

What Role Does the Black Church Play in Reducing Recidivism among Black Males?

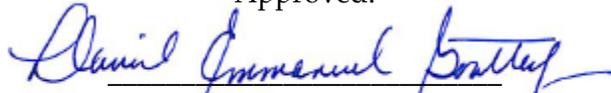
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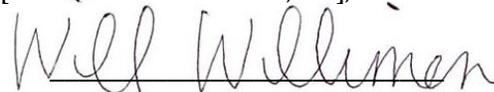
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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University
2022

ABSTRACT

What Role Does the Black Church Play in Reducing Recidivism among Black Males?

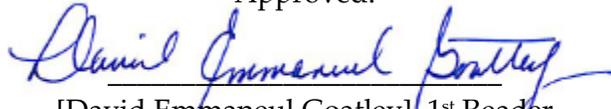
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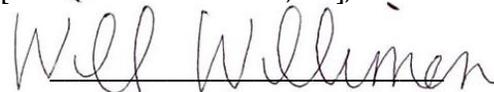
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Abstract

The correctional system in the United States has long demonstrated an unequal system that affects people of color, especially the Black male. This system has created a new form of slavery that continues to plague the Black male to find a place in the so-called land of the free and the brave. The prison pipeline created in the United States contributes to one out of three Black males being under some sort of supervision, probation, or parole in their lifetime. The problems on the inside of prison result in mental disorders, depression, anger, bitterness and a continue to destructive behavior. After incarceration, the challenges continue to plague the Black male when re-entering society. The Black male faces obstacles of employment, voting, housing, family, and adjustment. These barriers help contribute to recidivism. The majority who return to society have a high recidivism rate because of these challenges. This research dwells on the importance of the Black church regarding rehabilitation, along with family- and community. This research follows my own experience within this system and evidence of the role a church can play in reducing recidivism.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my children, Kobe, Jayla, Imiah, Patrick, and Chase. I dedicate this book to you, because you gave me a reason to make a change not only in my life, but in the lives of others. This thesis is evident that you can achieve your divine purpose, no matter what obstacles you face in life. Continue to follow your dreams and be the best that you can be. I dedicate this thesis in loving memory of my great-grandfather, A.C. Welch, who demonstrated what it means to be a pillar of the community and provide for the family. This thesis is also dedicated to my great-grandmother, who only had one leg, but raised all of her great-grandchildren, grandchildren and children with the love, wisdom, work ethic, and power of God. I cannot forget my parents, family, church, and community who helped mold me into the man, I am today. To my mother, who would always be there no matter the situation, I say thank you. To my father, who instilled in me to be a man and accept accountability and responsibility, I say thank you. To all who have played a part, and there are so many to name, I say thank you.

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Introduction

This country, since the beginning, has infused policy and privilege to systemically prevent the Black race from equally progressing. Structural racism — legislation, policies, and practices that stack the deck against Black individuals and families — makes thriving and succeeding a struggle. Black people must contend with economic inequality, systemic racism, engraved low self-esteem, and the genetic scars of slavery that have been deeply etched through generations of pain, anger, hurt, and mental distress.

One of these legacies is mass incarceration. “The United States has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world.¹ According to Michelle Alexander, “America has less than five percent of the world’s population but about twenty-five percent of all prisoners, with more than 7.3 million individuals on parole, probation, in jail or prison, or under some form of correctional supervision across the country.”² This system has created a for-profit business that formulates a less rehabilitative process.

The prison system in America frames a picture of inequality that disparately affects people of color. Blacks are more likely to be incarcerated on the same charge than their White counter parts. They also have a higher rate of recidivism (being rearrested

¹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2012).

² Ibid

and returned to prison for a similar offense after one's initial release.) Tavis Smiley suggested, "There are more African American males in jail now than there were working as slaves at the height of slavery. In their lifetime, 1 out of Black Americans will be incarcerated, compared to Latinos at 1 in 6 and whites at 1 in 17."³

Black males who return home from prison face many obstacles and challenges. The Black male has many challenges because of incarceration, which restricts their opportunities to gracefully reenter society. "These restrictions include disenfranchisement (losing the right to vote), public service ineligibility, student loan restrictions, child custody restrictions, employment and/or housing restrictions, and felon registration laws."⁴ Additionally, Black males are more likely than average to have a lack of family support and less education, if any at all. These factors make it a challenge for former inmates to obtain employment, housing, and social services after incarceration. Black males in particular face the problem of returning to a society that is still formed by the same historical and structural racism that made their initial imprisonment more likely.

Black churches have a role to play in addressing recidivism among Black men impacted by mass incarceration. My research suggests the Black church is not

³ Tavis Smiley, *The Covenant with Black America* (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 2006).

⁴ Jason M. Williams, "It's Hard Out Here if You're a Black Felon': A Critical Examination of Black Male Reentry," *The Prison Journal* 99, no. 4 (2019).

monolithic. My research shows that only a small percentage of African American churches surveyed have been committed to prison ministry in any form. Yet, many within these congregations know of someone who has been incarcerated. The church has not truly represented the whole Body of Christ if those individuals who come home from incarceration find no place to call home. Church should be a place where one can seek refuge, hope, and love.

The church must develop a strategic ministry to engage with Black men, when they re-enter society and address the issues of mass incarceration and recidivism, particularly as it disproportionately affects Black males. Church involvement must provide better opportunities to reduce recidivism, but that alone is not enough. Black men are trapped within a broken system that continues to promote systemic racism. A holistic response calls for naming and standing in prophetic judgment against the system of mass incarceration, even as the church ministers to individuals in need.

There is a great deal of wisdom available to draw on in examining this problem and proposing ways the church may become involved. Researching the present and past mass incarceration and recidivism, will help us better understand the scope of the problem. By engaging with ecclesiology, we will discern a call for the church to reach out to the suffering world. Through liberation theology, we will find a connection to reducing recidivism among Black males. We can assess existing programs by having

conversations with congregational leaders who have worked to reduce recidivism in their communities. And through the personal reflection of an African- American pastor with a history of incarceration, we will learn how this author found his way free of recidivism.

1. African Americans, Mass Incarceration, and Recidivism

1.1 In the Blink of an Eye

It happened on October 26, 1993. I still remember it like it was yesterday. This was the day I was sentenced to five years confinement within the Mississippi correctional facility, known as Parchman. My whole world had changed in the blink of an eye. When a person is making money and living the “so-called good life” it can make them feel invincible. Everyone always thinks they are smarter than the next person. I was that person who believed I could get away with what I was doing without repercussions. I never once considered that my actions not only affected my life, but had a great effect on my family, community, and society. The love of money can make one become selfish and really have no regard or respect for anyone.

Well, all this came crashing down on the day of October 26th, 1993; all of the money and material things cannot replace five years of my life. I remember seeing my mom through the fence and for the first time I saw tears running down her face. No one who is not a mother cannot fathom the hurt and pain she felt inside. But I was still worldly minded and clouded with the mentality of the street fast life, my response to my mom was “don’t cry mom, it’s going to be alright, I will be out before you know it.”

My gang affiliation on the outside carried on within the inside. One must understand that when you are arrested, many times the law officials already know of your gang affiliation. As you enter the correctional facility, someone inside will know

you from the outside, so one cannot hide their affiliation because, news of your arrival gets there before you do.

At that time, I was riding on the bus with some of my associates heading to prison. Along the ride, I would look at the trees, sky, outside surroundings realizing this would be the last time I would see the outside again, for some time. I begin to block out everything from my mind concerning the outside, because there was nothing I could do while inside. Immediately my mentality shifted to life on the inside.

1.2 The Impact of Walls

Experiences of confined walls can be stressful. Christine Leuenberger, “a sociologist at Cornell University who has studied walls around the world, says that walls are barriers that include a system of both physical markers, such as no-go areas and checkpoints, and ripple effects, such as job loss and the breakdown of social networks.”¹ Leuenberger wrote, “Walls can lead to feelings of humiliation, demoralization, denial, anger, or aggression.”² Walls can continue to cast a shadow on one’s life even after they are gone. According to the *Prison Policy Initiative*:

Incarceration can cause lasting damage to mental health. The carceral environment can be inherently damaging to mental health by removing people from society and eliminating meaning and purpose from their lives. On top of

¹ Jessica Wapner, “Do Walls Change How We Think?” *The New Yorker*, March 29, 2019.

² *Ibid.*

that, the appalling conditions common in prisons and jails-such as overcrowding, solitary confinement, and routine exposure to violence-can have further negative effects. Researchers have even theorized that incarceration can lead to 'Post-Incarceration Syndrome,' a syndrome similar to PTSD, meaning that even after serving their official sentences; many people continue to suffer the mental effects.³

Being confined in prison can cause major effects to mental fortitude. "Research by the Prison Policy Initiative shows that, although it varies from person to person, incarceration is linked to mood disorders including depressive disorder and bipolar disorder. Many of the defining features of incarceration are linked to negative mental health outcomes, including disconnection from family, loss of autonomy, boredom and lack of purpose, and unpredictability of surroundings."⁴ Professor Craig Haney described the impact of prison as follows: "At the very least, prison is painful, and incarcerated persons often suffer long-term consequences from having been subjected to pain, deprivation, and extremely atypical patterns and norms of living and interacting with others."⁵ The effects of prison can cause one to have a sense of longing and losing hope. It can stop an individual from dreaming for a better life. The rap group the Ghetto

³ Katie Rose Quandt and Alexi Jones, "Research Roundup: Incarceration Can Cause Lasting Damage to Mental Health," *Prison Policy Initiative*, May 13, 2021.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Craig Haney, "The Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment," ASPE November 30, 2001.

