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The Church's Responsibility to the Children of the Incarcerated:
Ministry to the Fatherless and Motherless

By

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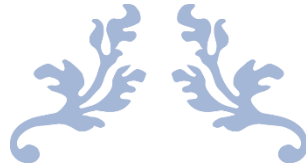
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Abstract

**The Church's Responsibility to the Children of the Incarcerated:
Ministry to the Fatherless and the Motherless
By Martin L. Lawson**

This paper discusses the church's responsibility to the families of the incarcerated and ways to improve efforts to support children of incarcerated men and women. The goal of this project is to interrupt cycles of family disfunction caused by incarceration, transform unjust systems that encourage disproportionate rates of incarceration in certain populations, and support families affected by these policies. Through the examination of current methods of ministering to the incarcerated and their families and a comprehensive study of the relationship between the church and incarcerated individuals and their families, I challenge traditional methods of ministry to the incarcerated to ascertain those methods that are no longer effective and then work with prison ministries to create new models that are more in line with a Christ centered model of ministry that promotes criminal justice reform, welcomes the incarcerated and their families, supports rehabilitation efforts, and empowers families with the tools necessary to overcome the burden of incarceration and the challenges that imprisonment poses to the family unit.



THE CHURCH'S RESPONSIBILITY TO THE CHILDREN OF THE INCARCERATED

Ministry to the Fatherless and Motherless



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Introduction

America the beautiful, land of the free and home of the brave, where all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. Rights that include life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The idea of a society guided by a standard of equality before God sounds promising in the American Constitution and Declaration of Independence, unfortunately, the idea of the United States of America and the reality of this nation have collided ethically and morally from the onset of its foundation. This nation of immigrants, built on the forced labor of enslaved men, women, and children, has evolved into a republic where the descendants of those slaves continue to be subjected to an existence void of the very freedoms and rights claimed as essential by the authors of the historic documents demanding their own emancipation and freedom from tyranny. Over one hundred and fifty years after the abolishment of slavery Americans who descended from the African diaspora continue to be disproportionately imprisoned physically, while also facing marginalization in areas of economics, health, politics, education, and many other societal considerations. This nation, which declared its freedom from tyranny as a God given right, has done extraordinarily little to ensure that same right to all its citizens. From the tyrannical slave trade to current systems of mass incarceration, certain groups of people have been decimated by the injustices of those who call on the name of the Lord while sinfully abusing and traumatizing generations of individuals and families through prejudiced legislation and underhanded policing practices and policies. How far we have strayed from the idea of justice for all? How might we begin to repair the breach of truth and trust mangled and undermined by unjust systems of racism, hate, greed, and inequality? Systems that have separated families and destroyed communities. Systems that clothe themselves “in God we trust” language while violently trampling the very rights to life, liberty,

the pursuit of happiness, and the idea of freedom that this country was founded upon. While the remedies to these issues may be many and varied, I have chosen to examine one area of considerable concern for the communities that have been immeasurably impacted by decades of mass incarceration. In this paper we will consider the current American criminal justice system, its focus on mass incarceration, and more effective ways of reforming incarcerated persons and returning citizens. We will also examine the extreme harm inflicted upon the children of the incarcerated, and discuss the role of the church in mitigating the severity of these hardships.

Dontae is an African American male, born and raised in Seattle Washington. His father was a high-level drug dealer who was in and out of prison for most of Dontae's childhood years. In the year 2000, sixteen-year-old (16) Dontae and two friends decided to beat and rob a homeless street performer on the streets of downtown Seattle. The man was hospitalized from his injuries and eventually died after spending several weeks in a coma. Dontae was charged with manslaughter and sentenced to 10-20 years in prison for his participation in the events that resulted in the death of another human being. In 2009 Dontae was released from incarceration on probation. Within four months of his release Dontae was arrested for a gun charge. He soon acquired three more charges and was on his way back to prison to serve another 10-year sentence before his thirtieth birthday. Dontae was raised in a family that sold drugs and enjoyed the power and esteem that accompanied the street pharmaceutical trade. Dontae's father, uncles, aunts, and grandfather had all served time in the Washington state prison system. It was as if he was destined to a life of crime and incarceration. Now Dontae has a son. What will this child's future hold, and what is the church's role in the life of this child and children like him?

The Problem

My work with Forsyth Jail and Prison Ministries (FJPM) and Community Passageways (CP) has exposed me to countless children who have had their mental, emotional, and/or physical being damaged by losing a parent for a period of time due to the incarceration of that parent. I have seen the tears and heard the wailing of both little children, and not so little children, as they realize that they must once again leave institutions of incarceration without their parent accompanying them. I have seen the pain in the eyes of a child and encountered the hardened young man or young woman who that traumatized child had become, after struggling to survive the crippling existence of growing up with an incarcerated parent. I have met countless young men and women, like Dontae, who exist in a society that they are ill equipped to navigate.

Currently, there are countless children suffering as a result of having a parent or both parents serving periods of incarceration in the United States criminal justice system. In my roles with Forsyth Jail and Prison Ministries (FJPM) and Community Passageways (CP) I have encountered many young men like Dontae. Unfortunately, these troubled young adults have emerged from the shells of children who were detrimentally affected by the absence of incarcerated parent(s). The children suffer economically from the loss of income that could be generated by the absent parent. They suffer from the lost intimacy and direct acts of love that the missing parent would be able to share. They lack the day to day support that inhouse parents can provide while also being forced to endure the societal stigma of having a loved one imprisoned. Often, as the remaining caregiver works to maintain the most basic and necessary needs of the household the children miss out on opportunities to participate in developmental activities that may stimulate his/her creative and artistic gifts. Children with incarcerated parents were also more likely to experience depression, behavior problems, learning disabilities, anxiety, and physical

health ailments, such as, obesity, asthma, speech, hearing, and vision problems.¹

In March of 2020, there were 2.3 million people incarcerated in the United States². Around 53% of these incarcerated persons were parents. According to these figures, depending on the number of children in the home, there would be more than 2 million, and possibly as many as 4 million children affected by parental incarceration in 2020. The harmful impact that the current American system of incarceration is having on generations of children has caused me to ask the following questions:

What is the church's responsibility to the children of the incarcerated, and how should we minister to the fatherless/motherless in order to counter the harm inflicted when a parent is incarcerated?

