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Examining the Idea of Church-based Prisoner Reentry

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A recent article in the *Washington Post*¹ announced plans for the District of Columbia to partner with local religious institutions. One goal of the collaboration is to create an institutional support network that will help ex-offenders easily find jobs, living quarters, and emotional and drug counseling. The article also mentions mentors, who will receive special training from CSOSA. The volume of ex-offenders returning to the District is large, and the article notes that federal funds might eventually become available to cover the costs. The article also notes that ex-offenders will likely become repeat offenders, and public safety is a crucial concern. It suggests that churches² intervene in this regard, for existing government programs have failed to help 2,500 people estimated to be released from prison in 2002.

The article presented clergy who apparently were more than eager to participate. A pastor of participating Faith Tabernacle, was quoted thusly: "We are willing to work with the government to bring permanent behavioral change." Urban Institute is inclined to participate in this and similar programs. To be certain, the article suggests that churches, following the suggestion of the Gospel to visit those in prison, should be of orthodox (especially Sunnite) and heterodox (Nation of Islam) presence in penal institutions as well, especially since the best-practice is to have a Muslim theodicy. Most recently, Buddhists have begun ministering to ex-offenders with equanimity through meditation.

Still, religious institutions have had to confront the limits of their resources. The hardships and absurdities of incarceration, but life on the outside is also difficult. Courts and churches are realizing that freed prisoners need job training. Many states all over the country face record rates of prisoner release. The article notes that programs originating in the late 1980s—will churches answer the inevitable calls? These calls rest on sound assumptions about the nature of religion.

Importantly, the basic assumptions implied in the D.C.-based (and other) church-based prisoner reentry programs around the country. First, these programs are not for the punished, not as places where people are directed away from crime.

offenders is taken to be the domain of the social world outside transformation of sinner to saint, are considered natural and in the language of "reintegration" into "community" and "neighborhoods," churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples as "community institutions." If they are open to serving nonmembers as well as members, these neighborhoods where they happen to congregate.

These assumptions certainly are valid; indeed, there are many other such assumptions. But these assumptions are not the *only* valid ones for reentry. My own observation of churches, particularly those of African-American churches, but equally valid assumptions about the way churches operate and encourage or design prisoner reentry programs should take several programs like CSOSA.

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1 Bill Broadway, "A Spiritual Path to Freedom: D.C. Agency Urban Institute Post, 12 January 2002, B9.

2 I use the word "churches" generically to refer to houses of worship.

3 Between 1995 and 1999 I conducted an ethnographic study of an African-American neighborhood in Boston. The .6 square mile neighborhood is McRoberts, *Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black*

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