Boyz has a song called "My Mind is Playing Tricks on me," which is what prison does to an individual's mind. Being behind walls makes the mind begins to find itself in a deep dark swirl of nightmares and horror with no hope of returning to peaceful living.

I recall my mother visiting every other Sunday, and after visitation, I wanted to leave with her but could not because of the walls. It was demoralizing to know the guards were searching my mom just to come and see me behind walls, but I could not see the strip search because it happened before we came into contact. But I could imagine in my mind the type of search that was conducted.

When a person is incarcerated, they are faced with the challenges of overcoming separation from their loved ones and community. They are told what to do and when to get up, as little children. The feelings of being subjected to dictatorship and horrific treatment can lead to hopelessness and despair. I experienced the mental aspect of my name being changed to a number. The freedom of day-to-day routines was now in the hand of the plantation owner (oops, I mean prison).

There are unwritten rules in prison, that must be followed and do not exist in outside society. What is right in the free world is wrong in prison and what is right in prison is wrong in the free world. In the free world, when one sees someone attacked, they can call 911 or law enforcement, but that is the wrong thing to do inside prison walls. Inside the walls of prison, when one is challenged, the right thing to do is to stand up for one's self or the person will continually be bullied. A riot is subject to break out

between rivals and guards at any time. When one notices everyone with their boots on, that is usually a sign that violence is getting ready to happen at any time, whether while eating or laying down, so when people have their boots on, one must put their own boots on and gear up for war. This can cause a sense of violent behavior.

Prison conditions can contribute to negative health outcomes. One stressor, in particular, is solitary confinement. This type of confinement places the inmate in isolation away from others, with no one to communicate with but themselves. The stress caused by spending time in solitary confinement can lead to a psychological disorder that creates anger, bitterness, and a lack of connectiveness.

1.2.1 A Stacked Deck

As the United States celebrates its 245th birthday, Jewel Taylor Gibbs asserted, “it remains nowhere close to racial parity. African-Americans own 2.7 percent of the nation’s wealth, but makes up 40 percent of the incarcerated population. Black males today are the ultimate victims of a legacy of nearly 250 years of slavery, 100 years of legally enforced segregation, and decades of racial discrimination and prejudice in every facet of American life.”⁶ Many Blacks have long been optimistic that “Jim Crow” was in a terminal stage, which meant opportunities were increasing for the Black male. Many believed that Blacks would finally be able to share in the American dream. No one could

⁶ Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, *Young Black and Male in America* (Dover, MA: Auburn House Publishing Company, 1988).

have anticipated that in 2020, we would be fighting a new “Jim Crow” that continues to stack the deck socially, politically, and economically. One of the main roots of this new “Jim Crow” is mass incarceration.

One of the most dramatic social phenomena of the last three decades has been the rise of mass incarceration in the United States. The correctional system systemically tends its arrow more toward the Black male than any other ethnic group. The Black male must deal with family, the neighborhood in which they reside, poor school systems in urban areas, and heavy law and order that helps contribute to a majority of Blacks being incarcerated.⁷

Becky Pettit offered insight in *Invisible Men* “surrounding the inequality of incarceration on the Black population relative to the White population on the grounds of health, education, electoral participation, employment, and wages”. Pettit argued, “That the penal expansion has generated a class of citizens systematically excluded from accounts of the American populace.”⁸ Pettit highlighted, “how mass incarceration has reached such high levels that it no longer allows social scientists to rely on standard household survey data to produce accurate descriptions of national socio-demographic trends.”⁹

⁷ Becky Pettit, *Invisible Men: Mass Incarceration and the Myth of Black Progress* (New York, NY: New York Printing, 2012).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

The growing incarceration rate has caused many Blacks to lose trust in our judicial and law enforcement system. There have been many protests to highlight the plight of injustice when dealing with racial inequality, from police brutality to unequal justice, which has long been a problem within the Black community.

Bianca Aldridge conferred, "The idea that race is no longer an influential factor in social life is a myth. As some race scholars have argued, post-racial rhetoric has been a tool of the political Right used to maintain the status quo of the American power structure."¹⁰

The underlined systemic system has longed gave way to creating a system that gives privileges to one group of people to continue a one-sided economic, political power structure. This type of system was never created for equality but for one such group to remain dominate in aspect of life within this society Black males still struggle for economic equality and social mobility as does the black female. Black male lives remain plague by the effect of racism. Recent statistics have shown that black men have the highest rates of incarceration with one out of three men aged 20-34 incarcerated. The black males also have the highest rates of arrest, violent attacks, and homicides.¹¹

Radley Balko suggested the following:

¹⁰ Bianca J. Baldrige, "New Possibilities: (Re)engaging Black Male Youth Within Community-Based Educational Spaces," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 14, no. 1 (2011).

¹¹ Ibid.

Systemic racism is often wrongly interpreted as an accusation that everyone in the system is racist. In fact, systemic racism means almost the opposite. It means that we have systems and institutions that produce racially disparate outcomes, regardless of the intentions of the people who work within them. When you consider that much of the criminal justice system was built, honed and firmly established during the Jim Crow era, almost everyone will concede rife with racism is pretty intuitive. The modern criminal justice system helped preserve racial order-it kept black people in their place. For much of the early 20th century, in some parts of the country, that was its primary function.¹²

“A 2018 study of 4.5 million traffic stops by the 100 largest police departments in North Carolina found that Blacks and Latinos were more likely to be searched than Whites (5.4 percent, 4.1 percent and 3.1 percent), even though searches of White motorists were more likely than the others to turn up contraband (Whites: thirty-two percent; Blacks: twenty-nine percent; Latinos: nineteen percent).”¹³ Black people are consistently arrested, charged, and convicted of drug crimes including possession, distribution, and conspiracy at a far higher rate than their White counterparts.

“According to the National Registry of Exonerations (NER), Black people are about five times more likely to go to prison for drug possession than White people. According to

¹² Radley Balko, “Democracy Dies in Darkness,” *Washington Post*, June 10, 2020.

¹³ *Ibid.*

exoneration data, Black people are also twelve times more likely to be wrongly convicted of drug crimes.”¹⁴ “According to the Project, mass incarceration combined with felon disenfranchisement laws have led to severe underrepresentation of Black Americans in the voting electorate. One in thirteen African Americans of voting age is disenfranchised, a rate more than four times greater than that of non-African Americans.”¹⁵ These statistics demonstrate a scale of injustice that continues to plague the Black male when it comes to the legal and justice system in this country. It shows a more unequal treatment toward Blacks than their White counterparts.

Two questions arise from acknowledging the deck is stacked against the Black male. First, why are things this way? Second, what can we do about it? As much as all of us value personal responsibility, these two questions go to the heart of how society undeniably influences behavior. Although we will never remove the relationship between personal choices and consequences, we must remember how deep structures in a society can impact our actions. The first question is perhaps more difficult to answer. The conflict theorist Johann Galtung wrote that “Structural violence is an indirect form of violence built into social, political and economic structures that gives rise to unequal power and consequently unequal life chances.” That is the reality of the world in which we live. Black men are at a structural disadvantage in our society. Denying it for

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

ideological or political reasons is putting one's head in the sand at best. At worst it is dishonesty used to perpetuate systemic racism.

1.3 A Blind Eye and Deaf Ear

Malcolm X said, "When America catches cold, black people catch pneumonia." "Lady Justice is a blindfolded woman carrying a sword and set of scales. It is a common symbol on courthouses in America and inside some court rooms." "Lady Justice originates from the personification of Justice in Ancient Roman art known as Iustitia or Justitia after Latin: Iustitia, who is equivalent to the Greek goddesses Themis and Dike."¹⁶ "The blindfold represents objectivity and impartiality that justice should be meted out without fear or favor, regardless of money, wealth or power."¹⁷ Justice should be fair and administered equally without corruption, favor, greed, or prejudice. Unfortunately, justice does not seem fair or equal for people of color. For the Black male, lady justice is seemingly blind to the inequality within the justice system. For too long there has been a blind eye and deaf ear to the outcry of justice not being fair and equal for all. Justice has never been one to consider the fair treatment of Blacks because we were not even considered to be human when the constitution was written in the eyes of those who wrote it, but rather less than human.

¹⁵ civic meaning .org lady Justice 2012.

¹⁷ Ibid

“In the five decades since African Americans won their civil rights, hundreds of thousands have lost their liberty. Blacks now comprise a larger portion of the prison population than they did at the time of *Brown v. Board of Education* and their lifetime risk of incarceration has doubled.”¹⁸ “As the United States prison population has exploded, Black men have been particularly affected. Today, Black men are imprisoned at 6.5 times the rate of White men.”¹⁹ James Forman, Jr. argued that the new form of Jim Crow is an American criminal justice system that severely ostracizes offenders and stigmatizes young, poor, Black men as criminals.²⁰ Michelle Alexander addressed how the criminal justice system, despite its claim to colorblindness, perpetuates racial inequality and injustice. Alexander took the unique step of calling mass incarceration a racial “caste system.” She wrote, “The system operates through our criminal justice institutions, but it functions more like a caste system than a system of crime control. Viewed from this perspective, the so-called underclass is better understood as an under caste--- a lower caste of individuals who are permanently barred by law and custom from mainstream society.”²¹ How, she asked, could these inequalities and injustices persist in a legal system that had officially abolished racial distinctions? She stated, “Although this new system of racialized social control purports to be colorblind, it

¹⁸ James Forman Jr., “Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration: Beyond the New Jim Crow,” *New York University Law Review* 87, no. 1 (2012).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.

creates and maintains racial hierarchy much as earlier systems of control did. Like Jim Crow and slavery, mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, polices, customs and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race."²²