Analysis of the Problem

Mass incarceration of African American men and women has decimated African American communities for generations. African Americans continue to be incarcerated at consistently high levels even though crime rates, both locally and nationally, are lower than they were thirty years ago³. Despite these trends that indicate decreased crime, the number of incarcerated African Americans continued to climb over the last thirty years. These rates of incarceration are in no way a reflection of current crime rates, and the ratio of incarcerated African Americans to Caucasian Americans is fearfully disproportionate on both the local and national levels.

¹(Cavanaugh, and McShane *Understanding Juvenile Justice and Delinquency* 2016) Pg.123

²Prison Policy Initiative

³ <http://www.disastercenter.com/crime/uscrime.htm>

The impetus of this disparity is the inequality and racially biased legislation behind many of America's criminal justice policies. Since the abolishment of slavery in the United States Black Codes and other laws and legislation have consistently been put into place to criminalize and incarcerate African Americans. In the early 1980s the American government declared a war on drugs. This war claimed to address rampant drug crime in poor minority neighborhoods. With this declared war as the justification, African American arrests and convictions increased drastically.⁴ American government used new laws and legislation to conjure reasons to criminalize and discriminate against people of color and deny them in equal rights in housing, education, public assistance, and voting opportunities. Michelle Alexander argues that, "As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it."

Even with progress in civil rights and voting rights laws and the expansion of some opportunities, African Americans have faced what appears to be constant redesigns of racism and discrimination in America. Many characteristics of racist practices remain at the forefront of American society by taking on new forms of implementation. Present day policing methods still target minority communities despite surveys and other data that indicate that Caucasians are more likely to engage in illegal drug activities than African Americans.⁵ With the recent social and political unrest in the nation judicial and law enforcement inequality has once again been thrust into public view. While a 21-year-old African American woman was arrested with a 1-million-dollar bail for peacefully protesting the murder of unarmed black men by the police, a 22-year-old white woman was released into the care of her mother with no bail after storming the

⁴ (Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* 2010) Pgs. 76-77

⁵ (Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* 2010) Pgs. 122-125

U.S. Capitol building and allegedly stealing a computer from Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House. This crime was escalated by reports that the suspect intended to sell the stolen computer to Russia. The criminalization of black minds and bodies persists even as these black bodies continue to speak out against unjust and inhumane treatments that have been perpetrated for centuries.

The American political and judicial reply to the white rage that fueled the storming of the U.S. Capitol building by a mob of predominantly Caucasian antagonists in response to a disputed election, an election that has repeatedly been declared legitimate by several reputable agencies, is yet another example of the disparity of truth and justice in American society. The January 6th, 2021 DC insurrection has been widely criticized by groups of mostly white lawmakers, even as they continue to support the people, policies, and practices that nurtured the ideologies that resulted in the deadly incident. The irony is in no way lost on many African Americans who watched as whites were willing to kill for their sacred American rights and symbols even as they desecrate those same symbols and violated the rights of others for their own self-interest. For generations African Americans have faced mass convictions for actions far less severe than the crimes committed by American whites on the world stage over the span of those same years.

When proponents of large-scale incarceration present the issue in politics and the media, their discussions usually revolve around images of particularly dangerous individuals that have been marketed to the masses to bolster the argument for increases in policing and incarceration. In these marketing campaigns the most heinous criminal activities are highlighted to justify policies that impact not only dangerous individuals, but nonviolent offenders as well. Politicians and special interest groups have long demonized and then marginalized members of communities that did not have the political and/or economic resources to combat these efforts. While the most

heinous crimes are cited to enforce mass incarceration policies, it is often not the hardened and most dangerous criminals that these policies affect most. Persons addicted to drugs and those addicts that commit nonviolent crimes to sustain their drug use are arrested and convicted in large numbers. According to Renny Golden, author of *War on the Family: Mothers in Prison and the Families They Leave Behind*, “the U.S. incarceration rate rose by almost 300 percent between 1980 and 1998.” Renny states that as a result of the war on drugs and other incarceration policies “almost 70 percent of all incarcerated women are mothers.”⁶ Most of these women were not the dangerous criminals being shown on television and in presentations to lawmakers to convince them to pass tougher criminal justice legislation. Most of the women imprisoned as a result of America’s war on drugs were low level street dealers, first time offenders, individuals addicted to drugs, and those participating in other property crimes to support a drug habit. That, however, is not the story that is told as these women are removed from households and placed in the penal system, leaving behind motherless children. “The percentage of women entering U.S. prisons in the last twenty years has increased almost 400 percent, while male incarceration rates increased at less than half that rate. The captured are poor women of color, mostly African Americans, the majority of whom are mothers. The incarceration of African American women in state prisons rose 828 percent between 1986 and 1991, and it continues to climb.”⁷

The children of these incarcerated mothers face monumental problems as they attempt to navigate life without the central figure in a child’s upbringing. Much has been said about fatherless children affected by the mass incarceration of men, however, the impact of incarcerating mother’s has yet to be fully understood and may, in fact, be more destructive to the

⁶ (Golden, *War on the Family: Mothers in Prison and the Families They Leave Behind* 2005) Pg. 1

