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Reentry Roundtable

## **Prisoner Reentry and the Institutions of Civil Society: Bridges and Barriers to Successful Reintegration**

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## **Religion, Reform, Community: Examining the Idea of Church-based Prisoner Reentry**

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# Religion, Reform, Community: Examining the Idea of Church-based Prisoner Reentry

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines two apparent assumptions underlying current discussions about church-based prisoner reentry programs. First, these discussions implicitly understand prisons as places where criminals are punished, not as places where people are directed away from criminality. The task of effecting “permanent behavioral change” in ex-offenders is taken to be the domain of the social world outside prison walls. Churches, which are taken as expert alchemists in the transformation of sinner to saint, are considered natural and ideal candidates for this work. Second, the language of “reintegration” into “community” and “neighborhood” via religious institutions implies a certain understanding of churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples as “community institutions.” The assumption is that churches are *open* communities—that is, they are open to serving nonmembers as well as members, and they are somehow embedded in the social life of the neighborhoods where they happen to congregate.

These assumptions certainly are valid; indeed, many religious communities around the country offer compelling support for such assumptions. But these assumptions are not the *only* valid ones we can or should make in our strategic thinking about prisoner reentry. Indeed, studies that seek to determine the viability of such programs should not focus exclusively on those churches already struggling to fill the void produced by an increasingly punitive and decreasingly rehabilitative criminal justice system. My own observation of churches, particularly those operating in poor urban settings, suggests divergent but equally valid assumptions we might make about the way churches operate, and what churches are inclined to do. Policymakers aiming to encourage or design church-based prisoner reentry programs should take seriously these alternative assumptions, as well as those that animate widely celebrated existing programs.

## Religion, Reform, Community: Examining the Idea of Church-based Prisoner Reentry

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A recent article in the *Washington Post*<sup>1</sup> announced plans for the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA) of the District of Columbia to partner with local religious institutions to help ex-offenders “reintegrate” into their “communities.” The goal of the collaboration is to create an institutional support network through which those recently released from prison might more easily find jobs, living quarters, and emotional and drug counseling. Congregations are asked to conjure at least three aspiring reentry mentors, who will receive special training from CSOSA. The volunteers will receive special training from CSOSA. According to the article, federal funds might eventually become available to congregations. Without these new local supports, as the reasoning goes, ex-offenders will likely become repeat offenders, and public safety will deteriorate. According to the article, it will be especially crucial that churches<sup>2</sup> intervene in this regard, for existing government services anticipate that they will not be able to support the 2,500 people estimated to be released from prison in 2002.

The article presented clergy who apparently were more than eager to meet this pressing need. For example, Reverend Judith Talbert, pastor of participating Faith Tabernacle, was quoted thusly: “We must have the inclusion of the church family and the community as well as government to bring permanent behavioral change.” Unclear, though, is the extent to which churches in general will be inclined to participate in this and similar programs. To be certain, religious institutions have long run prison ministries. Christian churches, following the suggestion of the Gospel to visit those incarcerated, have offered direct spiritual counsel to prisoners. Islam, of orthodox (especially Sunnite) and heterodox (Nation of Islam, Five Percenters) traditions alike, has established a considerable presence in penal institutions as well, especially since the best-selling *Autobiography of Malcolm X* presented that figure’s compelling Muslim theodicy. Most recently, Buddhists have begun ministries behind bars as well, teaching the discipline of unflinching equanimity through meditation.

Still, religious institutions have had to confront the limits of their ministries behind bars. Spirituality may help people survive the hardships and absurdities of incarceration, but life on the outside poses a radically different existential challenge. Meanwhile, local courts and churches are realizing that freed prisoners need jobs, homes, and unwavering support, emotional and otherwise. As states all over the country face record rates of prisoner release—a delayed consequence of “tougher” arrest and sentencing policies originating in the late 1980s—will churches answer the inevitable call for more faith-based reentry programs? More specifically, do these calls rest on sound assumptions about the nature of religious institutions?