According to the National Research Council, "the criminal justice system is used to increase public safety, to punish, to rehabilitate, to deter, to control certain groups of people, and to reinforce behavioral norms. Despite attempts to deal effectively with problems in society, the criminal justice system instead may have created deeper problems for vulnerable individuals and the communities they live by failing to address their needs during and after involvement in its system."²³

Haney and Zimbardo pointed out that, "The U.S. criminal justice system masks an important fact: the pains of imprisonment inflicted disproportionately on minorities, especially black men." The height of incarceration is especially detrimental to Blacks. "Structural inequities, policing policies, and disparities throughout the criminal justice system have all contributed to overrepresentation of black men in the criminal justice system."²⁴ "A black male living in the United States has a 32% chance of spending time

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid.

in prison during his lifetime, whereas a Hispanic male has a 17% chance, and a white male 6% chance."²⁵

Mitchell incited, "among incarceration for drug offenses, the disparity between blacks and whites' incarceration is disturbing. United States drug policies in particular affect black men disproportionately, even though blacks and whites use drugs at equivalent rates."²⁶ The Human Rights Watch gives statistical data that shows Blacks account for thirteen to fifteen percent of all drug users, but they are forty-one percent of the population incarcerated for drug offenses. In contrast, Whites account for eighty-two percent of drug users, but comprise only thirty percent of those incarcerated for drug offenses.²⁷ Whites are responsible for more drug crimes than Blacks, yet Blacks are more likely to be incarcerated "because of the concentration of arrest efforts in poor urban minority neighborhoods and differences in the enforcement of drug laws."²⁸ In his writings of race, criminalization, and historical trauma in the United states, Wescot stated, "Many of the policies of the criminal justice system serve to reinforce and intensify existing race disparities in the United States. Increased risk of incarceration among blacks often begins with over-policing in communities of color and an increased reliance on incarceration as a way to deal with crime. In addition to increased police

²⁵ Todd R. Clear, *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁶ Ojmarrh Mitchell and Michael S. Caudy, "Examining Racial Disparities in Drug Arrests," *Justice Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2015): 288–313.

²⁷ E.A. Carson & D. Golinelli. Trends in Admissions and Releases. U.S. Department of Justice, 2014: 5-31.

²⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Punishment and Prejudice: Racial Disparities in the War on Drugs," May 1, 2002.

presence in certain communities, police practices such as “stop and frisk”, racial profiling, and arrest quotas add to the risk of detention and arrest.”²⁹

If lady justice is blindfolded to symbolize equal justice and no impartiality, then maybe she should take off the blindfold for a closer look at the inequality that continues to plague the Black community. How long will society be deaf to the cries of a people who are being ignored for basic rights and human dignity? Can you see me now? Can you hear me now? There is an old saying, “The proof is in the pudding.”

1.4 The New Motel 6: A Revolving Door

“Motel 6 is a motel franchise with over a thousand locations that started in 1962 in Santa Barbara, California as a lower-cost alternative to motels like Holiday Inn, which were slowly becoming more upscale. Aside from its low prices, Motel 6 may be best known for its series of commercials with national public radio personality Tom Bodett, who closed every ad with the line, “We’ll leave the light on for you.” There is another place that also has a revolving door and always has the light on in the name of correctional facilities. “It is well documented that recidivism is high in all prison populations.”³⁰

Prisoner reentry is an important policy issue that disproportionately impacts Black males throughout the United States. Petersilia argued race is the “elephant sitting

²⁹ K. Westcot, “Race, Criminalization, and Historical Trauma in the United States: Making the Case for a New Justice Framework,” *Traumatology* 21, no. 4 (2015): 273.

³⁰ www.motel6.com

in the room” for reentry.³¹ In his journal of male prison inmates, Jackson wrote, “After incarceration, many black males are faced with dealing with collateral consequences of incarceration that often limit their abilities to reintegrate into society. Such collateral consequences include disenfranchisement, public service ineligibility, student loan restrictions, child custody restrictions, employment restrictions, housing restrictions, and felon registration laws. Black males who return to society after incarceration do so with limited social capital, education, and employment skills to assist them through the reentry process.”³²

Between the 1980s and 2000s, three times as many African American men were added to the prison system than to higher education, according to the Justice Policy Institute.³³ These statistics are overwhelming and highlight the many challenges Blacks encounter once they are released from prison, such as employment. Marbley and Ferguson suggested the following:

Most people think that once those are incarcerated, they are off the streets and out of mind as well. However, in reality, most reenter society at some point. They are released back into society with or without supervision. Not only do most have to worry about finding employment and shelter, but reconnecting with

³¹ Joan Petersilia, *When Prisoners Come Home: Parole and Prisoner Reentry* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³² Kevin Jackson, “Differences in the Background and Criminal Justice Characteristics of Young Black, White, and Hispanics Male Federal Prison Inmates,” *Journal of Black Studies* 27, no. 4 (1997): 494–509.

³³ Justice Policy Institute, *Cellblocks or Classrooms? The Funding of Higher Education and Corrections and its Impact on African-American Men*, Washington, DC, 2002.

their families along with a support system. Although there are some programs for ex-offenders to help improve their lives and minimize the chances of going back, the challenges often outweigh the support systems resulting in high recidivism. According to studies a majority of offenders will return to prison within 3 to 5 years from their release with the highest increase of recidivism in the 1st year.³⁴

Another reason recidivism occurs at an extremely high level is because many are given prison terms when other methods might be useful in addressing the reasons as to why individuals engage in crime. In many instances, drug and alcohol abuse have been attributed to petty crimes. As a result, those with drug abuse problems will continue to be sent to prison without having their addiction problems addressed. The justice system has not concentrated on the individual but rather seems to be more concerned with getting individuals off the streets. The problem is that the majority of those incarcerated keep reappearing on the streets once they leave prison. Once they leave prison, the very circumstances they were living in before incarceration are still there. As a result, many engage in their previous acts that landed them in jail from the beginning.

³⁴ Aretha Fay Marbley and Ralph Ferguson, "Responding to Prisoner Reentry, Recidivism, and Incarceration of Inmates of Color," *Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 5 (2005): 633–649.

According to Delbert, a lack of education and poverty are contributing factors that result in recidivism.³⁵ Lack of education has been associated with bad decisions, especially for those who start crime at a young age. As a result, they find it harder to obtain employment after they receive a criminal record. Having no steady means of income often leads to bad and quick decisions. The communities to which Black formerly incarcerated males return rarely have the resources necessary to support their reintegration.

“The North Carolina Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission released its biennial Correctional Program Evaluation, known better as the Recidivism Report. The report, prepared in conjunction with the Division of Adult Correction and Juvenile Justice, covers defendants placed on probation or released from prison in the 2018 fiscal year.³⁶ The report defines recidivism as an arrest, conviction, or subsequent incarceration during a two-year period after being placed on probation or released from imprisonment. The report covers 32,537 probation entries and 15,077 prison exits.³⁷ The recidivist incarnation rate for inmates increased from 21% in 2015 to 32% in 2018. The report suggests the increase is driven by the fact that many more inmates are released to

³⁵ Elliot Delbert, *Environmental Factors Contribute to Juvenile Crime and Violence* (San Diego, CA,: Green Haven Press, 2003).

³⁶ James M. Markham, *Sentencing Commission Recidivism Report*, University of North Carolina School of Government. <https://www.sog.unc.edu/blogs/nc-criminal-law/sentencing-commission-recidivism-report-available>

³⁷ Ibid.

post-release supervision and thus susceptible to having their PRS revoked.”³⁸

Unfortunately, for many Black men, reentry primarily offers them intersectional oppression and prejudice based on their race and criminal record. In sum, the challenges facing the Black male upon their return to society create barriers that make it nearly impossible to obtain a successful life. These barriers often lead to a revolving door of the new Motel 6: incarceration/recidivism.

I observed that a person’s social environment and their difficulty adjusting back to normal life contributes to recidivism. Many former inmates have trouble reconnecting with family and finding a job to support themselves. Research has suggested steps that can be taken during incarceration to decrease recidivism. “The first step is assessing the risks for reoffending. The second is to assess their individual motivators, followed by choosing the appropriate treatment program. The third step is to implement evidence-based programming that emphasizes cognitive-behavioral strategies, coupled with positive reinforcement that can help them recognize and feel good about positive behavior. Lastly, the formerly incarcerated need ongoing support from a good peer group”³⁹. And positive community leaders such as the church. I identify with those repeated offenders who were in gang culture and need church and positive ongoing support because these offenders face a great challenge to stay away from that behavior.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid

1.5 Analytic Data

Previous researchers at Florida State University, The University of Connecticut, and the University of Iowa found that Black males have higher rates of recidivism. The study, appears in *Justice Quarterly*, a publication of *Criminal Justice Sciences*, and stated the following: “the most potent predictor of recidivism was being a black male, even though black men had less contact with the criminal justice system and few of the risk factors traditionally associated with recidivism. This suggests that beyond individual risk, other factors, including racism and implicit bias, as well as poverty and employment opportunities in the local community, are driving recidivism.”⁴⁰

Furthermore:

The study estimated the effects of various risk factors on the time it took 5,365 Black men and White men released from North Carolina state prisons from 2000 to 2001 to return to prison. The risk factors included individual-level risk factors drawn from a standardized risk assessment tool used by most state correctional systems. These risk factors included individuals’ prior convictions, financial situation, marital status, attitude (as provided by an officer’s subjective opinion of the offender’s motivation to change), history of drug addiction, current employment and that within the past year, high school completion or dropout,

⁴⁰ IBId

and age of entry. I calculated the level of risk for recidivism from minimal/low to high. The study also looked at the type of crime individuals had committed, the total number of offenses, alcohol problems, and mental health diagnosis, as well as whether individuals had children and the size of the county where they were released.⁴¹

“More than 58% of Black men in the study were reincarcerated in a North Carolina state prison within the eight-year follow-up period, compared to fewer than half of the White men. That occurred even though Black men were less likely to be identified as high risk and had lower scores on all but two risk factors that are thought to drive recidivism: age at intake and marital status.”⁴²

I used a prior analysis from the North Carolina Department of Corrections in Mecklenburg County that briefly examined the post-release criminal activity of individuals returning to Mecklenburg County following a period of incarceration in a North Carolina prison. “The study analyzed a random sample (n=400) of all prisoners released to the county between September 1, 2009 and December 31, 2011 and detailed the following:

General Observation

- Offenders released to Mecklenburg County were predominantly Black (76%).

