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Keeping Faith In Prisons: Evaluating the policy and practice of faith-based prison units

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Growth of faith-based units

One of the most fascinating developments in prisons in recent years is the proliferation of religiously-oriented prisons and special prison units. The Prison Service England and Wales set up the first Christian-based prison unit in the Western world in February 1997 at HMP The Verne, in Dorset and it now has four Christian-based units in existence. The subject is immensely topical; just this year the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI) (part of Charles W. Colson's Prison Fellowship movement) opened a unit at HMP Dartmoor whilst another organisation, Kainos Community (KC), who have run Christian-based units in England and Wales since 1999, opened a new unit at HMP Parc, in Wales. Faith-based units have been expanding in the United States. IFI runs four Christian-based units in the US whilst another organisation, Horizon Communities, runs a further six Christian, multifaith and interfaith units in five states. Faith-based units have also spread to the Commonwealth and elsewhere in Europe. In 2004, Lawtey Correctional Institution in Florida became the first totally faith-based prison in the West, catering for all faiths.

Faith-based prison regimes typically allow the beliefs of a particular religious faith to inform the practice of punishment in penal institutions. Frequently, they allow prisoners greater freedom to explore religious beliefs (their own and those of others), usually with the support of volunteers from faith-based communities outside the prison. They also tend to include programmes that are more intensive and progressive than those typically found in standard regimes elsewhere in the national prison estate. At their best, such programming is designed to encourage desistance from antisocial behaviour and movement towards pro-social values, often as a result of contact with volunteers from outside the prison who model good citizenship.

Finding solutions

The growth of such units shows the readiness of prison departments to turn to faith-based communities to assist in finding solutions to the problem of how to manage expanding prison populations in ways that are safe and humane. Despite the growth of faith-based units, little detailed, empirical, research has to date been published on this phenomenon and its effects. This paper draws on a pioneering empirical evaluation conducted by a research team, headed by the author, for the UK Government Home Office, Prison Service and KC on the operation of four KC units in England (Burnside, Adler, Loucks and Rose, 2001).

We found that KC seemed to attract three main types of prisoners: (1) those who genuinely

wanted to change their behaviour and saw Kainos as an opportunity (if not a last resort) to do this; (2) the more religious (usually, but not exclusively, Christian) prisoners who wanted to be in a faith-centred environment and (3) those who volunteered because they believed it would be an 'easy option'. A number of these decided to stay, even when they realised that life on the wing was more challenging than they had expected. In addition, there were those who did not volunteer at all and who were placed on Kainos for different reasons (e.g. lack of bed space or those deemed 'vulnerable' in some way).

The processual part of our evaluation involved in-depth interviews with prisoners and staff on and off Kainos Community, as well as management. We found that almost all the respondents on KC (staff and prisoners alike) were of the opinion that KC were generally calmer, quieter places. The overall impression was that prisoners supported each other more, staff and prisoners had better relations, and prison staff and KC staff for the most part worked together as a team. Prison governors interviewed were generally very positive about the perceived regime benefits of KC in each prison. Each unit was seen as making a positive contribution to order and control within the prison. The biggest advantage of the KC was its 'community' ethos. This aspect tended to attract people to the units and to keep them there once they arrived. Few people named places elsewhere in the prisons that provided something similar. The Kairos Weekend (in which Christian volunteers from outside the prison present prisoners with some elements of the Christian faith and an experience of life in community) drew the strongest and most positive response regarding life on KC (although the Kairos Weekend can take place in any prison). Participation by volunteers from outside the prison was said to be a crucial factor.

Religion and human rights

The evaluation also explored a number of human rights and equal opportunities issues. We found that the general consensus from prisoners, staff, and managers was that no one was actively excluded from participating in KC unless they chose to exclude themselves, or if prison staff

excluded them for security purposes. Prisoners and staff who were not Christians or not comfortable with the Christian faith may choose not to be part of KC, but they are welcome to do so if they wish. Despite the Christian basis of the KC programme, KC clearly attracted people from a wide range of beliefs. Almost all the prisoners interviewed and the majority of staff believed the Christian basis of the KC had an impact on prisoners. Responses were generally that prisoners had become calmer, more polite, and more tolerant of others, and that they were more inclined to talk through conflicts.

A consistent pattern was that some people believed the emphasis on Christianity in the programme (and during the Kairos Weekend in particular) to be too heavy, while others said it was less than they expected or was even not enough. Much depended on personal background and experience of religion prior to KC. The vast majority of prisoners interviewed on KC said they felt free to discuss their beliefs and doubts, to ask questions, and to practice their religion, and that their beliefs were respected, both on KC and during the Kairos Weekend. There were, however, exceptions to this, notably the views of Muslims at one prison. These views were diametrically opposed to those of Muslims, and indeed of other non-Christians, at KC in the other prisons. This latter group stated without fail that their time on KC was very positive and that it had strengthened their faith in their own religion.