Importantly, the basic assumptions implied in the D.C.-based CSOSA program are not unlike those motivating church-based prisoner reentry programs around the country. First, these programs implicitly interpret prisons as places where criminals are punished, not as places where people are directed away from criminality. The task of effecting “permanent behavioral change” in ex-offenders is taken to be the domain of the social world outside prison walls. Churches, which are taken as expert alchemists in the transformation of sinner to saint, are considered

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Broadway, “A Spiritual Path to Freedom: D.C. Agency Urges Congregations to Help Inmates Make Transition.” *Washington Post*, 12 January 2002, B9.

<sup>2</sup> I use the word “churches” generically to refer to houses of worship, regardless of faith or tradition.

natural and ideal candidates for this work. Second, these programs, with their language of “reintegration” into “community” and “neighborhood” via religious institutions imply a certain understanding of churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples as “community institutions.” They assume that churches are *open* communities—that is, they are open to serving nonmembers as well as members, and they are somehow embedded in the social life of the neighborhoods where they happen to congregate.

These assumptions certainly are valid; indeed, there are many clergy like Reverend Talbert whose work offers compelling support for such assumptions. But these assumptions are not the *only* valid ones we can or should make in our strategic thinking about prisoner reentry. My own observation of churches, particularly those operating in poor urban settings,<sup>3</sup> suggests that there are contrasting but equally valid assumptions about the way churches operate, and what churches are inclined to do. Policymakers aiming to encourage or design prisoner reentry programs should take seriously these alternative assumptions, as well as those that animate programs like CSOSA.

### *Religion and Reform*

Much of the language of reentry recently has been organized around the concept of “reform”: the transformation of criminal identities into licit ones. The idea is that the individual personality must change, the individual psyche must recover from criminality, in order to prevent a relapse into anti-social behavior. It is no wonder that religious institutions have been raised as possible midwives of successful reentry. Time in prison is viewed as evidence of an individual moral failure; turning away from crime and incarceration, and toward “productive” life, is thus a form of conversion. This is not a new language or logic. The language of individual transformation is a cousin of that which emerged during the moral reform movement, a strain of religious social thought originating around the turn of the 20th century in the nation’s exploding urban centers.<sup>4</sup> According to the philosophy of moral reform, the city’s moral pandemonium would inevitably entice recently urbanized masses into lives of vice and violence; that is, unless evangelists were prepared to steer individuals into wholesome, quasi-pastoral lifestyles with Bible tracts and Sunday schools. Likewise, reentry policy is beginning to look to churches to reorient, or reform, ex-offenders so that they might resist the enticements to crime present in the city.

To be certain, church-based programs may well take advantage of what religious institutions and their leaders do best. Since they draw on religious traditions that affirm the values of human life, community, and faith, these efforts may be uniquely equipped (although not necessarily *better* equipped) to deal with the social and emotional challenges faced by recently released prisoners. There are, nevertheless, challenges unique to the church-based reform approach. An immediate problem is, given their forceful religious thrust, such programs may risk shutting out a significant portion of the population they intend to serve. This population

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<sup>3</sup> Between 1995 and 1999 I conducted an ethnographic study of religious congregations in Four Corners, a predominantly poor African-American neighborhood in Boston. The .6 square mile neighborhood contained 29 congregations at the time. See Omar M. McRoberts, *Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black Urban Neighborhood*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> See Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920*. Cambridge, Mass.: Oxford University Press, 1978.

may not be interested in “getting religion” to the extent that some church-based social programs subtly or blatantly encourage.