⁴¹ Crime and Justice Research Alliance, “Black Men Have Higher Rates of Recidivism Despite Lower Risk Factors,” *Phys.org*, October 23, 2018. <https://phys.org/news/2018-10-black-men-higher-recidivism-factors.html>

⁴² *Ibid.*

- A majority of the released offenders had a history of substance abuse (60%) and unemployment (53%), while seven percent self-reported a history of mental health issues.

Criminal History

- Eighty percent of offenders had been imprisoned for a felony conviction, the largest majority (69%) of which were for a class F-1 violation. Ten percent were released from a class A1-3 misdemeanor sentence.
- On average, an offender had eight previous convictions and, for sentencing purposes, was classified by North Carolina as a Level 111 defendant.
- Nearly half of those released had been incarcerated for a probation violation. The vast majority (87%) were under probationary supervision prior to their most recent incarceration. Half had previously served an active prison sentence.

Post-Release Arrests

- Thirty-five percent of offenders were rearrested within one year of their release.
- The rate of recidivism increased to 47% over two years. Half of those rearrested failed within 174 days of their release.
- The length of time to an offender's first post-release arrest was found to be predictive of their likelihood for multiple arrest events following their release.
- Sixty-four percent of offenders who recidivated were arrested more than once in the two-year period. The sooner an offender was arrested following release, the

more likely they were to have multiple arrest events. For example, ninety-three percent of those arrested within thirty days of their release were arrested again at a later date.”⁴³

These statistics suggest the Black male is at a higher rate to be incarcerated. They also demonstrate that Black men have a high recidivism rate within a short period of time upon their release. The majority of those released have a substance abuse problem that coexists with their incarceration. The impact of lack of employment also is identified as a major component. Another glaring aspect is a majority are under some type of supervision upon release, which puts them at a disadvantage to succeed and means they are more likely to reenter the correctional institution.

According to the Durham Innovation Team, “746 Durham residents were released from prison in 2016, 2,964 were under community supervision, and 7,072 spent time in the Durham jail. An estimated one in five North Carolinians have a criminal record.”⁴⁴

“The Durham Innovation Team's report detailed the following findings:

- Over one thousand residents reentered the Durham jail ten times or more since 2011. If Durham had “eliminated” recidivism in 2011, the jail population today would be sixty percent smaller.

⁴³ NC DOC Prisoners released To Mecklenburg County 2009-2011.

⁴⁴ Indyweek Re-entered Durham Jail 2011.

- Three hundred and eighty-three expungement petitions were filed in Durham last year, but more than 87,000 charges from the past five years might be eligible.
- The average length of stay at the Durham jail is nine days. At a cost of \$125 per day, that is more than \$1,100 per stay.
- From 2011–2017, misdemeanor probation violation was the most common charge among people in Durham jail. Seventy-nine percent of people with that charge were Black.
- One resource guide available to people returning from prison included seven employment services that were no longer in existence, out of fifteen listed.
- More than twenty-two thousand Durham residents have had their license suspended because they did not show up to court for a traffic offense or did not pay a traffic ticket. Eighty-two percent of those charged with failing to pay a traffic fine were people of color.”⁴⁵

The United States has some of the highest recidivism rates in the world.

“According to the National Institute of Justice, almost forty-four percent of inmates released return before their first year out of prison. In 2005, about sixty-eight percent of 405,000 inmates released from prison were arrested for a new crime within three years. Of the same sample, seventy-seven percent were arrested within five years.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ World Population Review.

The recidivism rates from Mississippi (the state in which I was incarcerated) and North Carolina (the state in which I reside) are as follows:

- Mississippi: The three-year recidivism rate in Mississippi is about thirty-three percent. Mississippi's five-year recidivism rate is more than twice that at seventy-seven percent.
- North Carolina: According to the North Carolina Justice Center, North Carolina's three-year recidivism rate is forty percent.

I collected data from the North Carolina Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission, which focused on a sample size of inmates released in 2017.

- Fifteen percent had a Class B1-D felony, thirty-two percent had a Class E-G Felony, and fifty-three percent had a Class H-I felony.
- Fifty-four percent of the offenders were Black
- The average age at prison release was thirty-four
- Seventy-four percent did not graduate from high school
- Over three-fourths (78%) were identified as having a possible substance use/abuse problem
- Ninety-four percent had a prior arrest
- Fifty-six percent had a prior incarceration

Recidivism rates were determined for prison releases assigned to select correctional jobs and programs. For comparison purposes, recidivism rates were also provided for the

entire prison release sample. Overall, the recidivist arrest rate for inmates in 2017 was forty-nine percent and the recidivist incarceration rate was thirty-two percent. These outcomes were also examined for correctional jobs and programs overall, as well as for select correctional jobs and programs. It is worth noting that inmates with no job or program assignment had higher recidivism rates.

- Recidivism rates for all inmates were nearly identical to the overall rates for inmates assigned to any correctional job or program.
- Recidivism rates for inmates in academic education were a high of forty-nine percent.
- Inmates in enterprises and vocational education had slightly lower recidivism rates.
- Recidivism rates for inmates in construction and work-release programs were lower.

It is important to consider the characteristics of the inmates and those assigned to particular jobs and programs when comparing recidivism rates of different correctional assignments.⁴⁷

Recidivism rates for a particular year provide an overly simplistic view of complex issues that people face. Less than half of the states produce recidivism reports.

⁴⁷ Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission Research Brief September 2018.

Annual reports on recidivism rate and multi-year reports are needed to understand various contributors to the problem.

“According to Arizona State University’s School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, better mental health (both in prison and changes to mental health post-release) is related to a decrease in the likelihood of recidivating. Individuals with poor mental health in prison who make significant improvements after release see the largest reduction in their odds of recidivating.”⁴⁸

Theories from health studies, sociology, and criminology are frequently applied to health issues among individuals who were formerly incarcerated, though infrequently applied to reentry outcomes. I used the couple stress process theory from Arizona State University with general strain theory to illuminate the ways that health, both in prison and post-release, may be an important predictor for recidivism. In brief, stress process theory suggests that incarceration is a stressor and has the potential to generate other stressors, such as poor physical health or mental health. Once health becomes a stressor for formerly incarcerated individuals, general strain theory suggests that stressors can be coped with in a variety of ways, including engaging in crime or through escapism through drug use, both of which contribute to recidivism.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Danielle Wallace and Xia Wang, “Does In-Prison Physical and Mental Health Impact Recidivism?” *SSM Population Health* 11 (2020).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

2. Recidivism: A Social & Theological Problem

2.1 Theological Foundations

2.1.1 Privilege: It is Different for Me

Even though we refer to it as the corrections system, incarceration does little to engender ideas of hope and restoration. By and large, many either see prison as a cage to isolate the dregs of society or a horrifying space that holds friends or family members. Those who come out of prison are rarely regarded as future contributors to society. Chuck Colson's testimony of redemption is one example of an exception. Colson, whose conversion catalyzed by C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* prior to his Watergate scandal imprisonment, developed a deeper faith and commitment to ministry while in jail. Subsequent to his release he became a prominent evangelical figure after launching Prison Fellowship Ministries and participating in initiatives such as the ecumenical document *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*.¹

Colson's work following his imprisonment has had global impact. His Prison Fellowship Ministries organizations can be found in countries around the world. While Colson was able to access resources and mobilize networks because of his previous relationships. Further, he was not hindered with personal and structural limitations of race. It's almost inconceivable to achieve all of that if he was a black man.

¹ Christian Scholars Review. Redemptive Rehabilitation Approaches to Criminal Reform. October 2019.

“Discussions concerning prison reform have often focused on reducing the prison population while avoiding a surge in crime. By framing this issue in terms of reducing the number of those in prison, the human individuals who constitute that population can often get lost in the statistical morass. These solutions may be helpful starting points for disinfecting the wound, but they may not provide the substantive overhaul needed to heal the system as a whole.”²

There is little evidence that prison reform people who have been sentence for crimes for which they have been found guilty. Of course, there is ample evidence that many black men have been convicted of crime, for which they are innocent. Drug use and prison violence contribute to behavior that can lead to recidivism. Additionally, three-strike laws and similar strategies allege to reduce crimes actually contribute to longer sentences for people who have already been convicted. The so called “tough on crime” strategy seems incompatible with a Christian commitment to love the neighbor.³

“Answering this question requires a reflection on the theological reasoning undergirding Christian understandings of punishment. Gorringer argued these attitudes have consistently been grounded in a retributive theory of punishment shared by

² Ibid

³ Hung-En Sung, *Rethinking Corrections: Rehabilitation, Reentry, and Reintegration* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2011).

theologians ranging from Anselm and Aquinas to Calvin and Luther, which suggests the states should use punishment to exact the just of crime.”⁴

It is hard for those without the privileges held by Chuck Colson and many others who look like him to weather the storm after incarceration. For Black men, prison is far from rehabilitation. I recall riding on the bus heading to the correctional facility. There were fifty-one people on the bus, and of those fifty-one people, only two were White and the rest were people of color, with the majority being African Americans. As I entered the correctional facility, I noticed that Blacks were the majority and Whites were the minority. Although Blacks made up the majority of prisoners, the administration and faculty were majority White.