⁷ (Golden, *War on the Family: Mothers in Prison and the Families They Leave Behind* 2005) Pg. 3

children left behind.⁸ The damage to families and relationships that look to these women as primary caregivers is compounded as the women return to society traumatized by a prison system that is designed to annihilate healthy minds and bodies and perpetuate patterns of debasement. “For incarcerated women, theatrical sites of terror exist both inside and outside walls of prisons. Women’s high incidents (over 50 percent) of physical and sexual abuse prior to incarceration attests to the social terror of their lives outside of prison. Brutal prison conditions often replicate prior abuse, reinventing and reinforcing spectacles of terror within America’s gulag.”⁹

A correction system that does not accurately assess the root causes of trauma influenced behaviors, is less a correction system than a space to punish, often in torturous and inhumane ways. These mass convictions have caused countless African American men and women to be denied the basic rights available to every American citizen such as the right to vote, find gainful employment, or receive financial assistance for post-secondary education. These and other consequences of incarceration have resulted in limited options for returning citizens, and unfortunately, these factors generally influence the individual’s decision to reoffend. An overarching question that continues to challenge the Christian leadership is, “how has the church mobilized to counter this epidemic which has decimated generations of families and countless communities?”

⁸ (Arditti, *Parental Incarceration and the Family Psychological and Social Effects of Imprisonment on Children, Parents, and Caregivers* 2012) Pg. 59

⁹ (Golden, *War on the Family: Mothers in Prison and the Families They Leave Behind* 2005) Pg. 59

Responses to the Problem

For some time, jail and prison ministries have been a source of debate and concern for many contemporary Christian congregations. The church has struggled with their responsibility to minister to the incarcerated and the families of the incarcerated while not putting the safety of other church members, especially children, in jeopardy. There is an ongoing tension between the church's responsibility to all members within the community that it serves and the concern that some members of the community may pose a threat to the welfare of the congregation. This tension may be present when church leaders must decide how to deal with a particularly unruly and distracting member of the congregation, but it is especially evident in regard to formerly imprisoned citizens returning to society or the congregation after serving some time incarcerated for a crime. The congregation leaders must wrestle with the biblical charge to forgive as God and Christ forgive and be welcoming to all who come without exposing the congregants to individuals who may have harmful motives or intentions.

As a Christian theologian I believe that it is the responsibility of the church to not only serve the immediate needs of the entire community but also speak truth to power to change unjust systems that make it more difficult for certain groups within the society to enjoy all the benefits that the society has to offer. I believe that congregations are able to accomplish this through full engagement with returning citizens and comprehensive wrap around holistic support services that recognize and combat the cause and effect of corrupt politics and unjust governmental systems. Church involvement in changing systems of inequality and injustice is crucial to its role of being a change agent in the lives of all its members. Unfortunately, churches and places of worship are currently ill equipped to identify and affectively minister to the deep seeded causes of criminal behavior within their congregations and among the family members of

their congregations. Thus, cycles of crime and violence in households and periods of incarceration experienced by certain members of society persist. This project is designed to equip churches with the tools and discernment necessary to establish a positive long-term change in the hearts, minds, behaviors, and environments of the children of the incarcerated. The desired goal of this project is twofold. The first area of focus is the creation and implementation of trainings and programs of direct attention and support for families affected by incarceration. Second, this project encourages local churches to implement methods of ministry and social involvement that work to change unjust systems, laws, and societal practices that encourage disproportionate rates of incarceration in certain King county populations. This work is to be done while simultaneously providing needed resources and opportunities to returning citizens, children and families of returning citizens, and the communities most detrimentally impacted by unjust legislation and marginalizing societal practices.

I have worked in prisons, alternative schools, and mental health facilities. In these locations I have seen how incarceration has affected the children left behind. In my current ministry setting I am tasked with providing education and guidance to youth and young adults who have lived experience with gangs, gun violence, and incarceration. My organization, Community Passageways (CP) is a nonprofit organization that provides programming and resources to combat the harm caused to individuals, families, and the larger community by racial disparities, systemic oppression, marginalization and other societal ideologies and practices that detrimentally impact African American communities at disproportionate rates. CP partners with individuals, churches, and social organizations in the Seattle and South King County areas to provide support and resources for youth, young adults, and families in the King county area. CP also facilitates activities and events designed to break the cycle of generational crime, poverty, miseducation, and

incarceration. Most of the employees at CP are men and women of faith. A belief in a higher power influences many of CP's approaches to community service. Many of CP's core leadership lean towards nontraditional forms of faith expression and often criticize prevailing ways of doing church due to the church's ineffectiveness in more thoroughly improving the conditions of the African American communities where these churches are located.

In my previous position as Director of Forsyth Jail and Prison Ministries' (FJPM) Transition to Work Program I was responsible for staffing and facilitating prerelease courses and training sessions to prepare incarcerated individuals for reentry into society. These courses included Human Resource Development (HRD), Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University, and 7 Habits on the Inside. I was also tasked with providing mentoring support for inmates in the program, before and after release. I maintained a case management caseload that provided returning citizens with individual and family counseling, spiritual support resources, housing support, transportation resources, ongoing educational opportunities, and employment and vocational courses and referrals. These efforts were accomplished in partnership with local church congregations and volunteers committed to the wellbeing of incarcerated persons and their families. Forsyth Jail and Prison Ministries (FJPM) is seen as a liaison between city congregations and the jail and prison population because of its ability to provide access to inmates for ministry. Through interviews and focus groups I learned that the inmates come to the programs facilitated by FJPM because they believe that the services and discussions are helpful. They shared that they come seeking the hope and support that they need to do better and be better. It is my belief that God is inviting FJPM to be a catalyst and example of creating and functioning in new ways of ministry that do more than provide temporary aid to those impacted

by systems of inequality, but more importantly, works with community church partners to engage and change those systems to decrease the rates of incarceration.