Also, the individual moral reform approach will appeal mainly to that subsection of churches that already frames its work in terms of radical conversion experiences. What about those religious institutions that do not resonate with this framing of crime as a matter of individual moral failure? Some religious groups, historically and currently, have framed these matters in terms of a grand societal failure—especially a failure of government and market to protect and distribute life opportunities in ways that are just and pleasing to God. As crime is concerned, we might expect churches to take a hard moral reform stance: speaking out against criminal acts, crusading to transform individual criminal lives, and so on. From a theological standpoint, however, there is no reason to assume so. A Christian, for example, might just as readily point to Jesus’ sympathy for outlaws, and the fact that he was himself executed by the state as a criminal. We should not forget the historical role of churches as moral agitators, who have targeted activism not so much at personal moral failures, but at society-wide ones. Churches thinking in the social failure vein might express moral outrage at the phenomenal expansion of the penal system, which disproportionately incarcerates African-American men and women and now includes for-profit prisons. They might find it tragically ironic that the dearth of living-wage jobs has led working-class communities to actually compete to host penal institutions. Rather than celebrating “tough on crime” measures, these churches might attack them as unfair, if not outright predatory. Perhaps they would identify the postindustrial service economy, and lack of educational opportunities in poor urban contexts, as sources of material deprivation that lead to illicit crime. Or they might decry the fact that in 1994 Congress banned prisoners from receiving federal education aid, thus further eroding whatever rehabilitative functions prisons might have served. In their focus on such matters, these churches act in the *prophetic* tradition of isolating and challenging what they understand to be deeply flawed systems of power. Like the individualistic moral reform frame, this broader societal frame is not new or foreign. The Social Gospel movement, which emerged around the same time as Moral Reform, and the black Civil Rights struggle of the mid-20th century identified social justice as the primary goal of religious-based activism.<sup>5</sup>

When acting in this prophetic vein, churches take advantage of their ostensibly<sup>6</sup> independent status vis-à-vis the state and the market. Their authority is derived not from the court system, electoral politics, or the corporate boardroom, but from sources religious people understand as wholly other and above these. As a result, and somewhat ironically, religious institutions and leaders often enjoy a special legitimacy in the public square. Perhaps the most forceful example of this public wielding of religious authority was the black Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The moral challenge that this movement posed to the state was framed and articulated almost entirely by clergy and religious laypersons who thought of

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<sup>5</sup> See Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920*; Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, New York: Free Press, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> I say “ostensibly” because not all churches are completely disassociated from corporate and government entities. Some churches spawn major businesses; others directly receive government money to operate service programs.

their struggle not merely as a legal one, but as a cosmically significant one. Moreover, much of the local community organizing behind this movement took place in churches.<sup>7</sup>

Given the title of this roundtable, we might also think of individual moral reform and social reform strategies in terms of the two primary heads of this veritable hydra called “civil society.” Churches that adopt the moral reform approach, perhaps relieving the burden now placed on public programs, embody that aspect of civil society that “empowers people”<sup>8</sup> to do for themselves what government cannot, or will not, do. The latter, by contrast, are the equally important head that advocates and agitates for those who have little power over the policy decisions that directly affect their own welfare. There is an alternative vision of what churches and civil society do: represent underrepresented people, making sure that their interests are represented in large-scale policy. Mind you, these two heads are not necessarily separate in practice—many religious communities may feel called to do both kinds of work. Policy discourse, nonetheless, tends to privilege one or the other so that, for example, we imagine *only* the church’s role as a possible stand-in for state social service agencies. Meanwhile, we do not imagine how policy might protect the prophetic voices of those religious groups that receive public money to perform social welfare services.

### *Churches and Community*

The new reentry discussions have something else in common with the older moral reform movement—both link crime and disorder not only with personal weaknesses, but with a presumed breakdown of ordering functions in *local community* life. Moral reformers believed the city had a chaotic power irresistible to those not properly anchored in personal religious faith. The city simply could not nurture community, with all its morality-sustaining intimacies. Those who tried to reform wayward urbanites thus offered *order* in the form of faith-based communities—usually Sunday schools. Prior to the recent talk of faith-based prisoner reentry programs, this logic had reincarnated most recognizably in the criminological literature on “social disorganization.”<sup>9</sup> Social disorganization theory ultimately is about the failure of community institutions and structures that might otherwise prevent social disorder in urban neighborhoods. It finds the genesis of criminality in communities that fail properly to watch and control young people, that cannot organize to assist law enforcement, that permit too many “broken windows”<sup>10</sup> and other small signs of disorder that might invite more egregious transgressions. It points to the failure of a certain social safety net—not the state-based one that once aimed to prevent people from falling into material desperation and hopelessness, but the local community one consisting of people voluntarily ordering and controlling each other in the spaces where they live.