I understand that Western Christianity (Evangelicals) has long played a part in incarcerating the Black male. The fear of the Black male has made many perceive the Black male as evil. It was this part of Christianity that promoted slavery, segregation, and the dog whistle of “law and order.” While incarcerated, I witnessed many churches coming in with the same message that did not resonate to the masses because it was based on the brimstone and fire message to create fear within the person. This message was not effective because the evangelical churches that were coming never realized we considered where we were as hell. When one is already living in hell, fire and brimstone will not work to help transform the lives of the incarcerated.

⁴ Timothy Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Then, there were a few Black churches that would come sporadically. Their messages did not resonate with the inmates. When a Black church continues to preach and teach the same message, as we inmates call “messah,” it is considered to us a form of plantation religion to keep the slave on the plantation. Most of the messages were based on the belief in Jesus; repent so you can go to heaven. One thing that did resonate with many inmates was the singing of the Black church. The songs would bring a chill that would have one feeling good on the inside for a minute.

Rev. Dr. Louis Threatt is senior pastor of Cities of Refuge Christian Church in Durham, North Carolina. The church is concerned with and dedicated to all those impacted by incarceration. I asked Dr. Threatt what pushed him to start this church re-entry ministry. Dr. Threatt replied, “I have pastored other churches, but those churches didn’t want to start something new. While in chaplaincy here in North Carolina, I saw the need to have a church specifically focused on the incarcerated and former incarcerated, because I noticed a disconnect between church and prison.” Dr. Threatt continued, “There’s both a lack of prison ministries and congregations doing prison ministry well. In Matthew 25, Jesus asks did you visit me. Churches will use that text to check this box off, even if they do little more than stop by.” Dr. Threatt added, “Others will come into the prison and preach fire and brimstone.” The attitudes toward those who have been incarcerated are not much better after they are released. Dr. Threatt created a church inside a minimum-security prison. The church created a ministry that

would make outside members and members who joined the church from the outside not be ashamed of their past.

According to Dr. Threatt, when someone is released from prison and enters into a church, a simple introduction of who they are can be very uncomfortable for some, as they struggle between revealing if they have been incarcerated and having their past exposed or waiting until somebody finds out and then being treated differently. Their mission is to share Jesus Christ's goodness, words, and teachings. The church is open to and for those who are left out, abandoned, and forgotten.

Dr. Threatt admitted that having conversations with people who have served their time has been challenging. He has conversed with those who were released and then returned. Some of them informed him that they recommitted just to get back in for peace of mind and less responsibility. But he continued to add that the church congregants include people who have been incarcerated, those who have been impacted by incarceration, and others who are passionate about the work. The worship service is like any other service; they have music, invocation, prayer, and scripture reading. One of the worshipers who sang in the prison choir was released and now continues his passion for music with the city of Refuge. He shared with the church that he was able to get his ankle bracelet removed and is no longer on curfew. Another member was serving a life sentence and was released after twenty-nine years. This individual shared the joy of receiving his driver's license and insurance.

For formerly incarcerated individuals, finding someone after they get out—other than a judge or probation officer—to hold them accountable and check on their spirit and peace of mind and see how things are going and offer support is essential.

I asked the following questions to leading clergy and received the subsequent answers:

Do you think the Black church has failed this population?

“Many churches have some type of prison ministry but we can do a whole lot better.”

“With the magnitude of our people being incarcerated, it is within landscape of the church and community to seek innovative ways to address this social ill.”

“The whole church must be focused on this type of ministry. You can’t just couch it under men’s ministry because it impacts everyone.”

What is one area needed for those coming back into the community?

“A person needs a place to be accepted, a family (village); a place where love gives one space with no shame.”

“Many struggle when they come out; because their question is do they give their information to the church just on introduction? They are afraid that if they tell their piece those within the church and community may look at them strange and treat them differently.”

A church must be able to connect with their needs. We must reach them holistically and assure we will never leave them. The Cities of Refuge Christian Church has gained over forty former inmates over a two-year span who are now living productive lives and have not returned to correctional facilities. Dr. Threatt suggested it has been some good work on behalf of the church but much more can be done.

Russell Memorial C.M.E. Church is in Durham, North Carolina. The church supports outreach ministry and functions in the character of Jesus Christ (Matthew 25:35-40) to win the spiritual and practical battle against the return to spiritual and physical prison for African American men. Russell Memorial follows the general rules of the C.M.E. Church, which is the "United Societies," organized by Mr. John Wesley, which states: "There is only one condition previously required of those who desire admission into these societies, a 'desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins.' But wherever this is really fixed in the soul, it will be shown by its fruits."⁵ The concern of the Russell Memorial C.M.E. Church for, "the well-being of humankind springs from the act of God in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Gospel, and from the life and witness of John Wesley and other fathers of Methodism who ministered to the physical, intellectual, and social needs of the people to whom they preached the gospel of personal redemption."⁶

⁵ Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, *The Book of Discipline of The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church* (Memphis, TN: CME Publishing House, 2014).

⁶ Ibid.

Our theological perspective as representatives of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church is “we believe that as a part of the body of Christ, it must express itself in the world in the light of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught us many things by word and example; to be concerned for the welfare and the well-being of others, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be concerned for justice. For the Church to be silent in the face of need, injustice and exploitation is to deny the Lord of the Church.”⁷

The outreach ministry here at Russell Memorial is to rescue and restore lives through ministry and engagement with the Durham community.

2.2 I am Already in Hell

Many churches that come inside of the prison only speak from a fire and brimstone message. The message does not resonate with those on the inside. This fear tactic of preaching to one’s soul about heaven or hell is not effective within the prison system. This is not an effective tool for the church because you are preaching a message about hell when these inmates are already in hell. How can one preach to one about hell when the people they are trying to reach are living in hell?

I can recall being processed in the correctional facility. As one is being processed, you are asked to remove your clothes and let the staff examine you from head to toe as property. Once examined, you receive your clothes with the labels of the correctional

⁷ Ibid.

facility on the front and back. Each new inmate then receives a number to remember, which strips them of their name. After being processed into the correctional facility, the guards lead the new inmate into the compound, and that is when all of the noise begins. The inmate is assigned a bed in a zone that is usually filled with over five hundred to one thousand inmates per zone. This zone is occupied by individuals who are doing one year to life. Each inmate is inside with different charges, characteristics, and backgrounds. The only thing similar between each inmate is most have adapted the criminal mind associated with survival of the fittest. I was zoned with people from my own gang and those of the rival gang. Then there are those who are called peons (those without a gang-affiliation). Inside of the prison walls is hell, so how can a message of fire and brimstone sway one to transform when they are living in hell on earth?

When one cannot think because of the loud noise of over one thousand people yelling at one time with different conversations, that is hell. When inmates must go to sleep at night with a shank (a weapon to defend one's self), that is hell. When inmates are walking down the hall or going to eat but have to watch everything around them at all times, that is hell. When one has to sleep with one eye open, that is hell. When an inmate is being attacked and beaten by gang members and stripped of their goods while everyone walks away, including the guards, that is hell. When one can hear individuals crying and screaming for help, but help does not come, that is hell. I can recall taking showers or using the facility and my fellow gang members would stand guard for one

another because you could lose your life during showering or using the facility – that was hell. Hell is also when it is really quiet on the zone and everyone is walking around with their boots on, so the inmates know a war is getting ready to breakout. When one is walking around with books and magazines taped around their waist to protect from being stabbed – that is hell. When an inmate can see someone being abused and all you can do is keep walking, that is hell. When an inmate is sleeping with the bugs, mice, and other creatures, that is hell. With all of this hell experienced inside these walls, how can a fire and brimstone message be accepted? This type of message is not accepted among the inmates, especially the Black male or poor White inmates who have experienced hell not only on the inside but on the outside as well.

Many of the churches that visited the prison were those whose messages went in one ear and out of the other. Even many of the chaplains did not really have a message that would make one want to change because, as previously mentioned, the chaplain works for the state. It was a sense of selling plantation religion to a group of slaves who belonged to the state. In his book, *Hell Without Fire*, Dr. Henry Whelchel Jr. stated, “hell presented in the slaves’ conversion narratives is not just a place in the afterlife. Hell was a metaphor for their present situation. The slaves viewed their plight as a hell on earth.”⁸ It was the church’s duty during that time to continue the mission of slavery by teaching a message that would make that slave fearful and more obedient to their slave master.

⁸ Henry Whelchel Jr., *Hell Without Fire Conversion in Slave Religion* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002).

This message that was being taught in prison is no different than the current message, which is to promote the institution's survival rather than the true transformation of the individual. The vested interest of the institution is to preserve the for-profit procedure rather than rehabilitate the inmate. Hell, still exists on earth for those who are confined when one continues to deliver a proposed message with no true substance to change the situation.

Those who were supposedly converted were those who continued to hear a message and see a picture of Jesus that looked like them. And for those Black inmates who accepted the message, it did not last because of the reality that they faced from day to day. When one is treated less than humane, that is a hell that can be mentally detrimental to one's body, mind, and soul. If Jesus came to set us free, then the message must be one of liberation with radical revolutionary change that speaks truth to the forces that continue to enslave.

When inmates are caged and packed like sardines in one zone, like the Atlantic slave trade, that is hell. Hell is more than the fire often pictured or identified in Disney stories. But hell is a place that makes one cry with no possible way of escape. Hell is a place where one lives; a place that seems hopeless with no end and one full of torment from inside and out. In prison, one is treated like an animal, a product that is there to make others' live comfortable, while theirs is one of misery, confusion, chaos, and

darkness. If the church is of God, then the message must be one of action of love that shows a place better than the one the person in hell is living.