Analyzing the Responses to the Problem

My research for this project (See Appendix A) revealed the gaps in support services that churches are providing to the incarcerated and their families. During interviews and surveys conducted on 25 returning citizens and the 25 adult caregivers remaining in the home, 47 of these interviewees, all of the caregivers and 22 of the returning citizens, shared that the returning citizens required holistic wrap around services and supports to increase their chances of success. They stated that they believed these supports were necessary to assist returning citizens in their efforts to become contributing members of society. Interviews with the caregivers revealed that the children and families of the incarcerated require comprehensive supports both during and after the periods of incarceration of a parent. The inmates shared that while the bible study programs, and weekly worship services provided by the church volunteers were helpful in temporarily lifting the morale of the inmates, they did not provide long term tangible solutions for issues faced by the inmates and the families left behind. The men shared that the prayer services were great for providing moments of hope but there was not a direct line of connection between the prayer and the provision of food for the inmate's child, clothing on the child's back, peace in the child's mind, and freedom and joy in the child's spirit.

In the fall of 2019, I relocated to Seattle and my position changed, but my desire to see the implementation of innovative revisions to how the church supports incarcerated persons and their families persisted. Thus, I continued this project's examination of the local church's responsibility to the incarcerated men, women, and young adults in Seattle and South King County, with a

particular focus of consideration on the children who are affected by these incarcerations. I focused particular attention on the current systems of interaction between the church and the caregivers of those children who have been impacted by the incarceration of a parent.

Through my research I learned that there is a common thread in how the churches in North Carolina and the churches in Seattle attend to the incarcerated. There are frequent bible studies or worship services inside the institution, yet there is little attention given to the children of the incarcerated, or the systems of government that perpetuate racist and unjust criminal justice praxis. There is little attention given to the systemic problems such as unjust laws and practices in the criminal justice system, or the educational system that tends to funnel certain youth demographics into the criminal justice system. There was also inadequate attention to the material situations of the families of the incarcerated, especially the children. I studied the local churches' current methods of ministry to the men and women in the King County Correctional facility, and ministry efforts aimed at the children of the incarcerated. This research was done to determine which methods are most effective, and which ministry methods require adjustments to ensure that desired goals of reduced rates of trauma and generational incarceration, amongst children of the incarcerated, are achieved. I found that very few congregations focus on the day to day needs of children of the incarcerated. Of the 25 congregations represented in this study, 15 had a bible study/worship service presence in a correctional institution and 4 had a Christmas program that provided gifts to children of the incarcerated, but none of the congregations had a program or ministry that focused on the day to needs of the children or caregiver left behind due to incarceration.

My research has shown that to meet their scriptural responsibilities, while safeguarding the welfare of its congregation, many churches have developed these "inreach" ministries that go

to jails and prisons to minister to the incarcerated. These methods “inreach” provide inmates with worship services, bible studies, prayer, encouragement, and donated items such as toiletries and reading materials. However, traditionally, there has been little church follow up with the inmate once he or she is released to welcome them into the congregation. Of the 25 congregations that I assessed none had long term supports in place to ensure that returning citizens make the transition to prospering and contributing members of society. Often the congregational consensus is that “inreach”, through bible studies and worship services, is an adequate form of ministry to the members of society who have been affected by incarceration. Some volunteers stated that they participate in these activities with the belief that this is their only opportunity to minister to the incarcerated men and women. They stated that this is the major focus of their ministerial outreach efforts and they believe that they are providing the inmates with something that the inmates need. Volunteers shared that in these encounters they teach from the bible, or other materials that they have brought, to convey a message of hope in a loving and forgiving God. They work to assure the inmates that God will take care of them if they commit their lives to Him. Often there is an implicit message conveyed that the inmates are incarcerated because they have not committed their lives to God in the way that they should. Usually, the volunteers share a belief that acceptable ethical and behavioral norms are to be found in biblical scripture, thus, biblical commands, statutes, and quotes are used to enforce ideas about God’s plan for each person. The overall message communicated in these setting is this:

“GOD IS REAL, AND WE ARE CREATED TO SERVE HIM. HE WILL TAKE CARE OF US AND WE WILL LIVE IN HEAVEN AFTER OUR PHYSICAL DEATH, IF WE OBEY GOD”

Little is done to illustrate how God cares about and will attend to the immediate needs of the incarcerated persons and their families. The incarcerated persons were generally left with a “pie in the sky” ideology of hope when they came seeking tangible expressions of God’s love.

Of the 25 congregations that were studied for this project 21 have their primary places of worship outside of the communities that are impacted the most by the criminal justice system. Often it is easier for these congregations to come into the places of incarceration, do a “good deed”, and then return to their communities without following up because there is no real and lasting connection to the inmates or the neighborhoods that the inmates must return to. The activities of these “distant” ministries” can sometimes take on a posture of unrecognized arrogance as “the people of God” enter into institutions of incarceration to bring the “Word” to the poor and “uncivilized” inmate population.

The 4 congregations located in the neighborhoods most impacted by crime and incarceration faced different challenges when engaging the incarcerated and returning citizens. The incarcerated may be members of the congregation, or friends or family members of church congregants. In these situations, the details of the crime that caused the individual to be incarcerated might be known by either the leaders or the lay persons within the church. When this occurs, it can negatively affect how the returning citizen is viewed and treated by the congregation, especially when the crime is of a violent or sexual nature. While the congregation may have a desire to be welcoming and forgiving, they may struggle with the practical application of these characteristics when engaging an individual who has served time for a violent rape, murder, or some other crime that is deemed morally reprehensible by society at large. The pastor and congregation might fear that the returning citizen may commit a crime that directly impacts the members of the congregation. There might be concerns about exposing

vulnerable members of the congregation to known offenders and a constant sense of concern about the possibility of the returning citizen reoffending. Although there may sometimes be valid and legitimate reasons that warrant concern for the safety of church members, congregational leaders are responsible for encouraging all believers and making sure that all members within their communities have access to the healing and redemptive power of the word of God and love of Christ personified in the body of Christ, the church. This can be done for even the most heinous of crimes with proper safeguards and safety considerations.

