants who struggled the most to connect with faith-communities.

Barriers to joining faith-communities

Overall, 32 participants spoke of barriers they experienced to involvement in faith-communities. These participants were more equally split over re-offending outcomes.[51] The barriers included practical matters such as a lack of transport, suitable clothing, parole restrictions and conflicts with employment schedules. After employment, the second most prevalent barrier to continued involvement was the perception of implicit exclusion due to the shame of continued illicit activities. It seemed that at the most vulnerable moments of transition, in the oscillations between criminality and conformity, it was especially difficult for participants to continue to attend faith-communities.

In his examination of faith in community, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that it is only in church that one can dare to be a sinner.[52] But for many participants in this study, involvement in activities they perceived as illicit, from cohabiting to smoking crack cocaine, stymied their engagement with faith-communities. Participants spoke of how they struggled with life outside, did not live in ways they felt were compatible with continued involvement, and did not want to divulge these difficulties to the people they knew in the faith-community because they felt embarrassed and feared rejection.

This pattern of shame and stigma inhibiting potentially helpful links when ex-prisoners faced difficulties or dabbled in illicit activities was replicated in many re-offenders. James linked his inability to bring his struggles to the his faith-community specifically to having previously felt that people in church looked at him differently because of his criminal past, evidenced by his monitor:

> Q: So tell me about your experiences of church
> A: Well I was doing real, real well in the church when I first got out and then, when I started having problems, I just stopped going.
> Q: Why do you think that was?
> A: … I'd sit in that church house some days and be looking at some of the people like I know they'd be looking at the monitor and everything; I just didn't feel comfortable with it.

Social stigma compounded the shame and disappointment participants felt when their grand plans of success in a non-deviant life-style unravelled and some found themselves back in behaviours they had hoped to avoid. James felt the stigma of his ex-prisoner status when he was first released and was wearing an ankle bracelet, an outward sign of his convicted status. However, it was the point at which James needed some help because he was struggling in life that this perceived stigma became an operational barrier to involvement. James explained his withdrawal from church when he started having problems in the following terms:

> I could tell you the truth if I'm comfortable with you, but if I'm not comfortable with you I'm not going to tell you nothing, I don't care how cool we are — you just never know.

Participants said they did not seek help because 'it's nobody else's problem but my own' and 'everybody's got enough mess of their own' (Rock). When I asked Garrett if he would ever have asked his faith-community for their help, he acknowledged:

> I could have got the help, I was just really pretty much trying to do it on my own, you know.

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51. Mentioned by 55 per cent of participants in outcome one — non-reoffenders (n=11), 77 per cent of those in outcome two — 'pro-social' reoffenders (n=10), and 73 per cent of those in outcome three — who were re-imprisoned (n=11).
52. Bonhoeffer, D., 1939. *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community*. LondonL: SCM Press.

Big G similarly blamed his 'embarrassment' and his 'pride' for his failure to seek assistance that he knew was available to him.

Participants struggled with involvement in faith-communities because in prison they had learned not to draw undue attention to themselves either positively or negatively, what Haney calls 'prisonization': 'safety in social invisibility by becoming as inconspicuous and unobtrusively disconnected from others as possible'.[53] Even participants with good standing and relationships within faith-communities failed to use these potential avenues of support and help when they needed it because of chronically low expectations and an inability to use their initiative to request the help they needed. These 'prisonization' attitudes were most prevalent among those who reoffended. They exacerbated the extent of the barriers to involvement in faith-communities through acclimatisation to coping alone.

Overcoming the barriers

Between the difficulties of helplessness and hypermasculinity, ex-prisoners can be a difficult group to befriend. However, the ready and proven availability of help and support, should it be needed, appeared to go some way towards encouraging ex-prisoners to overcome a preference for self-reliance and the suppression of problems. Octavio said he had never asked his faith-community for help and would rather not — but despite his reluctance he said he would if he really needed to, because he was confident that help would be there:

> Q: Would you ask them?
> A: No
> Q: Why not?
> A: I've got to do it myself. If I couldn't do it myself then I would ask.
> Q: Do you think they'd help?
> A: Yeah they would. They got this lady an apartment for six months. They helped this travelling minister get a bus. They will break their back to help people.

Octavio's faith-community had shown itself to be what Bauman calls an 'ethical community', one that could be trusted because it had demonstrated how it would 'break [its] back to help people' (Octavio). For participants, asking for help meant trusting their faith-communities; it involved a declaration of vulnerability and the need for assistance, and ex-prisoners, the categorically untrusted, find it difficult to trust.