I recall riots that broke out among the inmates and extended to the guards. Many lives were lost during this riot; many were injured because of the anger that had built up over time. The violence that occurred was so deadly that we were all put on lock down, which is a time where inmates cannot leave their cell or zone; there is no recreation nor outside time for a breath of fresh air for a long period of time. Because I was considered a ranking gang member, I was put into “the hole” during these riots, along with others. The hole is a place to which an individual is confined where they spend a period of time alone in a dark space with no light. Although I was not the instigator of these riots, I was still put in a hole for two months with no contact except when I received meals through the door. For two months, I could only see darkness; I had no contact with others, and could only talk to myself—that is hell. I felt like John the Baptist when he asked the question, “Are you the one or should we look for another.” I also could not shower for the entire two months I was confined in tiny hole with other creatures that were crawling around. Is this not hell? After the two months, I was released back into the zone (section of prison). So, I was released from one hell to enter another hell. Back inside the zone it was still the same thing, I could hear voices of so many at one time. Nothing had changed, but those were moved from one zone to another zone, but it was still hell. How can one escape the grips of hell when torment is all around? How can one

be free when all they see or notice is captivity? Where is the church? What message can the church give that will truly set one free? What programs can help foster a change in a hellish environment? There are programs in prison but these post-education, GED, and drug and alcohol programs are not really functional because the finances are not really pushed in that direction. The prison just offers these programs to say to the outside that there are programs. I was all in programs that were not functioning properly because the main focus was work programs to not better the individual but rather fatten the pockets of the rich. In other words, to make the rich get richer. What can the church say or do to bring heaven into this hell? What spiritual formation is needed to overcome the odds? When one is tired of living in hell, where can the inmate turn? Is the Black church a place to help the Black male overcome the hell in which he is living inside the prison walls? The Black church must offer a religion that brings peace, liberation, justice, and freedom to the ones struggling to find hope and peace. If the Black church does not lead with the beacon of light from God, then the church is no more than a bucket that continues to get water from the well but always comes up empty.

2.3 Shackled Physically but Emancipated Spiritually

Everyone called him Big Chubb. Big Chubb was an O.G. (original gangster) who was doing a double life sentence. Big Chubb was well respected by all the inmates and guards. He had been an inmate in the correctional facility since he was seventeen years old. Big Chubb was in his twenty-eighth year of incarceration when I met him. He was

an individual who came in with no education but in time he began to educate himself through reading, classes, literature, and religion. Eventually, Big Chubb left the gang life behind. Although he was no longer a gang member, he was well respected by all gangs in the facility.

He would talk to inmates about changing their mindset. Big Chubb would often say, “just because you are locked up, does not mean you have to be shackled in the mind, your mind is the key to unlocking the chains that binds you.” He was a chaplain, minister, mentor, and advisor to so many who looked to him for knowledge. Big Chubb believed in God, but he saw God as a liberator of the oppressed. He often talked about African spirituality. His conversations about Jesus gave Black males a different outlook of Jesus, different from the Jesus many would preach or teach about in the chapel. His view of Jesus was one of radical, revolutionary faith that came to set captives free. A brother that many inside the prison could relate to and would long to know.

According to James Cone, “Jesus’ work is essentially one of liberation. Becoming a slave himself, he opens realities of human existence formerly closed to man. Through an encounter with Jesus, man now knows the full meaning of God’s actions.”⁹ Jesus demonstrates by His actions one who was willing to preach, teach, and do work that fostered change in the lives of those he came into contact with. The gospel of Jesus demonstrated liberation, where the blind was able to see, the lame walked, the dead

⁹ James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power* (Mary Knoll, NY: Baylor University Press, 1997).

were raised, and the captives were set free; that within itself is liberation. It was John the Baptist that asked the question, “are you the one or should we look for another?” Jesus replied by saying to John’s disciples, “tell John what you have seen, the lame walk, the blind see.” Jesus was liberating those not just physically, but also spiritually through the power of God. This is what Big Chubb was preaching inside the walls, that if one is to be a disciple, they must be willing to do the work required to bring about change.

Big Chubb asked me the following question, “When are you going to leave this street life, you have too much potential and purpose to continue down this path. I want you to succeed young brother, not in here for the rest of your life. I will never leave here until I am dead, but you have a mind. I have been watching you, if you can lead people in a negative way, with this gang s---, then you can leave brothers and sisters in a right way. Come out these streets and become productive.” That conversation resonated with me and although I did not fully grasp those words at the time, that conversation became a vital piece of my eventual transformation process.

It is conversations like that and other messages of liberation that can help bring the Black male to change the way one thinks and acts, as James Cone suggested, “this is not pious talk and one does not need a seminary degree to interpret the message.”¹⁰ Just because an individual is shackled physically, their mind and soul can be emancipated spiritually.

¹⁰ Ibid

Daniel 3 is a message that should resonate for the incarcerated Black male.

Chapter 3 tells of three Hebrew boys who were captives. Their names were changed to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These were not their original names. This situation is similar to the way the Black inmate's name is changed to a number. Their names were changed, but the good thing is that, although their names were changed by the captors, they never forgot who they were and whose they were. Their original names were Hananiah (Jehovah is gracious), Mishael (what God is), and Azariah (who the Lord helps). This is important because changing names is a technique used to strip one of their belonging and ties. This is the same way slave owners changed the names of our ancestors. So, what is the difference in changing names of the Black male when they are incarcerated?

This story in Daniel details persecution to religious and ethnic minorities because they would not bow down to the system that was in place to oppress them. The furnace (prison) functions as a symbol for the three Hebrew boys. The musical instruments are the beats of another god and hierarchy. The Black male must emancipate their mind to not dance to the beat of a society that has longed supported a system that does not represent all of the people. Nebuchadnezzar used the instrument of music because it could stir the people's emotions and make it easy for him to manipulate them. Many are incarcerated because they have been manipulated by the music of their environment and society, which has shattered dreams through drug abuse, violence, and other criminal

activities. This music has created a sense of selfishness. The Black male must make a change from the inside out so he will no longer bow down to the norms or statistics that continue to shackle their life. Although one may be incarcerated, there is hope; there is still one who can make a way out of no way. Even when the system cranks up the volume seven times with their so-called law and order, the Black male can show the Nebucadnezzar in their life that their mind and soul have been emancipated because God has arrived in the midst of their burning furnace (prison).

Although they are still confined, their mind has been set free to dream again. Prison can no longer be a strong hold. When the Black male is set free and delivered, he will no longer dance to the music of drugs, gangs, or violence. The Black male has an opportunity to be like the three Hebrew boys and declare if God does not set me free, God can. The Black male can witness Jesus showing up in the midst of the incarceration, changing them from the inside out. The ancestors would sing a song that says, "I woke up the morning with my mind stayed on Jesus." No matter what the obstacles, no matter the challenge, the Black male must keep their mind on Jesus. The Black church must present itself as a servant for all. It must represent the love of Christ in the midst of a burning furnace. It must represent true forgiveness and grace to those who have been bamboozled by the tunes of Nebechuanzer. God may not remove the burning furnace, but God can restore, transform, and give one the mindset to persevere through the flames of life. God will provide for those who are willing to open up their hearts and

receive the blessing. It is the duty of the Black church to become more involved and help make a change not only in the lives of the Black male but in society overall. The impact of the Black church is crucial to the development of the Black male. I never heard a message of liberation from the churches who would visit the prisons. The churches' message was those that portrayed Jesus as the passive, turn-the-other-cheek savior. There was never a message that would allow me to see Jesus as a liberator, or one I could identify with through my experiences. The God portrayed by the visiting churches was always on a level of sin, with no social, political, or communal substance. Big Chubb was the only person who gave the picture of Jesus that I and other Black inmates could identify with and he was not even ordained by the church.

2.4 New Life Through the Word

For those incarcerated and former inmates, the preacher must deliver messages of a new life and transformation that resonates with the inmates and brings a breath of fresh air. The preached word must unpack the evils and powers that have so longed mislead and misguided those who have been impacted by incarceration. This word must foster hope that deals with the challenges those who have been incarcerated face on a daily basis. Challenges that create diversions to make individuals return to their old ways of life. The preached word is important to set those free from the shackles that bind them from moving forward. It must be a word that is connected with actions to help empower the hearers to make a difference in their lives. It should be preaching that

demonstrates the power of God and offers vision for God's divine purpose in the life of the formerly incarcerated. The inmate and formerly incarcerated needs preaching that brings hope of freedom in spite of the challenges they face. The best preaching is preaching that rises out of circumstances, experiences, trials, and tribulations. To make an impact on the lives of the formerly incarcerated, the preacher must first preach to him or herself and ask God to then preach through them. This allows the preached word to become more personal and authentic. Preaching cannot be boxed into one phrase, as this limits the power of God. Black preaching especially should deal with the theological points of view but bring life to scriptures that resonate in the times of today. It should use a certain hermeneutic that brings about the experiences Black males face every day. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once asked, "Who is it that is supposed to articulate the longings of people more than the preacher?"¹¹

In Ezekiel chapter 37, Ezekiel is called to pastor and minister to God's people. God gives Ezekiel an appointment to preach to the inmates and formerly incarcerated in the valley. Ezekiel has a vision, and his vision is for the restoration of the marginalized. God asks Pastor Ezekiel if these bones can live. Can these brothers who are in prison, and those who have been released, live? Can these brothers who have been battered live? Can these brothers who have been misled and misguided by the ways of the

¹¹ Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *Exodus Preaching, Crafting Sermons About Justice and Hope* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2018).

world, can these bones live? Can these brothers who have been outcast, can these bones live? Can these bones that have lived in nightmares day in and day out, can these bones live? Can these bones that have seen dreams shattered, can these bones live? Can these bones that have been oppressed through systemic racism, can these bones live? Can these bones that have done violence to one another and lost respect for themselves and others, can these bones live? Ezekiel says, "I don't know." I do not know if the Black church will help these brothers. I do not know if these brothers can fight for a better life. I do not know if these brothers can handle the challenges they face. I do not know if the Black church is willing to be more involved in their lives. I do not know if the Black church truly wants to be holistic and reach out to all. I do not know, God, only you know.