The churches involved in this study have historically focused most of their prison ministry efforts on going into institutions of incarceration and serving the immediate and temporary needs of inmates and returning citizens. Unfortunately, these efforts alone, while meant for good, can be quite harmful. Some of the incarcerated individuals looked to the visiting churches for more lasting physical and spiritual supports and when that did not occur, they expressed disappointment in the body of Christ as a whole. Ministries must learn to employ tactics that do more than place a “band aid” on the problem. None of the congregations that I studied employed actions that attended to displacing systems of injustice that lead to and encourage disproportionate rates of incarceration. This type of ministerial support may not result in the immediate remedy for an inmate or returning citizen’s day to day physical needs, but when applied alongside conventional methods of emergency support an eventual repair of broken institutional systems can occur and the overall long-term needs of the inmate or returning citizen are more fully met. This type of ministerial support begins with the act of wholly welcoming returning citizens into the church community. It is only by embracing returning citizens as equal members of the community, and engaging them as whole persons, that congregations become concerned about the systems that are harmful to their wellbeing. It is easier to ignore a tragedy

that has happened in someone else's home than it is to ignore one that has happened in your own home. So, when returning citizens are entirely welcomed into the church community the long-term concerns and wellbeing of the returning citizen become the interest of the congregation. The ability to arrive at this understanding will take some focused self-reflection within the various congregations. In order to engage in this type of theological reflection the church must first learn to recognize the incarcerated, not as the other who needs charitable acts, but as a member of their own community.

The current methods of prison ministry, employed by the congregations that I studied, dealt with the inmate as an entity separate and apart from the community. He is not seen as a father, brother, nephew, or son. He is not treated as a fatherless child or a victim of abuses that distorted his worldviews. He is not recognized as a byproduct of corrupt government or a broken educational system. He is not seen as being with relations, loves, abilities, hopes, and fears. He is treated like a criminal who is fortunate enough to have "upstanding volunteers" come and spend time with him. He is not treated as one who needs, and deserves, access to all the resources and opportunities that are enjoyed by the most prosperous members of the congregation. This demonizing of the inmate must cease if the church is to properly minister to his needs. In order to treat inmates with this type of respect the church must first accept and acknowledge the inmate as a member of the church's beloved society. The majority of the volunteers that I interviewed wrestled with how to truly satisfy their responsibility to the lost, the widowed, the orphaned, and the otherwise marginalized citizens of the world. How should the church serve the immediate needs of these populations while also removing the obstacles that perpetuate conditions of need?

These and other apparent ethical and moral failings sparked a desire within me to understand the true intent of Christian ministry. In this effort I turned to a dictionary and looked up the definition of ministry. There were several different definitions having to do with a class or group of ministers and the office of clergy, however, the definition that resonated most with me, regarding the Christian ministry, was: “something that serves as an agency, instrument, or means.” I was drawn to this definition of ministry for several reasons, chief of which is the service aspect of the definition. This definition best fits my understanding of ministry because when I imagine Yeshua (Jesus) I see service to God and humanity in all the acts that Yeshua performed in the brief period His first century earthly ministry. It is for this reason that I believe service is of paramount importance to any group that claims to do ministry.

The remaining part of this definition is just as important to Christian groups. The definition does not simply require service, but service as an agency, instrument, or means. This implies that Christian ministry is service as an agent or instrument of Christ. Christian ministry is more than social service it is service in the name of Christ, service that draws men, women, boys, and girls to God. Christian ministry should point to God and all things should be done with the desire to introduce people to the Creator and source of all.

Yeshua was able to accomplish this difficult task by preaching a gospel of healing, hope, and restoration with His words while positively impacting everyone that He encountered with His actions. By feeding the hungry, speaking truth to power, and setting the captives free from the different situations and circumstances that had them bound, Christ delivered individuals and families from varying degrees of hopelessness, pain, and despair. Yeshua not only directly healed and delivered persons who suffered from mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual anguish, but He also spoke and acted against the government and religious systems that fostered

practices of injustice that were detrimental to certain members of society. Yeshua confronted leaders head on regarding their unjust practices while He simultaneously healed and empowered the victims of these corrupted systems. His approach was holistic and impactful on both the personal and collective levels. Yeshua's interaction with the woman at the well was an example of a type of restorative justice framework that should inspire alternative ways of responding to crime in our society. A justice that does not condemn the individual nor condone her transgressions, but instead empowers through genuine forgiveness while mandating right action. The command to, "Go and sin no more" is a mandate that impacts not only the individual being corrected, but also those who are affected by the means of correction society chooses to employ.

In her book *Redeeming a Prison Society: A Liturgical and Sacramental Response to Mass Incarceration* Amy Levad asserts that "The eschatological imagination of the Eucharist ought to indict our consciences about the ongoing reality of social injustice and our failure to live up to the vision of God's reign." She argues that our efforts should counter "disparities that remain as significant factors in our society."¹⁰ The vocation of the Christian church is to provide an environment that nurtures, supports, and produces disciples of Yeshua who are prepared and equipped to do ministry in every aspect of their lives. The vocation of the Christian church is bigger than simply telling people about Yeshua a few days a week. Instead, the Christian church should mimic Him in every aspect of His ministry. The Christian church should be a place where healing is found and people are raised from the dead, figuratively, and God willing, literally. People should find hope, purpose, and direction from the Christian church, but as they look to God and seek to reestablish a loving relationship with the Creator their earthly needs should also

¹⁰ (Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society: A Liturgical and Sacramental Response to Mass Incarceration* 2014) Pg.98

be attended to. The children of the incarcerated need more than a prayer, a sermon, and a bible study. They need their basic needs met so that they can then look beyond survival to spiritual and social growth, and mental, physical, and economic wellness.

