

## **THE IMPACT OF FAITH ON OFFENDING AND REOFFENDING**

---

by Kim Workman

### **The Available Research**

There seems to have been reluctance over the years to research the relationship between religious beliefs and practices and offending behaviours. The lack of a comprehensive body of corrections research about prisoners and the influence of religious variables on inmates' adjustment and recidivism can be attributed to potential problematic biases held by both religious workers and scientific researchers. Many chaplains, ministers, and religious volunteers have been reluctant or lack the skills to undertake publishable research. This reluctance has been fuelled by a broader historical scepticism about the relevance of religion held by many in higher education, and at best by university researchers' ambivalence in studying spirituality or religion.

Weaver, Samford, et al have suggested that since religious behaviour is important to a large section of the population and its youth, there needs to be greater consideration of its effect on behaviour.

John DiIulio, Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Princeton University, recently had this to say:

It's remarkable how much good empirical evidence there is that religious belief can make a positive difference. It is intellectually irresponsible to ignore the "faith factor" in tackling social problems.

The study of religion in criminology is at last receiving scholarly attention. There is developing a consistency in the findings, especially with those more significant studies of the relationship between religion and crime. In a recent and important study, Evans et al conclude, "Among our religiosity measures, participation in religious activities was a persistent and non-contingent inhibitor of adult crime". These results are consistent with other published research showing that religion has similar benefits in other areas of impulse control or deviance, such as drug and alcohol abuse.

## **What Does The Research Say?**

What little New Zealand research there is, shows that religious beliefs have a significant influence on motivating offenders to turn from a life of crime, and to remove themselves from anti-social influences. In one New Zealand study, Leibrich tracked down 50 offenders who had been sentenced to supervision in 1987, and had not reoffended three years later. Over half of them said that religion was important to them. Sixteen belonged to or were drawn to a specific religion, with nine of them active church members. A further 11 people spoke about a general belief in a God or Higher Power, or about the benefits of a spiritual life. Several made a connection between their belief in God and their resisting further offending.

In two recent New Zealand research papers, the role of religion in motivating people to leave gangs was considered. Lala found that half of his participants were strongly engaged with some form of religion at the time interviews took place. They acknowledged that religion played a part in their departure from the gang lifestyle. Dennehy reported that many of the female participants she interviewed gave credit to religion for the life changing experiences which led them to leave gangs. She concludes that religious conversion facilitated the dramatic changes that occurred, and calls for more research in this area.

## **The Impact Of Faith On Offending**

The growing body of evidence demonstrates the impact of faith on reoffending. In adult populations, participation in religious activities has been found to be a “persistent and non-contingent inhibitor” of adult crime. Seven of the eight studies quoted suggest the greater the religious observance the lower the rate of offending and drug use.

Kendler, Gardner and Prescott in one of the most comprehensive studies (albeit only of females) found that a measure of personal devotion was inversely related to both depression and substance abuse and that personal and institutional conservatism were related to lower levels of alcohol abuse and lifetime alcohol dependency. The authors suggest that personal (religious) devotion but not conservatism assists with coping with stress. This is supported by a number of other papers that examine this in adult populations. A number of authors also suggest that religious factors need to be considered along with the ethnicity of the group.

## **The Impact Of Faith On Inmate Adjustment And Reoffending**

It is surprising that only a handful of published studies have examined the influence of religion and religious beliefs on key prison predictor and outcome

measures such as inmates' adjustment and recidivism. The authors of this research have recommended not only more research in this area, but research that examines more reliably and more comprehensively the dynamic interplay between prisoners' adjustment, recidivism, and post-release success.

In a 1997 study, Johnson examined the impact of religious programs on institutional adjustment and recidivism rates in two matched groups of inmates from four adult male prisons in New York State, USA. One group had participated in programs sponsored by Prison Fellowship; the other had no involvement with Prison Fellowship. Prison Fellowship and non-Prison Fellowship inmates were similar on measures of institutional adjustment, as measured by both general and serious prison infractions, and recidivism, (as measured by arrests during a one-year follow-up period). However, after controlling for level of involvement in Prison Fellowship-sponsored programs, inmates who were most active in Bible studies were significantly less likely to be re-arrested during the follow-up period.

Clear found that religiousness was related both to improved adjustment, fewer institutional infractions, and reduced reoffending.

### **The Impact Of Faith On Reintegration**

One of the recent key findings is the work by Dr Rodney Stark, in his publication "Religion, Deviance and Social Control". He established that where there was a solid core of Christian faith existing within the community, and local Christians were well integrated into the prison with faith-based programs, it contributed significantly to the reduction of reoffending. One of the findings of specific interest to this proposal is his view that Prison Fellowship has been successful in the reduction of reoffending. He concluded that it might be of little consequence that a given inmate "finds" religion in prison unless this also involves or is followed by immersion in a like-minded group. Moreover, prison conversions will not have lasting influence unless persons retain or replicate religious group support upon their release.