God then tells Ezekiel, "I need you to preach to them." Ezekiel begins to preach and people begin to voice their concerns about mass incarceration. People begin to use their voices for the voiceless. People begin to speak out against the inhumane treatment of inmates. Inmates begin trying to receive their GED and become entrepreneurs. The bones begin to come together. The Black church, community leaders, and the poor, rich, educated, and uneducated came together. But Ezekiel did not stop preaching, because if he would have stop preaching, it would have only been rhetoric noise that made no impact. Ezekiel kept preaching until God breathed on their circumstance. This is when the bones began to move. In Hebrew, the moving of bones is called Rual, which means

spirit, breath, and wind, which refers to God's cosmic reach. God can reach any situation. The preached word must deliver a message to the Black male that helps them connect to the one who can breathe new life into their mind, body, and soul. A message that creates a change in the attitude of the church and government to help make a difference.

2.5 A New Start with Old Scars

After five years, the time had come for me to be released physically from the correctional facility. Although I was released, I was still on probation for another two years. This meant I would have to find a job and pay restitution back to the state. If I failed any testing or to comply, I would be confined for those remaining years back into the correctional facilities. I could not be around anyone who was a felon. This is difficult when there are those in one's own family who are felons.

I recall coming home to family who welcomed me back with open arms. My mom and grandmother hugged me with tears of joy. They both told me to avoid any obstacles that would send me back to prison. This was easier said than done. Growing up in my circumstances, it was hard to avoid the gang life when those in your own family are part of that life. The neighborhood was still swarming with crime. I knew that I must maintain and find a new way of life. Thus, I began applying for work, but it was very difficult. When I would fill out the application, there was always a part that asked, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony? If so, tell us what your charge was?" This

may not necessarily affect your employment, but time and time again, the past affected the progress of the future.

Still, after a month, I was back home with no employment. I recall having the probation officer informing me that if I did not get a job soon, my parole would be revoked. I also had restitution to pay in the amount of \$2,100 and \$25 to the probation officer upon every visit. The failure to do so would also violate my parole. Finally, I was hired at a company that only paid \$7.25 an hour. After taxes, I would bring home a total of \$195 to \$200 per week. With that money, I had to pay \$25 to the probationer officer and \$50 per week to the state for restitution. How can anyone live on \$150 a week? I was blessed to be supported by a strong family. It was difficult for me to only make \$150 a week when I was accustomed to making \$2,000 dollars a day. Times had changed. The frustration began to set in and it was not long after that I found myself involved with the old side hustle. The drug dealing brought along with it old and new gang acquaintances. I found myself caught up in the same web that had landed me in prison previously.

Most Black males deal with the same circumstances and challenges. These challenges can put limitations on the Black male to successfully reenter society. Many are faced with paying child support and restitution and they often do not have healthcare or job opportunities, and if they find work it is usually a job with low wages that does not meet all the needs they are facing. Those who return home are limited because they lack skills and education. This can help lead the Black male into making

bad decisions that assist in their recidivism. Most Black males are released back into the same communities and environment that they once left. They can find themselves as outcasts from their family, community and the Black church. The barriers Black males face are more than just coincidences; rather, they are systemically designed.¹² I can recall that, upon being released and as I was exiting the gate, the guard said, “you will be back in no time, we will save a bed for you.” Without those who reenter incarceration, the profits would decrease for those who invest in the correctional facilities.

Designed barriers such as these can make the Black male feel as though he is less than a man. When one feels like they are less than a man, it can make them give up and throw in the towel. Without any support from family, the church, government, and community, the Black male can begin to think he is alone and bad choices begin to settle into the mindset. One of the tools the slave owners used to continue their slave practice was to humiliate, dehumanize, and destroy the masculinity of the Black male in front of the woman and children. This practice is still being practiced through the criminal justice system.

I came home and lived at my mother’s house. Although I was blessed with a home, this is not the case for most Black males reentering society. Many are faced with no home to go, while others are temporarily released into a half-way house. The former inmate can find himself homeless at the blink of an eye. Many are not allowed to stay in

¹² Williams, “It’s Hard Out Here if You’re a Black Felon.”

public housing because public housing does not allow anyone with a felony to be on the premises. Many formerly incarcerated people find themselves back in a poverty situation and neighborhood. With no permanent residence, it is hard for the Black male to find stability. With no stability, it is hard for the Black male to reconnect to his children if he is a father. A lot of Black males have children who are living in public housing, and as stated earlier, public housing restricts ex-felons from being on the premises. With these roadblocks, the Black male is stripped of spending quality time with his children and made to feel less than a father but more as a failure. The lack of income can also create friction between the mother of his children and himself. Without the ability to pay steady child support for his children, the Black male is faced with another dilemma, which is being jailed for past child support or no possibility to obtain a driver's license.

Many Black males released from prison look forward to uniting with their family and children. They imagine themselves as a provider who helps develop a better and different pathway that they themselves followed. But this dream is usually crashed because of old woes and systemic structure. The ex-felon faces the reality that because of past hurt and pain, their family does not want to associate with them. They are left to navigate through the wilderness and face the attacks of the animals of the world by themselves. But studies have shown that family support is crucial to reducing recidivism and ensuring that the Black male does not relapse into the same behavior.

When a Black male is not able to provide for himself, it affects not only him but his family and children. According to the American Psychological Association, family and friends are key in the rehabilitation of the formerly incarcerated. They play a major role because their lifestyles set the paths on whether the Black male walks down the path of recidivism. The ex-felon must be watchful of those with a negative influence. These participants in his life can provide negative influences. It is important that the ex-felon is surrounded by positive people who provide mentoring, support, and resources to make his future promising. Relationships can build or tear down the morale of the formerly incarcerated Black male.¹³

Most recidivism occurs during the first year and can be associated with old acquaintances, economics, and a lack of family, church, and community support, and immediately changes from prison to civilian life.¹⁴ There must be a pathway for the former inmate to have a better life from the one he has been accustomed to inside and out of prison. There must be more than alms giving by the church and other faith-based organizations that deal with a temporary issue without addressing the long-term problem.

I interviewed a presiding elder from a denominational church. The presiding elder replied to the question of the problem with the disconnection of the Black church

¹³ Monica L. Ricci and Carolyn McNamara, "Challenges of Reentering Society for Incarcerated African-American Men," *Modern Psychological Studies* 17, article 3 (2011): 13–20.

¹⁴ Ibid.

with those incarcerated. The elder's response was profound: "A lot of our problem is that we have little to no prison ministries and the ones that we do have just take a few items such as socks, bibles and books but that is not enough." I can relate to this type of ministry. Many churches assumed they were doing God's work by just sending socks and bibles from time to time. This was a good gesture, but it only provided a sense of false ministry and mission to the ones who gave the alms to make them think their mission was accomplished. It was the slave master who would give cake during certain times of the year to give false appreciation to the ones who made the business grow. It was the plantation owners who would give a few items that did not cost sacrifice to the slaves but did not offer a way to make things better for their life, which was freedom. As long as they gave the alms and their situation did not change, it was just fine, they had done their due diligence. It is easy to give alms without really addressing or creating formulated ways to change the circumstance. Could it be that the Black church has fallen into a sense of alms plantation ministry that does not change the ones who are crippled in life? It takes more than alms to foster a change in the life of the ex-felon. Because the Black male encounters so many problems and challenges upon release, the church and their family and community have a great impact on whether the Black male walks toward success and a better future or remains in the same condition, seeking alms from those who do not even recognize them.

In Acts chapter 3, Peter and John were on their way to the temple, and as they approach the gate, they met a man who was crippled. It is interesting that the man is not given a name, but he is just known as the beggar. This is similar to myself and other ex-felons who are identified by their problems and past. This cripple man was accustomed to begging and asking for alms. He was placed there every day doing the same thing. He had been in his situation since birth. Many ex-felons continue to face the same issues that help complicate their conditions, including their employment, healthcare, housing, transportation, drug addiction, criminal behavior, and lack of family, community, and church support.

But it is when the beggar comes into contact with Peter and John that a new life begins to take place. He was expecting to receive alms from them because all the church and community did was send socks while he was incarcerated and give him a gift on certain occasions and feed him with a meal on thanksgiving, but he was still an outsider to the church and community. But Peter and John did something the others who were going to the temple never did. They looked at him and not just his situation. Peter and John saw possibilities beyond his current situation. They did not pacify him with alms, but rather empowered him to make a change. The Black church must do more than pacify with benevolence; it must look at the individuals it serves and see beyond their circumstances and empower them.

Peter and John take the beggar by the hand and helps him up. Has the Black church been doing an effective job of helping the formerly incarcerated Black male back up on his feet? By helping the man up, his ankles became stronger. But the interesting thing that goes unnoticed is that the man is holding on to Peter and John while going into the temple. I can relate that to the fact that many former inmates have nothing or no one to hold on to after they are released. Where is the Black church that one can cling to in times of distress? Where is the Black church during the incarceration and after? Where is the forgiveness of the Black church where they can look beyond faults and see the needs of the Black male?