However, participants in this study often faced mistrust from faith-communities. Chris explained the lack of help for ex-prisoners in his wife's church on the basis that 'they helped someone once, but he messed it up'. Chris went to a different church. One minister told me that his church no longer helped ex-prisoners because they had once bought some clothes for someone coming out of prison but they 'got burned' — the prisoner had taken the clothes but not attended church. When I asked Joel what faith-communities could do better to help ex-prisoners, he explained why he thought such mistrust was misguided. He said they should:

> *Just accept you as the person you are. … You've got to trust God to change my heart or do whatever. People don't understand that and they want to protect what they've got instead of saying 'this is what God blessed you with, help somebody else.'*

For Joel, a faith-community being generous with material things was one way of demonstrating 'acceptance' and providing evidence of shared beliefs in a God who could 'change my heart or do whatever'. The availability of tangible help was therefore not only about meeting immediate needs, but about acknowledging worth through recognising personhood, belief in redemption, and demonstrating acceptance and belonging. The converse of this was the perception that faith-communities that were unwilling to risk helping ex-prisoners did not believe in their essential humanity (do not 'accept you as the person you are'), and mistrusted the identity transformation purported by the ex-prisoner. To put it in Bauman's terms, they offered 'the joy of belonging without the discomfort of being bound.'[54]

Transforming Rehabilitation — Transforming Communities

Most participants in this study did not go to faith-communities seeking help. They were looking for a place where others shared their beliefs and in which

> ## Between the difficulties of helplessness and hypermasculinity, ex-prisoners can be a difficult group to befriend.

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53. Haney, C. 2002. The Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment. *From Prison to Home*. University of California-Santa Cruz, at p. 82.
54. Bauman, Z., 2001. *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, Cambridge, Polity Press, at p. 69.

they hoped they could belong. They wanted somewhere to practice their faith, and in that process to nurture their new-found or resurrected identity. But the communities that facilitated this belonging and bolstered their burgeoning hopes for transformation were those that understood how to draw them into community through compensating for their individual deficits. Faith-communities that were more involved with socially excluded groups appeared to have a deeper understanding of the vital role of social action as evidence of shared belief in the potential for individual transformation. In his study on desistance Maruna found that a 'significant other' believing in the offender's identity transformation was part of the desistance process. He also argued, '[i]f one knows what personal myths seem most appealing to desisting persons, one can better direct the narrative reconstruction implicit in the rehabilitative efforts'.[55] Where these 'personal myths' include belief in the transformational power of a God, but the very institutions dedicated to this common belief demonstrate doubt in this transformational power through not acting accordingly, they may struggle to be the 'significant other' that can buttress narrative reconstruction during the initial precarious transition from incarceration. Ex-prisoners were more likely to remain in faith-communities that could engage with the practical aspects of their debilitated individual autonomy because a lack of such help indicated a lack of shared belief, and, as outlined at the start of this article, it is the shared belief system that provides the basis for belonging.[56] If faith-communities are merely forums for pro-social identity manifestation they will struggle to overcome the barriers that inhibit ex-prisoner involvement. Communities that overcame these difficulties responded to ex-prisoners who sought a forum in which to manifest the strength of their faith, through providing a community that showed solidarity in their weakness.

One church that stood out as a faith-community that was very successful in reaching out to ex-prisoners was situated in the wealthiest neighbourhood in the city, but had a specific mission 'to create a safe-harbour for the hurt, the lost and the seeking'. Its congregation was unusual in that it was mixed both in terms of race and socio-economic status. It had a distinct 'recovery' format to the service, which involved a time where congregants contributed by voluntarily sharing things they were celebrating. The first time that I attended, one member of the congregation stood up and celebrated the fact that even though this week he had relapsed and used drugs again, he had called his friends within the community, got help, and wanted to celebrate the fact he was still in church and had now been clean again for five days. The congregation clapped and cheered his 'success'. This was a church where people could fail and still belong. Six of the participants attended this church.

The type of community available to ex-prisoners in churches depended to a large extent on the social make-up of the churches. One common denominator among faith-communities that were more successful in engaging ex-prisoners was a stronger presence of individuals lower down the social scale, less self-reliant, less privileged and less powerful, more individuals 'de jure' than 'de facto'. Because these communities were constituted of the socially weak, (not created for the socially weak), they gravitated towards a sense of communalism that embraced 'fraternal obligations' and could provide some kind of 'communal insurance against the errors and misadventures which are the risks inseparable from individual life'.[57] Engagement with the needy bred responsiveness to need, hence the historic and recognised depth of social involvement of black churches. Faith-communities that included more members of the lower social strata were more likely to offer the kind of fraternal bonds associated with continued involvement, those of non-judgmental acceptance, of small groups facilitating support, intimacy, accountability and an opportunity to meet others with similar difficulties. They were also better at overcoming the barriers I have outlined, such as hosting multiple communal services to facilitate attendance for people with difficult work schedules, providing transport, having more relaxed dress codes and crucially for supporting desistance, they could conceive how failure can be part of success. These communities stood out in taking a distinctly less judgmental, individualistic and authoritarian approach to spirituality.