This finding supports the faith-based prison methodology, which promotes the development of a 'moral community' within the prison, and then seeks to integrate the inmate with a church community, mentoring and support following their release.

For inmates, basic personal and practical assistance in the critical weeks and months of initial transition to the community can be the key to beating the recidivism odds. Spiritual nurturing and a supportive faith community

are beneficial for transitioning offenders, personal growth and maturation as members of families and societies. Faith communities are able to give offenders a place to learn, grow and gain strength in an atmosphere of both accountability and support. One example is a project in Detroit, Michigan, called Detroit Transition of Prisoners (TOP). Detroit TOP's start-up and first four years were facilitated by Prison Fellowship Ministries. TOP is a church based, non-residential aftercare programme. Its purpose is to help selected prisoners overcome personal, economic and social barriers in order to lead productive, crime-free lives following their return to Detroit. TOP engages and equips community churches and volunteers to encourage, assist and strengthen accountability for ex-prisoners. TOP also works to leverage the assistance of the business community, social service agencies and other local resources on behalf of participants and their families. In its fourth year of operation, TOP has a recidivism rate of just nine percent. This compares favourably to an anticipated recidivism rate of 50 percent for TOP participants, based on their risk scores (using LSI-R) when they entered the programme. According to an evaluation by the Center for Social Research, TOP participants' risk scores drop significantly during their time in TOP — which corresponds with the low actual recidivism rates in TOP.

### **Does Religion Rehabilitate?**

If religion can inhibit delinquent and criminal activity, why might it not facilitate the process as well as the outcomes of prison rehabilitation? Aside from theological discussion about the spiritual role of religion, as well as the evidence demonstrating the mental and physical health benefits of religion, there are scientific reasons to predict that religion might affect behavioural and social change.

Religion targets antisocial values, emphasises accountability and responsibility, changes cognitive approaches to conflict, and provides social support and social skills through interaction with religious people and communities. Such emphases seem to be consistent with what many rehabilitation workers call principles of effective treatment.

### **Faith Based Prisons And Recidivism**

Faith based prisons or “APAC” prisons had their genesis in Humanita Prison, established in Brazil in 1972. Built on a firm foundation of Christ centred leadership that is fleshed out in tangible expressions of unconditional love, APAC successfully empowers inmates and volunteers alike to take

responsibility for solving their personal and communal problems. Careful programming ensures that the fourphased incremental change process is successful in restoring the inmate to peers, family, the community, and God. Lower recidivism rates, lower levels of prison incidents, and savings to taxpayers are clear benchmarks of APAC's effectiveness. APAC is different from conventional approaches to offender rehabilitation. It is a process of spiritual transformation. It seeks to change people's values and beliefs through changing their relationship with God.

In a very recent study, Johnson compared the recidivism rates for two Brazilian prisons considered to be exemplars in a country facing an array of correctional crises. One of the prisons is primarily based on vocational training and the use of prison industry to better prepare inmates for release and to reduce the cost of operating the facility (Braganca). The second prison is Humanita, the original APAC prison, on which many countries now model faith-based prisons. The study compared recidivism rates for prisoners released from these two facilities during a three-year post-release window from 1996 to 1999. The findings reveal that:

- a) The three year recidivism rate of prisoners from both facilities is extremely low by any standard (16 per cent Humanita and 36 per cent Braganca);
- b) That the recidivism rate for former Humanita prisoners was significantly lower than that found for Braganca prisoners;
- c) Inmates from the faith-based prison were charged with significantly fewer arrests during the three year follow-up period; and
- d) Where disposition data was available, former Braganca prisoners were also significantly more likely to be re-incarcerated than former prisoners from Humanita.

An ongoing study at the faith-based Innerchange Prison, based at the Jester II complex, near Houston, Texas, is producing highly promising results. As of 2 June 2001, of the 199 prisoner-participants released from the Carol S. Vance Unit near Houston, 109 (55 percent) have completed at least 16 months of the intensive IFI program, 153 (81 percent) are employed, and 143 (75 percent) are members in a nurturing church. In stark contrast to Texas' current recidivism rate of 40 percent (as reported by Texas Correctional Industries), only six of the 199 IFI members have returned to prison — a recidivism rate of three percent. Currently 178 members remain in the unit.

Some of the reasons for the power of a Christian emphasis in a prison setting are that:

“The Christian emphasis neither undermines the offender’s integrity (by considering him to be of ‘diminished’ responsibility) nor leaves him without hope (in the face of his own weakness and failing). Christian conversion — with its emphasis on repentance, forgiveness and a new allegiance and empowering reach to the heart of those needs of every individual”.

