

# Transforming Prison Rehabilitation with Inmate-led Religious Movements

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Inmate ministers and offender-led religious movements offer a unique avenue to redemption and rehabilitation within prisons. Professor Byron R Johnson of Baylor University and Pepperdine University has examined the influence of faith-driven programmes within prison facilities. His work highlights the inspiring power of peer support, spiritual growth, and restorative justice in reshaping the lives of those behind bars. As demands for reforms in the criminal justice sector intensify, the impact of faith-based activities in fostering change cannot be understated.

## Positive Criminology and Faith-based Initiatives

Positive criminology advocates for restorative approaches to crime, placing emphasis on virtues such as forgiveness, service, honesty, and identity transformation. In contrast to more punitive methods, these approaches seek to foster personal growth and rehabilitation among offenders. Professor Johnson is the founding director of the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, USA, and works in the field of positive criminology, where his research sheds light on how faith-based initiatives offer effective restorative approaches to crime reduction and human flourishing.

## The Growing Culture of Volunteerism

Johnson stresses the pivotal role of volunteers in enhancing civil society, highlighting their substantial contribution to various community services and social initiatives. Due to constraints in federal and state funding, the non-profit sector increasingly relies on volunteers to deliver essential social services. Despite this challenge, the number of volunteers in the USA continues to grow, with millions of adults dedicating their time to diverse causes, from formal organisations to informal acts of kindness. Many of these volunteers are motivated by faith.

## Religion and Prosocial Behaviour

Religion plays a significant role within communities by fostering personal networks that provide emotional and social support. These networks often deter individuals from engaging in illegal activities as well as shield them from negative influences, particularly in disadvantaged areas. For instance, church attendance among youth correlates with decreased rates of drug

abuse and criminal behaviour. Additionally, religious communities and houses of worship can contribute to crime reduction, prisoner rehabilitation, prevention of substance abuse, and effective coping mechanisms during stressful periods.

## Finding Purpose Behind Bars

The Louisiana State Penitentiary (AKA Angola), once notorious for its violence and corruption, has undergone a remarkable transformation under the twenty-one-year leadership of former Warden Burl Cain. The establishment of a Bible college and inmate-led congregations profoundly shifted the prison's culture towards redemption and hope.

Within Angola and other correctional facilities, inmate ministers serve not only as spiritual leaders but also as agents of change. They lead congregations, provide pastoral care, and promote prosocial behaviour among their peers. Despite confronting the harsh realities of incarceration, these inmate ministers find purpose in serving others and bringing hope to those who may have lost it.

## The Field Ministry Program

In the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, the Field Ministry program exemplifies the impact of inmate-led initiatives. Through training in prison-based seminaries, inmate ministers transition into 'Field Ministers', offering support and guidance to fellow inmates.

Such programmes can serve as valuable resources in the rehabilitation process. Preliminary findings suggest that exposure

to Field Ministers is associated with lower levels of risk factors and higher levels of virtues among inmates, underscoring the potential of peer-led interventions in rehabilitation efforts.

### Cost-Effectiveness of Faith-based Programs

Contrary to common perception, faith-based prison programs prove to be not only spiritually enriching but also cost-effective. Initiatives like 'InnerChange' in Minnesota demonstrate significant reductions in recidivism rates and promote post-release employment among participants. These programmes, funded by private sources and relying on volunteer support, have shown significant benefits, offering a promising model for sustainable rehabilitation efforts within correctional systems.

### Offender-led Religious Movements

Professor Johnson highlights how central to prison reform is the concept of offender-led religious movements (ORMs). Scholars are, indeed, increasingly interested in understanding the emergence, values, and impacts of ORMs within prisons. Research in this area aims to uncover how these movements foster prosocial behaviour, spiritual awakening, and service to others among incarcerated individuals.

These grassroots initiatives provide inmates with a sense of identity, moral guidance, and opportunities for character development. The transformative potential of ORMs on individual lives and entire correctional environments should be given serious consideration among correctional leaders.

### Implications for Justice System Reform

In an era marked by calls for criminal justice reform, inmate-led faith communities offer a fresh perspective on rehabilitation. Preliminary research suggests that ORMs could offer innovative avenues for rethinking correctional programs and the process of rehabilitation. However, comprehensive empirical research, such as Johnson's latest research project at the Mississippi State Penitentiary, is needed to understand the prevalence, effectiveness, and implications of these movements.

The legal complexities surrounding inmate-led congregations pose challenges to their widespread implementation. Nonetheless, the potential of ORMs to foster rehabilitation and reduce recidivism warrants further exploration and consideration in policy-making circles.

### Restorative Approaches and Virtue-based Practices

Positive criminology suggests that restorative approaches, which prioritise social connectedness, service, spiritual experience, and personal integrity, may offer more effective alternatives to traditional measures. Such approaches aim to promote virtue and active responsibility among offenders.

Central to the philosophy of inmate-led faith movements is the idea of restorative justice. Rather than focusing solely on punishment, these approaches emphasise personal responsibility,



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virtue, character development, and human flourishing. By promoting a culture of service, social connectedness, and spiritual growth, inmate-led faith communities offer a path to redemption and transformation for individuals within the criminal justice system.

### Promoting Faith-based Activities

Faith-based activities have emerged as a cornerstone of rehabilitation efforts within correctional environment. Beyond traditional programs, religious activities attract some of the highest participation rates among inmates. The spiritual enrichment offered by faith-based initiatives, combined with opportunities for service and personal growth, represents a promising avenue for achieving evidence-based solutions to the challenges of crime and recidivism.

### Bringing Hope and Transformation

In the intricate fabric of criminal justice reform, inmate-led faith communities can be beacons of hope and transformation. Faith-based activities have emerged as a catalyst for rehabilitation efforts within correctional facilities.

Beyond traditional programs, religious activities attract the highest participation rates among inmates. Professor Johnson has shown how the spiritual enrichment offered by faith-based initiatives, combined with opportunities for service and personal growth, represents a promising avenue for achieving evidence-based solutions to the challenges of crime and recidivism.




## MEET THE RESEARCHER

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Professor Byron Johnson is a distinguished scholar recognised for his groundbreaking research at the intersection of religion, psychology, and social sciences. Johnson holds pivotal positions as the Director of the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University and Co-Executive Director of the Center for Faith and the Common Good at Pepperdine University. He is also a faculty affiliate with the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University. With a prolific career spanning decades, Professor Johnson has produced an extensive body of work, including numerous publications in academic journals and influential books. His research has been instrumental in shaping policies and practices, shedding light on the transformative role of spirituality in addressing complex societal issues. Professor Johnson's work has been consistently supported by significant funding. His contributions have advanced our understanding of faith-based initiatives, prisoner rehabilitation, and the dynamics of religious involvement across various contexts. Johnson is the Co-Project Director of the Global Flourishing Study (GFS), a joint venture of Baylor University and Harvard University, in collaboration with Gallup and the Center for Open Science. This large-scale longitudinal study includes more than 200,000 respondents across 22 geographically diverse countries. The GFS is the first longitudinal multi-country data resource for studying the determinants of flourishing, with a nationally representative sample within each country.

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### FURTHER READING

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