The current discussion about prisoner reentry picks up the old moral reform narrative at a later point. It begins with the fact of the released criminal; it admits that time spent in prison does

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<sup>7</sup> See Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*. New York: Free Press, 1986

<sup>8</sup> For more on this perspective, see Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: From State to Civil Society*. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute Press, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Social disorganization thought extends back to the early Chicago School of Urban Sociology. For a review, see Robert Bursik, “Social Disorganization and Theories of Crime.” *Criminology* 26(4):519–51, 1988.

<sup>10</sup> James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, “Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety.” *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1982, pages 29–38.

not conclusively reform him or her. The concern is with those aspects of the community, or the lack thereof, that permit or encourage ex-convicts to continue in their criminal careers. Put differently, the focus is not on the disorganized, disorderly community as the primordial matrix of criminality, but rather as the place where criminals regroup, reinvigorate, and ultimately reproduce their old anti-social selves. Given this perspective the question then becomes, how can communities be ordered in ways that encourage the emergence of new, pro-social selves? This of course invites the evangelical question of the old urban moral reformers: how can communities help criminals be *born again*? Again, with concepts so resonant with conversionist themes, it is no surprise that churches are implicated as potential, if not ideal and natural, candidates for reentry work. The implication is that churches can form a *sacred* safety net to catch those who have fallen, or might fall, into trouble with the law.

One fairly well-known Pentecostal church in Boston church is a would-be node, or rather knot, in this anticipated net. The Azusa Christian Community serves ex-convicts and young people, mostly male, at risk of teetering into the criminal justice system. Although all of these services are operated under distinct 501(c)(3)s, Reverend Eugene Rivers, Azusa's founding pastor and the dynamo behind all of its social programs, sees social outreach as a matter of religious and community responsibility. His actual congregation remains quite small, containing perhaps 30 people, in part because everyone is expected to participate heavily in the church's activist program. But Azusa's programs, run out of the Ella J. Baker House (literally a *rehabilitated* Victorian house) reach hundreds of local people. The Baker House knot in the sacred safety net exists, above all, to offer meaning, order, and purpose in the midst of a devastated social landscape.

The emphasis on order is evident in the way the building is run. Everyone who enters—me, a semiretired beat police officer; an architect from London helping church members design a proposed science center—is asked to remove his or her hat, as are the young men who regularly circulate in the building. Cursing is strictly forbidden. Male staff persons are required to wear neckties. By creating a highly ordered space, Azusa is able to offer its Ella J. Baker house as a “gang-neutral space” and “safe space” for young people trying to avoid trouble. Throughout any given day, young people are literally walking in off the street to take advantage of Azusa's tutoring and job placement services, or just to hang out.

Some of Azusa's programs directly incorporate secular activities that, in many churches, would be considered decadent. For instance, in the safe space of the Baker house basement, young men hold boxing tournaments, which frequently serve to settle “beefs” between individuals and rival crews without resorting to armed struggle. It is the high level of order in the building that allows Azusa to metabolize “beef” into boxing without worrying about the fight escalating. “Nothing's gonna happen in here,” Rivers once assured me. “No fights are going to break out in this church.” Just that day, a teenager had broken house protocol by taking a couple of bare-fisted swings at his opponent, initiating an actual fight. Baker House staff pulled the two young men apart. I asked Rivers if this were not evidence of something “breaking out.” “Here's how the religious piece comes in,” he replied. “If this wasn't a church, [the initiator] would have got *mashed*.” In previous scuffles outside the church, the young man had “gotten his ass kicked.” For taking advantage of the safe space, though, he was temporarily banished from Baker House.