### **The Role of Spirituality in Change**

It is well known that many people who join social movements or who become involved with a community network or religious community can secure a rapid and sudden change in their life. David Aberle draws attention to four classifications of a social movement: transformative, reformative, redemptive and alternative, that are known to facilitate personal and social change. Religious conversion, whether achieved through new religious movements or the more traditional religious institutions, draws together the process of change within a religious experience or a spiritual encounter. For the purpose of this discussion religious conversion refers to a “subjective and private change of orientation and values through religious or spiritual allegiance”. Commenting specifically on how religion appears to change inmates, or how inmates perceive they are changed, Clear writes:

“Inmates who adopt religion seem for the most part, deeply committed to doctrinaire models of religious living. This is an indication of how attractive the certainty of religious doctrines can be for inmates. It facilitates a type of ‘total replacement’ whereby the ways of the past are subordinated to a new, fully developed way of living, one that can be thought of as ‘proven’”.

Clear writes “prison is about things bad” — crime and punishment. Religion is about things ‘good’ - holiness and devotion. With the aid of a religious institution, the prisoner has a good chance of rebonding. A prisoner is a social outcast. It is hard to imagine a more direct interpretation of the fact of imprisonment. The offender has been banned from society. To be shunned by one’s community is to invite a special kind of shame, the mortification that comes with undeniable public rebuke. One of the attributes claimed by religion is its power to reconcile “flawed” persons to society.

In talking about the impact of religion in changing lives, Clear uses the language of restorative justice.

## **Restorative Justice as Criminological Theory**

Within the context of faith-based initiatives, the role for restorative justice in the process of rehabilitation and reintegration has yet to be fully explored. Publicly funded restorative justice initiatives are currently directed toward the pre-sentencing stage. In our view, the theory of restorative justice has the potential to underpin the complete criminal justice process. Prison Fellowship New Zealand has begun to explore the potential for a restorative approach to justice during an offender's sentence of imprisonment, and during the reintegration process.

It is the biblical message that underscores PFNZ's approach to restorative justice programme. Christian teaching targets antisocial values, emphasises accountability and responsibility, changes cognitive approaches to conflict, and provides social support and social skills thorough interaction with religious people and communities. Such emphases are consistent with what many social workers call principles of effective treatment.

There is a close connection between cultural and spiritual formation. An inmate, who takes an interest in cultural development, will often begin a spiritual search. The reverse is equally true. For Maori, our indigenous people, there is often a need to deal with internal conflicts which can arise between the two. The potential conflict of "Being Maori and being Christian" requires sensitive support from mature Maori Christians, who are able to work through the ideological and theological issues with the inmate.

One of the strengths of restorative justice is its capacity to accommodate not only Christian, but indigenous systems of justice. Mediation, reparation and reconciliation are essential features of indigenous justice. Restorative processes can offer greater sensitivity to indigenous needs as they enable cultural diversity to be recognised, and may also be a mechanism for affirming and strengthening the power of Maori and Pacific peoples. Restorative justice theory has indigenous roots which provide the context within which effective Maori and Pacific responses to offending can be further developed. Currently, 53 per cent of the inmate population is Maori. The Maori inmate population will increase to 60 per cent of the inmate population by 2011. Maori imprisoned will grow by 20 percent (from 3,055 to 3,675) by 2005. Pacific peoples imprisoned will grow by 24 percent (from 422 to 524) in the same period.

Prison Fellowship's approach has at its very core, a commitment to implement the biblical principles of restorative justice. In Hebrew Scripture, restorative justice is a peacemaking response to crime for all those persons affected by it.

In the Christian tradition the sinner is given hope, the prodigal is welcomed home. Seen in that light, forgiveness promises to deliver on learning from the past to actually transcend endlessly cycled violence in response to victimisation. Forgiveness liberates us from the very core of our violent impulses.

To put restorative justice in its simplest form: crime violates people and the violations create obligations. Justice should involve victims, offenders and community members in a search to identify needs and obligations, so as to promote healing among the parties involved. Those working with ex-inmates will address issues through a process of restoration. Faith based programmes, whatever their nature, should work with the offender to emphasise recovery of the victim through redress, vindication and healing, recompense by the offender through reparation, fair treatment and habilitation, and reintegration of both into the community. We will seek to invoke processes through which parties are able to discover the truth about what happened and the harms that resulted, to identify the injustices involved and to agree on future actions to repair those harms.

A Christian approach to criminal justice evokes a call to creativity, a call to repentance and conversion, and a call to community. It argues against the marginalisation of religion in public life, and for practical engagement in our pluralist, secular society. Finally, it argues that religious traditions, including Christianity, continue to shape human reality and experience and are therefore central to social dialogue and social cohesion.

We believe that the search for true and satisfying justice is forever linked to the spiritual growth of all concerned. The path of overincarceration, of a vengeful spirit and a punitive mentality, can only dry up the soul of Aotearoa.

*Kim Workman is the Executive Director, Prison Fellowship New Zealand, PO Box 45 065, Epuni, Lower Hutt 6330. Email: [pfnz@xtra.co.nz](mailto:pfnz@xtra.co.nz)*