Because of this mandate on the Christian church, it is my belief that new methods of prison ministry must be employed if we hope to make a real impact on the current system of incarceration and counter the generational harm that it is causing. Change must occur to initiate lasting and self-sustainable growth and improvement in the lives and attitudes of inmates, ex-offenders, and their families. The prevailing system of prison ministry lacks the checks and balances that might be used to assess effectiveness, and instead, credit is given to those simply willing to show up. There must be a renewed effort to establish a goal of dismantling the unjust criminal justice system while providing inmates, returning citizens, and their families with the tools that lead to self-empowerment. Community volunteers must be trained with the skills necessary to engage the inmates, returning citizens, and families of the incarcerated in a way that encourages them to continue to grow on their own, outside of the bible studies and other events facilitated by the volunteers.

Additionally, youth and young adults sometimes have a difficult time adjusting to a life where God is the focus and hope is preached when so many things around them seem hopeless. This difficulty is increased exponentially when they are dealing with the hardship of having an incarcerated parent. The Christian church is responsible for adjusting in ways that allow it to remain vital in the communities in which it participates by having a positive impact on the prevailing issues of the members of those communities. Many of the youth and young adults interviewed for this project expressed that they see the current church as obsolete and thus they are not drawn to it as a means of growth and progression. From their perspective the church is

not seen as relevant to the cares and concerns of many in emerging generations. Eighty percent of the children with incarcerated parents that I interviewed for this project stated that the church's involvement in their day-to-day wellbeing would be crucial in establishing a relationship built on trust and a sense of being valued and cared for that could then make the youth more receptive to gospel messaging.

Through tangible examples of care an effective church will teach youth and young adults how to contribute to society while standing for Christ. The Christian church must help youth and young adults embrace the faith by making the promised hope and joy of a relationship with God real to them by showing them God's love through the caring actions of the church. The church is to use God's benevolent care for all of humanity as a standard by which they determine their choices and decisions. The purpose of youth and young adult ministry is to teach youth, young adults, and emerging adults how to find their place in the Christian story while helping them look beyond the material concerns of a consumerist society to their identity in Christ. This is to be done while assisting them as they navigate the difficulties and obstacles of life. Having an approach to youth and young adult ministry that deals with the prevailing consumer culture, recognizes the struggles of the family unit, and addresses the biases of societal systems is of utmost importance due to the influence that societal systems, prevailing culture, and family dynamics have on youth identity and development.

Without foundational understandings of family unity and standards of behavior, established by a caring family unit, youth may seek out other sources of connection and acceptance. This search can have adverse effects on a young person's health and safety when they align happiness and contentment with destructive sources. In my ministry to youth and young adults of incarcerated parents I hope to inspire them to seek to develop a real and lasting

relationship with God that is based on their personal desire to know God as their source of meaning and purpose. I also hope to see the young people that I work with mature into Disciples of Christ who are eager to go and make more disciples after being properly equipped to accomplish this task.

It is important that Christian churches and prison ministries develop ministries that are progressive and innovative enough to keep their audiences engaged while also being effective. Effective ministry to the children of the incarcerated supports their social, spiritual, physical, and psychological needs while teaching them how to personally seek God and buy into the mission and vision of the congregation. This is done by remaining relevant to emerging generations. Just as Moses passed the mantle to Joshua, aging church members must pass the mantle to the next generations if the church is expected to continue. It is imperative that future generations acquire the necessary knowledge and skills needed for them to live lives of purpose where relationship with God determines their values and morals. Without a moral standard society lets each person determine for themselves what is right and what is wrong. This can result in a destructive society when certain members have less regard for issues of fairness, justice, and equality than others and everyone is left to administer their own methods of justice. From these types of environments issues like mass incarceration are formed.

Ministering to youth and young adults with incarcerated parents can be an especially challenging situation for many older church members. The generation gaps often lead to additional difficulties due to differences in cultural understandings, maturity, and areas of interest. Even among biological parents and their children the issues and concerns differ among generations. These differences can easily present as conflict between different generations.

Another challenge concerning youth and young adult ministry is the expectation, among seasoned Christians, that youth and young adults understand Christian concepts in the same ways that older generations understand them. New Christians are often expected to embrace Christian concepts and apply them in ways that are comparable to the ways in which the elders of the church reacted when they were coming of age. Many older Christians neglect to acknowledge the correlation between the prevailing social factors that were present during their moments of true conversion and how these historical moments in history served to shape their congregational experience. Whether it was the Great Depression, segregation, Jim Crow laws, the Great Migration, or the Civil Rights Movement, the church's participation in these eras helped shape the public consciousness and opinions of the church.

Older Christians sometimes seem to forget that they were not always the obedient Christians that they now claim to be. They often lack the patience and grace necessary to take a loving and nurturing approach when dealing with youth and young adults who are still struggling with basic concepts of Christianity. This lack of patience and grace may manifest as frustration which is sensed by the youth and young adults who in turn retreat from all things Christian. Older Christians must remember that coming to Christ is an ongoing process that all Christians must go through at their own pace and they must be willing to walk at this pace as youth and young adults grow in their Christian vocation.

The struggle against mass incarceration and the effects that it is having on the children and families left behind might very well be a present-day point of location for both older and younger generations to rally around. There may be a commonality of purpose in the recognition of how this current epidemic is harming current communities while also being a threat to future generations. If the more seasoned Christians are willing and able to meet youth and young adults

with patience and tolerance, they may be able to pilot the youth into participating in a faith practice that encourages thoughts and deeds guided by their relationships with God that works to overturn systems that have detrimentally affected them directly. This might be the “Civil Rights Movement” that they assemble behind.

The research gathered for this project has culminated in the creation of a program designed to equip individuals and congregations with the education, guidance, and awareness that they need to facilitate prison ministries that provide hope, support, and work to dismantle unjust criminal justice systems. From this research I suggest new methods of doing prison ministry that, when implemented in local churches, are more likely to interrupt the collateral damage that mass incarceration is causing among certain communities. I have used the collected data to create a new training program for local churches that wish to provide more holistic and impactful ministry to the incarcerated individuals and their families. These trainings and program methods will be used to address and overcome the various issues that plague incarcerated individuals and their families in Seattle and South King County.