The key here is that the individuals, ex-offenders and otherwise, who frequent Baker House have *faith* in the stability of the order established in that community space. It is not that they have converted to Pentecostalism and joined Azusa or that they have a generic respect for

church buildings. It is a faith in the reality of order in the building, a faith in Rev. Rivers and the younger mentors at the House that propels the young men to socialize peacefully and help maintain order among *themselves*. Rivers averred, “it’s not a leap of faith, but a walk across a bridge built relationally”; that is, Rivers and his workers prove themselves trustworthy through ongoing relationships. Baker House regulars prove themselves trustworthy as well over time. Furthermore, order is subtly and explicitly enforced, through everything from hats off, neckties on policies to temporary banishments.

To the extent that Baker House and similar programs work, it is probably because of the relationships of trust and mutual accountability—of *social faith*—they generate among participants. Of late, social scientists have referred to these kinds of relationships as “social capital,” though the capital metaphor may be displaced, since these interpersonal matrices are not so much spent or invested, but *activated* for particular purposes. Religious people, particularly Protestant Christians, might broadly identify this as “fellowshipping”: the ongoing, ever-deepening human interaction that makes congregants not simply a body of a faith, but an active community where people look after each other and are willing to hold each other to righteous lifeways. In any case, this ordinary aspect of religious community generates precisely the kind of human support that reentry program advocates want to extend to ex-offenders.

The question, though, is whether we can *expect* churches to translate their community-building ethic into social service work with court-involved adults, as have Azusa and other widely celebrated cases. Certainly not every church will be eager to widen the circle to include ex-offenders in this way. As member-serving institutions, churches commonly place a priority on the immediate concerns of congregation members or on communities of interest that transcend particular neighborhoods. These concerns and interests may loosely resemble those of former prisoners: Church members, their families, and their friends may need job training, jobs, affordable housing, educational opportunities, drug counseling, and so on. But we cannot assume that churches instinctively will want to reach out to nonmembers, especially ex-offenders, or otherwise incorporate them into a community of mutual accountability, resource sharing, and shared striving.

Indeed, many of the churches I observed were intensely aware of the space immediately surrounding them and did not lack convictions about what to do, or not do, in that space. This was not surprising, since most of these churches worshipped in commercial storefronts located right *on* the street. There was barely any physical buffer between street life and church life. As a result, the street itself and all the images of violence and criminality that went with it, often were part of the religious identities of church members. More specifically, the communities that religious people built among themselves were defined over and against this street world.

Churches conceived of the street in one of three ways: (1) as a recruitment ground to be trod and sacralized, (2) as a point of contact with persons at risk or in trouble who are to be served, or (3) as an evil other to be avoided at all costs. In each case, the street was more than just a physical place—it was also a trope embodying religiously assigned meanings. The meanings that church people, especially clergy, assigned to the street in turn helped them define what it meant to be religious in that particular church.

A few churches fit into the first two groups. Some conceptualized the street as a mission territory. Here, church people would go out into the street in order to sacralize it, so that one might encounter not only the devil, but God in the street. But there was no social service or advocacy work embedded in this approach. It was, rather, a proactive, evangelical way of dealing

with the basic understanding of the street as an evil space filled with people doing evil works and living evil ways of life. Out of churches, only two, one of which was Azusa, considered the street as a point of contact with marginalized individuals and families.

The great bulk of churches I studied fit into the third group: they drew a very thick cognitive line between the street and the church community and considered the street, and the people associated with it, as a place worthy of careful avoidance, not evangelization, outreach, or “reform.” The most marginal families and individuals, the ones least likely to feel welcome in church, were viewed as symptoms of the world’s chaotic and evil state. This pattern echoes Elijah Anderson’s findings regarding the way people distinguish decent ways of life from street ways of life. In one ethnography, Anderson (1999)<sup>11</sup> was concerned with interactions of blacks in a uniformly poor neighborhood. Not unlike churches that view the street world as an “evil other,” Anderson’s interviewees saw their neighbors as falling into two camps: “decent people” and “street people.” Decent people were characterized by civility and dedication to work and family, while street people were associated with violence, public lewdness, personal and familial irresponsibility, joblessness, illicit activity, and proud nihilism. And most important, those people who considered themselves decent went out of their way to avoid those they associated with the street.

