A recent article in the *Washington Post* 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. 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 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 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?
offenders is taken to be the domain of the social world outside prison walls. Churches, which are taken as experts in the transformation of sinner to saint, are considered natural and ideal candidates for this work. Second, these programs, with their language of "reintegration" into "community" and "neighborhood" imply a certain understanding of churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples as "community institutions." They assume that churches 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 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, 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 these assumptions into account.

Note: This report is available in its entirety in the Portable Document Format (PDF)


2 I use the word "churches" generically to refer to houses of worship, regardless of faith or tradition.

3 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.

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