By applying the learning in these trainings prison ministry leaders and volunteers with healthy pastoral imagination will be able to see the potential in each inmate and visualize new ways of engaging with that portion of their congregation. They will have the ability to love and believe in the inmate until the inmate learns to love and believe in him or herself. A new course must be charted that gives the incarcerated the leeway that they need to grow through their mistakes and learn to walk in a faith that is their very own. The faith of their grandmothers, mothers, and bible study facilitators will not sustain them, and so they must be given space and guidance as they stand and stumble along until they are strong enough to not only walk in their

own power but be able to reach back and help someone else stand. These efforts may include partnering with community friends of CP who reinforce the organization's efforts to support children of incarcerated men and women by exposing them to opportunities in education, travel, music, theater, summer camps, etc..., with the goal of breaking household cycles of illiteracy, addiction, poverty, and incarceration. Churches are encouraged to participate in these efforts by providing the remaining care giver with funding, sponsors, mentors, and resources that follow the child's development from elementary school into college and introducing the caregiver to various means of self-development such as parenting classes and other educational and vocational opportunities. With the information that I have obtained from this research project I intend to guide and encourage the CP staff, volunteers, and partners in the application of new and innovative ways of engaging the problems that lead to criminal behaviors and the generational marginalization of families and individuals. Churches will be taught to guide children and families of the incarcerated into a relationship with God while providing for their basic and psychological needs. As these youth and young adults grow in their Christian understandings, through new trusted relationships, they can be taught to take ownership over the Christian vocation in ways that are most relevant to them. They must be given the space to create their own approaches to the use of the Christian symbols used by their faith communities as they seek remedies for harms inflicted by systems of incarceration. The Christian congregations must learn to engage with the next generations with open eyes and ears and treat these youth, young adults, and caregivers as "fellow travelers toward God."

Proposed Innovation

To help facilitate this travel toward God I have created a twelve-week workshop series designed to address issues of culture, faith, identity, history, and purpose (See Appendix B). The workshop is designed for young men and women between the ages of 8-21 who have incarcerated parents. The program is also for the caregivers of these young persons. Most of my audience will be urban African and African American youth but the workshop can be tweaked to be taught to a more diverse audience as well. Youth from all socio-economic groups will participate since all youth need to learn the skills they will acquire in this course. The workshop will explore the effects of incarceration on the youth and their household and teach young people how to think through common issues affecting their lives by using different lenses and perspectives which we will introduce to them and the remaining caregiver. The youth and caregiver will be provided with wrap around support services like individual and family counseling, mentorship, educational support, economic education and financial support, and exposure to travel and the arts. These workshops will help the participants learn to make meaning in new ways by applying tools and techniques made available to them in the workshop. This is an important element of the workshop because youth tend to think in durable categories. They are categorical thinkers so I intend to provide them with some tools and teachings that they can apply as they make choices regarding their lives. I will evaluate the course by taking quizzes to test retention and playing games that test the participant's methods of dealing with the issues that are common to them. Although the foundations of this workshop will be built upon Christian principles it will be available to both secular and Christian groups. For each of the first 11 weeks the group will examine a different topic of discussion and on the 12th week we will hold a celebratory session where family members are encouraged to attend. At this session, the youth

will be given certificates and gifts to symbolize a rite of passage and the completion of the program. The caregivers will also be given a gift to symbolize their participation and completion of the program. During the 12-week program attended by the family members of the incarcerated there will also be a weekly class to educate the church members about the trauma faced by the families of the incarcerated, long term ways to support these families, and ways in which the congregation can participate in efforts aimed at criminal justice reform. Prior to being introduced to the families of the incarcerated the volunteers, mentors, and congregations will attend periodic trainings to help them identify helpful and harmful ways of doing ministry with the children and families of the incarcerated. These trainings will challenge traditional ways of participating in ministry to inmates and their families, with a specific focus on the participants understanding of their reason for doing prison ministry and the impact that they hope to have in their ministry efforts. Participants will also receive information on current legislation and other prevailing systems of government and law enforcement that perpetuate injustices in the criminal justice system. Once the volunteers and participants are educated on criminal reform initiatives, they will be encouraged to adopt methods of working to change corrupt systems and include these actions in their ministry efforts. In the 7th week of the training the groups will come together and be giving an opportunity to begin to develop relationship. From these relationships church members will be encouraged to “adopt” youth and families that they will commit to maintaining a support presence for a determined amount of time. These relationships would then be monitored, long term, by members of the congregation’s prison ministry staff. This course will be made available to all church congregations that are interested in attending to the needs of the incarcerated and their families.

This program will be an introduction to a lasting relationship between children of incarcerated parents and healthy church prison ministries. After the workshop sessions, through mentoring and other engagements with the youth and their caregiver, church members will continue to expose the youth to opportunities in travel, the arts, education, vocational discernment, financial literacy, mental health and wellness, physical health and wellness, and appropriate social awareness. These youth and families will also be guided by informed congregations who will assist in providing the basic provisional necessities of the family while providing them with a consistent community of support, consultation, and encouragement. The engagements will be ongoing and culminate with the youth and family being prepared and encouraged to become an agent of support to other youth and families impacted by incarceration.

Involvement in the lives of the incarcerated persons and their families will take place both pre- and post-release. While the youth and caregivers are receiving support, the incarcerated parent will also receive classes, study materials, and support to help them navigate their period of incarceration and prepare them for reentry into society and the lives and households of their loved ones. These focuses will include mental health and wellness counseling, addiction recovery classes, workplace etiquette and vocational guidance, mentoring, family support services, and spiritual wellness support. This program methodology will provide a restorative approach for both the parent and the youth and remaining caregiver.