The point is, the religious communities that are most adept at fellowshiping, most skilled at generating internal social capital may also require, *as a matter of spiritual survival*, that members avoid contact with people who have not committed their lives to the path of salvation. In the language of one of the more recent works on social capital,<sup>12</sup> intimate “bonding” ties among church members can thwart the formation of “bridging” ties between church and non-church. It is the bridging tie—the type of fellowshiping that deliberately leaps across the cognitive line between church and street—that might link a recently released offender to a religious community and its services, thus forming a node (or, rather, a knot) in a sacred safety net. Azusa members made this leap because they thought of the street as a kind of social service area where the faithful were *supposed* to go to meet the material and social needs of marginalized persons, including ex-offenders. They were even willing to put aside explicit proselytizing to do so. But such religious communities cannot be taken as the norm.

### *Conclusion*

Admittedly, this paper merely grazes the tip of the proverbial iceberg. I have addressed neither the capacity, evaluation, nor legal concerns involved with funding church-based reentry programs. In short, suffice it to say that churches will require good deals of money, extensive training, and professional staffing to do this work; faith and community alone will not do. In addition, such programs will succeed only with close evaluation over time. Yet, where religious faith is understood as a primary social service technology, evaluation may come as something of an insult. The conversion factor is notoriously difficult to evaluate systematically and impartially. The alternative, though, would be simply to assume, based on religious bias alone, that some practices are just better. True, stories about how God led a person to turn his or her life

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<sup>11</sup> Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. *The Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, New York: W.W. Norton.

<sup>12</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

around are powerful, and religion has undeniably made a difference in many people's lives, but which religion is best at changing lives? On average, how many prayers must one utter in order to find a job or house, or quit crack, or avoid returning to prison? Should the prayers be uttered aloud, or in the heart? The need for systematic evaluation could easily lead to such nitpicking over the elements of religious practice. In the end, this could inadvertently make a mockery of religious *experience*, the very factor countless people of faith believe to be effective in reforming lives. And finally, despite the recent congressional détente over Charitable Choice, which now permits explicit displays of religious conviction but disallows discrimination in hiring, we are not necessarily out of the woods as legal issues are concerned. As government becomes tolerant of overtly religious content, church-based reentry programs will find themselves at the center of debates about the legality of such programs. This will be so because people reflexively view the matter of crime and punishment, perhaps more than any other topic of civic discourse, as a matter of individual moral reform, and organized religion is still perceived as the master alchemist of the individual moral heart.

These matters, nonetheless, have been raised elsewhere in reference to other kinds of faith-based social services. My goal has been to initiate a discussion about the very idea of churches "reforming" ex-offenders by integrating them into rehabilitative forms of "community." I have tried to clarify the assumptions this idea implicitly makes about the inclinations of local religious institutions. It is crucial that we closely examine and deeply critique these assumptions, for as former prisoners hit the streets in record numbers, government will increasingly, and perhaps faultily, view the multi-congregational landscape as an army of pre-formed communities, eager to change the lives of ex-offenders, one by one.

Of course, not all churches view themselves in such ways. Unlike public agencies, churches are member-serving institutions. Their relationships with nonmembers are complex, widely varying, and often saturated with religious meaning. The forms of community they construct are not instantly or naturally adaptable to reform-oriented social services. Also, as I have emphasized, there is a robust prophetic tradition of religious activism that would just as likely protest the state as assist it. Policy would do well to protect this role even as it encourages direct service roles. At the same time, policy should protect released persons, not all of whom will be drawn to church-based programs. Many may prefer assistance from public and unambiguously secular entities. Protective measures, then, should ensure that ex-offenders are not herded against their will into church programs, but they should also ensure that existing secular programs are not starved to support church-based ones. Neither public nor church-based programs are served when Peter's dwindling coffers are raided to pay Paul.

Studies that seek to determine the viability of such programs should therefore not focus exclusively on churches that struggle to fill the void produced by an increasingly punitive, and decreasingly rehabilitative, criminal justice system. We should attempt to understand the religious institutions that resist this work, for one reason or another. This task will require, nonetheless, that more criminologists and policymakers take up the sociology of religion.