Reconviction rates

The reconviction study followed 84 participants in KC who were released from prison prior to October 1999 for two years from release date (the 'Reconviction Sample') (Burnside et al., 2005, chap. 10). Comparisons were made with a national sample of nearly 14,000 prisoners discharged in 1996/97, with similar sentence lengths to the Reconviction Sample and from similar prisons (the 'Comparison Sample'). The two-year reconviction rate for the Reconviction Sample is, at 36.9%, nearly 6% less than the rate for the Comparison sample, at 42.7%; a decrease that is too small to be statistically significant. That said, the sample of KC participants numbered only 84 in total; a more definitive assess-

ment would need to be based on a larger sample, which will be possible in the future when enough KC participants have been released from the prison system. It is clearly too early to conclude that faith-based programmes can have no effect on recidivism – it is, rather, that no such effect has yet been demonstrated. Given the large-scale investment in faith-based programmes currently (especially in the USA) the need is for more research on recidivism outcomes.

Religion is an intensely personal experience and the manner and extent to which it forms the basis of programmes in prisons must always be handled with extreme care. There are a number of risks: vulnerable prisoners may be exploited (deliberately or otherwise) and lack of sufficient informed consent may violate prisoners' conscience and freedom of religion. This can lead to accusations of 'brainwashing' and favouritism. Equality of opportunity can be violated. The personal nature of faith-based programmes also means they risk unearthing sensitive issues that staff and volunteers may not be best qualified to deal with. Non-uniformed unit staff and outside volunteers risk being seen by uniformed staff and management as well-meaning but potentially damaging amateurs. Volunteers and ex-offenders used as part of such programmes are potential security risks. Programmes can also be vulnerable to individual personalities involved in running them and their relations with key people in the rest of the prison.

Love and forgiveness

Nevertheless, and on the basis of the positive results gained from the evaluation (including its attitudinal study; Burnside et al. 2001), we concluded that, overall, faith-based units in England: "... may act as a signpost to the [England and Wales] Prison Service in terms of promoting standards of decency, humanity and order in prisons" (Burnside et al. 2001, 13), a recommendation quoted on the floor of the House of Commons. Much the same can also be said, in my view, of other faith-based units around the world including APAC, Horizon Communities and IFI: (accounts of each of these organisations and their development can be found in Burnside

et al. 2005). A former prison Governor in England with experience of faith-based units concluded that they could be: "*the home from which prisoners took on prison life and in which they established and took responsibility for love and forgiveness*" (quoted in Burnside et al., 2005, chap. 11).

They can help to foster a sense of maturity and responsibility and encourage prisoners to take more responsibility for themselves, their families and their communities, as well as greater responsibility with staff. Instead of apathy, stagnation and a fear of deterioration, they offer a place for reflection and the possibility of inner development, in terms of character, morality and spiritually. They consider what prisoners' strengths are, as well as their weaknesses. They are a chance to reorder personal values and to reconstruct a new identity. They can also be places of safety and real relating in the often frightening and artificial world of prisons. They offer humanity in the face of a dehumanising prison environment, reinforcing pro-social attitudes and behaviours traditionally regarded as weaknesses in prison.

Counter-culture

Beyond this, faith-based units can be a kind of 'counter-culture', challenging and subverting the prison 'honour code' whereby the strong subdue the weak. Intimidation can be replaced with vulnerability; hostility with friendship; suspicion with trust and isolation with community. They can resymbolise the meaning of imprisonment. By making prisons more human and punishment more humane, faith-based units promote ethicality and legitimacy. They provide grounds for believing that prisons are places where punishment is just. Given the increasing pressures upon imprisonment at the start of the twenty-first century, this is significant. Faith-based units can be of great value – to keep faith in prisons.

Recommended Further Reading:

Burnside, J. (with Loucks, N., Adler, J. and Rose, G). (2005). *My Brother's Keeper: Faith-Based Units in Prisons*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.

Burnside, J. (with Adler, J., Loucks, N., and Rose, G). (2001). *Kainos Programme Evaluation*. Retrieved June 14, 2005 from <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/prisons1.html>.

Maruna, S., LeBel, T. P., & Lanier, C. S. (2004). Generativity Behind Bars: Some 'Redemptive Truth' About Prison Society. In E. de St. Aubin, D. P. McAdams, and K. Tae-Chang (Eds.), *The Generative Society: Caring for Future Generations* (pp. 131-151). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

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