Mass incarceration has been a bane for communities of color for generations. It has been a cause of trauma for individuals, families, and entire communities. Efforts to appeal to governmental agencies appear to continuously fall on deaf ears as policies and conditions of disenfranchisement continue to decimate certain communities. It has become clear that the people must become the change that is necessary to repair the harm that generations of children

and families are suffering because of mass incarceration. If the people are responsible for initiating this change, then it seems that the men and women of the church, the disciples of Christ, should be at the forefront of this movement, for it is in this way that the children of God care for the children of humanity as they manifest Luke 4:18-19 in the world.

¹⁸ The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,

¹⁹ To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

Appendix A Research

For this project I employed three different research methodologies. I began by interviewing the chaplains who were on staff with FJPM. I interviewed three chaplains, including the senior chaplain who has been part of the ministry for over 35 years. I also interviewed community volunteers who come into the jail and prison to participate in the different ministries that are offered to the inmates. I interviewed 25 volunteers who participate on 5 different ministries to get a variety of feedback from different denominations, ethnicities, genders, and ages. Finally, I interviewed the inmates to get feedback on how they received the ministries and if they felt that they were effective in helping them change harmful behaviors and if they were positively impacting the lives of their children. Aside from the interviews that I conducted I also observed the various ministries and took extensive notes. My research on the organization's history was done by interviewing the senior chaplain to get a complete picture of the organization's founding and evolution into its current organizational standing. I did further research by looking at the history of the community around the prison congregation and interviewing congregational leaders who have participated in prison ministry with FJPM for some time. After researching local prison ministries, I looked at how other congregations were doing prison ministry around the nation to gauge the impact and effectiveness of current methods of engagement with inmates, inmate families, and returning citizens. I also surveyed local congregations and CP staff to determine their motivations for doing this work and the goals that they hoped to achieve in this work. I employed small group discernment, as well as congregational surveys and conversations, to determine a way to focus the energies and efforts of local church volunteers in a direction that empowers returning citizens and their families in their efforts to overcome systems, thought processes, and behaviors that lead to detrimental actions, incarceration, and recidivism.

I studied the relationship between the local church and incarcerated individuals and their families while researching current methods of ministering to the incarcerated and their families in King county to determine if there is a more compassionate/effective way of welcoming this population into loving fellowship. My research has caused me to challenge traditional methods to discover those methods that are no longer effective and create new models that are more in line with a Christ centered model that invites the incarcerated and their families to come as they are while empowering them to become thriving and contributing disciples of Christ, instead of people who become dependent on the charity of church congregations and other social service institutions.

I employed several different methods of focused research to collect data to determine where change should take place in our current ministry efforts and what practices should be implemented in order to accomplish ministry outcomes that most closely resemble the ministry focus and efforts of Jesus the Christ. These methods of research included:

1. Observations of volunteers, inmates, family members of inmates, prison staff, and CP personnel. I observed practices and methods of ministry currently being employed in bible studies, yokefellow gatherings, ministry service events, donation and fundraising drives, worship services, and other areas of ministry.
2. Conversations and interviews with volunteers, inmates, family members of inmates, prison staff, and CP personnel. The conversations were “Transformative” conversations where I began by framing an invitation.
 - a. For those who chose to participate, we discussed the ability, and the necessity of growth and development of the prison ministry services (framing choices and

identifying hurdles that might hinder actions to change ministry methods so that the ministry efforts might be most impactful)

These interviews and conversations revolved around the following questions:

- What is the story that you are telling about this ministry/work?
- What is your role in the story that you are telling about this ministry/work?
- What is the commitment you hold that brought you into this ministry/work?
- What are the gifts you hold that have been brought fully into this world?
- What is your contribution to the very thing that you complain about?
- What is the price you are willing to pay to ensure the thing you complain about is solved?
- Who serves/is served by this ministry/work?

Finally, I employed Asset Mapping surveys to take an inventory of the various gifts, talents, & abilities present in the community to learn how existing community gifts, that may not have been identified, can be best utilized to meet the needs of the community we serve. I mapped the community assets of:

- Inmates
- Inmate family members
- Volunteers
- Local church congregations represented by the volunteers.
- Community organizations
- CP staff
- King County Correctional Facility staff

Appendix B Workshop Schedule and Agenda

Phase 1 Foundations

(Weeks 1-3)

Week 1

Families of the Incarcerated

Welcome, introduction of program and desired goals, confidentiality agreements, commitments to program rules and expectations.

Church Volunteers

Welcome, introduction of program and desired goals, confidentiality agreements, commitments to program rules and expectations.

Week 2

Families of the Incarcerated

Introductions/Our Stories: Facilitators, Families.

Church Volunteers

Introductions/Our Stories: Facilitators, Volunteers.

Week 3

Families of the Incarcerated

Why we're here. What we need and hope to gain from this relationship.

Church Volunteers

Why we're here. What we have and hope to give to those in need.

Phase 2 Awareness

Week 4

Families of the Incarcerated

Discuss current criminal justice system and areas where reform is needed.

Church Volunteers

Discuss current criminal justice system and areas where reform is needed.

Week 5

Families of the Incarcerated

Discuss desired changes in the criminal justice system and ways to accomplish those changes.

Church Volunteers

Discuss desired changes in the criminal justice system and ways to accomplish those changes.

Week 6**Families of the Incarcerated**

Discuss needs.

Church Volunteers

Discuss needs experienced by the families of the incarcerated.

Phase 3 Connections**Week 7**

Groups are brought together, round robin where groups share their stories to introduce themselves to one another.

Week 8

Groups continue introductions.

Week 9

Connect volunteers to families who they will be responsible for.

Outline expectations for families and volunteers.

Phase 4**Successes and Adjustments****Week 10**

Families and volunteers create immediate, short term, and long term goals together.

Week 11

Families and volunteers report out on progress, challenges, and future adjustments.

Week 12

Graduation

Families and volunteers are celebrated.

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