Conclusions

The co-option of faith-based organisations (FBOs) by policymakers in the move away from more traditional Keynesian forms of social service delivery and welfare cutbacks assumes that 'FBOs provide a wellspring of compassion and social capital that is unattainable in government-run organizations'.[58] However, as McRoberts suspected, most faith-communities I visited in this study were neither

55.   Maruna, S., 2001. *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild their Lives*, Washington DC, American Psychological Association, at p. 114.
56.   Lim, C. and Putnam, R.D., 2010. Religion, Social Networks and Life Satisfaction. *American Sociological Review*, 75, 914-933.
57.   Bauman, Z., 2001. *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, Cambridge, Polity Press, at p. 72.
58.   Hackworth, J., 2010. Faith, Welfare and the City: The Mobilization of Religious Organizations for Neoliberal Ends. *Urban Geography,* 31, 750-773, at p. 753.

especially motivated nor equipped to work effectively with ex-prisoners post-release.[59] In many congregations there was no apparent readily accessible current of compassion and pool of social capital. Where faith-communities do embrace ex-prisoners and the multiple difficulties that accompany them, the resulting theology of these institutions is less likely to reflect a neoliberal individual approach to personal responsibility which will sit comfortably with partnering state sponsored entities to reduce recidivism, and is arguably more likely to produce socially active congregations compiled of individuals who are motivated by matters of social responsibility. McRoberts acknowledges that where crime is concerned 'we might expect churches to take a hard moral reform stance: speaking out against criminal acts, crusading to transform individual criminal lives and so on', but goes on to admonish 'we should not forget the historical role of churches as moral agitators, who have targeted activism not so much at personal moral failures, but at society-wide ones.'[60]

In their normative theory of community intervention Bazemore and Erbe suggest that community engagement with ex-prisoners is reciprocal and could increase collective efficacy through encouraging community engagement with issues of social justice.[61] My findings support this theory. Faith-communities where participants found it easier to get involved, to benefit from involvement and to stay involved were those communities whose congregants were either mainly from lower social strata or were socially mixed and manifested a commitment to each other through engaging theologically and practically with the broader realities of their lives. Grand claims have been made about the potential for faith-community involvement with ex-prisoners to increase public safety[62] and reduce the risk of failure in reentry[63] but a note of caution is appropriate. It has been shown that joining a faith-community and later leaving is worse for re-entry outcomes and recidivism than never going at all.[64] Where ex-prisoners pin their hopes on belonging among a group of like-minded individuals whom they believe share their faith, a pervading sense of isolation and dislocation even in their midst is a bitter disappointment. If faith-communities are to provide a 'sacred safety net' for ex-prisoners[65] they will need to be adequately equipped for the task because if they are not, they could become part of the problem rather than the solution. However, I am not without hope. If the 'Transforming Rehabilitation' agenda means faith-communities become *better equipped* to support ex-prisoners then in the future they could play an important role in reducing reoffending, because with more ex-prisoners in their midst faith-communities may begin to agitate for the kind of societal transformations that could actually potentiate a rehabilitation revolution.

59. McRoberts, O., 2002, Religion, Reform, community: Examining the Idea of Church-based Prisoner Reentry. *Reentry Rountable*. The Urban Institute.
60. Ibid. at p. 5.
61. Bazemore, G. and Erbe, C., 2003. Operationalizing the Community Variable in Offender Reentegration. *Youth Violence in Offender Reintegration*, 1, 246-275.
62. Hercik, J. 2003, Prisoner Reentry, Religion and Research. Department of Health and Human Services USA.
63. Travis, J. and Visher, C. (eds.) 2005. *Prisoner Reentry and Crime in America*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press at p. 255-256.
64. La Vigne et al., 2009, One Year Out: Tracking the Experiences of Male Prisoners Returning to Houston, Texas. *Returning Home Study*. Urban Institute, Justice Policy Centre.
65. McRoberts, O., 2002, Religion, Reform, community: Examining the Idea of Church-based Prisoner Reentry. *Reentry Rountable*. The Urban Institute, at p. 7.