I was out of prison physically but still dealing with the old scars of my past life. The old scars of hurt, anger, and frustration toward myself and others. Scars can impact the outlook of life if the wounds are not healed. I had old scars of living the life that led me to incarceration. The old scars of seeing churches on every corner but nothing changing. The Black church must do a better job of becoming change agents for all. I found myself headed down the same path. But I had family, some in the community, and eventually there was a church that entered my life that made a great impact. I had to make a change from the inside/out to successfully reintegrate into society. I had to change the way I was thinking to make better choices, no matter the challenges. Although there were old scars, I could live a new life. But the church also played an

important role in the prevention of recidivism in my life. Thus, the Black church must realize the intentional and unintentional impacts it has on the life of former inmates.

2.6 Sample Collection of Black Churches

I surveyed a total of fifty-three Black churches around the Carolina area. I presented the following questions to all churches and the administrative leaders of those churches to answer:

1. Should the Black church play a role in reducing recidivism (re-entry into the correctional system) among our Black males?
2. Does your church have former inmates attending your services?
3. Do any congregates have family members who have been or still are incarcerated?
4. How does your congregation accept the formerly incarcerated? In what ways does your church show its love to them?
5. Does your church have a prison outreach ministry? If yes, in what capacity does it serve the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated? If no, why not?

After the survey, I collected the data of all churches. I also compiled the reasoning from the administration on the answers that were given.

Question 1: All fifty-three churches responded with an answer of yes.

Question 2: Only twenty-seven churches responded with an answer of yes; twenty-five had no idea whether any former inmate was within their congregation.

Question 3: Only eighteen churches responded with an answer of yes; thirty-four had no idea as to whether there were family members who had family incarcerated or had been incarcerated.

Questions 4: The churches stated that they treat them with the same love Christ has for us; the other forty-two churches really had not pondered the thought.

Question 5: Only five churches stated that they had a prison ministry. Of those five churches, only three had a ministry that met the physical and spiritual needs on the outside in some type of form. The other two churches considered their prison ministry as sending goods (alms) during Christmas season.

I concluded that out of fifty-three Black churches in the surrounding region, only five had a prison outreach ministry. I also concluded that out of those five churches with prison outreach ministries, only three had a ministry that helped the inmates with their physical and spiritual nourishment.

What is the reason for the lack of ministry in this area for the Black church? Why is the Black male more represented in mass incarceration, but less represented by the Black church as a whole?

To answer and give reason to these questions, I conducted a conversation with prominent leaders of different Black churches and denominations. Their responses are as follows:

Interviewee A:

“The black church has not done a good job, in reducing recidivism among black males. It is mainly because we do not have ministries reaching out to that group. Those that have the ministry do not follow up with the inmate, once they get out. Most of our efforts if dealing with them while they are in, but rarely do many churches get contact information before they are released, to check on their well-being. A lot of our prison ministries just take items and books, but that it not enough. In order to prevent them from going back in, we must do something, when they get out.”

Interviewee B:

“We as a black church and denomination has fallen short on the efforts, when it comes to helping our brothers and sisters that are in prison and those that get out of prison. Many of our black males convert to Islam, while in prison, then Christianity. The reasoning is because the Muslim brothers have teaching within the prison walls, but they never relinquish contact with them once they are released. Upon released the Muslims are right there to help assist and guide them through the perils of life with a helping hand and mentoring. The black church must look at the model used by our Muslim brothers and understand what it truly means to be there for our brothers.”

Interviewee C:

“To many of our black churches condemn or drop them once they have made a mistake. The black church has to be willing to face challenges not only from the outside of the church, but also from the inside of the church. During the time, I grew up, many white people were racist or prejudice toward us because they were taught and believed that they were better than us. Our educated black churches begin to feel as though they are better than other blacks. This creates a wall within the black church of the have and the have nots. This also creates a caste or class system within the black church. One reason we are still fighting the social norms is because through learned behavior, the status quo has learned how to separate us from the house black to the field blacks. But the church must remember whether educated or non-educated it is still our brother.”

Interviewee D:

“The black church has a strong role to play when people are on the inside of prison walls and the church plays an even stronger role when they return home. I think we have a few prison ministries. But they are designed for people to worship and give them a few items. But the worship experience does not address the cause of recidivism. We play an ancestry role, but we are helpful, but not intestinal. But we will not tap into the prison, to let the inmate know, they have options. We do not take it to the next step. Who was in your household? We make an impact but it’s not like it should be.”

Interviewee E:

“There is a cultural shame that the inmate faces when he comes home. Many that have been incarcerated, when they attend church, they are afraid to tell of their former experience, because of the fear of being shunned by the ones who profess Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Also, most black churches face barriers when trying to enter prison, because of their hermeneutic message about God and the power of God to the people. Most ministries that are welcomed are those that do not consider systemic racism as a real issue. So, they continue the doctrine of plantation religion that does nothing for the inmate to be set free.”

The researcher also interviewed twenty-one former inmates in the surrounding area by asking them the following questions:

1. Have you been incarcerated before this previous incarceration?
2. How long have you been home?
3. What are the biggest challenges you face when reentering society?
4. How is the relationship with your family?
5. What factors could help you not repeat incarceration?
6. Who has provided you with the most support since you have been home?
7. Are you still on probation? If so, how long is your probation?
8. What is the highest grade level of education you have completed?
9. Do you have any vocational training or skills?

10. Do you have any goals or aspirations? How could you attain them?
11. Do you believe in God? Do you think you have a relationship with God?
12. Do you have a church home? If so, are they active in your life? Are you active in the church?

Here are the data from the questions asked:

Question 1: From the sample size of the twenty-one former inmates, only two had been incarcerated for the first time. The others had been incarcerated more than twice.

Question 2: From the sample size of the 21 former inmates, seventeen were only home for a maximum of two years. Three former inmates have been home for three to five years and only one has been home past the five years.

Question 3: The biggest challenges for the former inmates, beginning with the most to least challenging, were economics (i.e., jobs), housing, reconnection with family, avoiding former friends and environments, paying child support, housing, transportation, and receiving a valid driver's license or I.D.

Question 4: There were only eight former inmates who still had a good relationship with members of their families. There were five who had a good relationship with certain members of their family, such as their mom, grandmother, or children, but not others. There were eight former inmates that had no relationship or a strained relationship with their family.

Question 5: The leading factors from most to least to help not repeat were: God, job security, family, staying clean and sober (I never mentioned alcohol or substance abuse but it came up many times), and avoiding old friends.

Question 6: The most support given to the former inmates from most to least were: family, community, and church.

Question 7: There were eighteen still on probation, and only three there were not on any supervision. Out of the eighteen on probation, the times under supervision varied from five to twenty-one years.

Question 8: The highest grade level for the former inmates were as follows. Only seven had a high school education or completed a GED while inside. Eleven had no education or never obtained a GED or high school diploma. Only three had some college education through community college.

Question 9: Ten inmates had vocational training or skills such as construction, plumbing, painting, electrician, and welding. Eleven had no previous skills or training.

Question 10: All twenty-one had goals or some sort that they would like to reach at some time in their life. But only four had a realistic plan on how to obtain the goals they had set for themselves.

Question 11: Nineteen former inmates who stated they believe in God. There were two who stated they did not believe in God (their reasonings were they never really had a reason to believe). Of the nineteen who stated they believe in God, only five

said they have a relationship with God. The others really did not know if they had a relationship with God. One of those who stated they have a relationship with God was not Christian but Muslim.

Here are some sample responses given by the former inmates:

Lorenzo

“I grew up living in the fast lane and finally it caught up with me. I found myself in prison on a drug charge. Upon my release within a few weeks, I was back in the drug game which gave me a longer sentence. This last time upon my release, I begin to think about my children, my life, my family and I did not want to continue down the same path. I begin to take entrepreneur classes and eventually I started my own financial business. I have a successful business for the past five years. My church family and immediate family has always been there for me. I have new friends and I never ponder on the old life, because God has given me a new life and another chance to live more productive.”

T.A.

“This is my third time been home from jail. I never graduated from high school. I never knew my daddy. I really want to say out of prison this time, but it is hard out here. I have children to care for but the only way I know to make a decent living is what I have always done and that is hustling. I’ve tried to find work but the jobs do not pay enough to take care of me, housing or my child support. So,

what am I to do? I haven't really thought about God, because to be honest, I wonder has God or the church ever thought about me. I wish it was different but it is what it is."

Salome

"This was my second time being incarcerated. My first time I did not learn from my mistakes. My mind was still on a selfish path. I have done a lot of wrong in my time, things that I am not proud of. My last crime was that of aggravated assault. But while I was inside, I begin to listen to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. My brothers begin to instill in me a sense of pride of who I was and whose I belong. I immediately begin to follow the ways of Allah. Since I have been home, I have a new family, wife, children. I have a print shop business that I own. I have mentors that continue to check on me. For the first time in my life, I have a true family that lets me know I am loved and somebody. This keeps me grounded."

Kenny

"This was my first time being incarcerated. I was charged with manslaughter. While on the inside, I distanced myself from the gang life. I begin to read my Bible; through that I formed a relationship with God. I have been home for 8 years now. I have a family, a lovely wife, children. I have a good job that have been working for the past 5 years. We recently purchased our own home. My

family has always been there for me, in spite of my bad decisions. I am faithful to God and love my church family who has been right by my side.”

Greg

“This is my third time being home. I have a good family, but I believe they are tired of me continuing down the same road. I want to remain home this time. I just need to remain clean and sober. I understand that I have a drug problem. It is only when I get with the same old crowd and begin to indulge in drugs that I lose all focus. I am working now, and have applied for barber school. I believe in God, but I have not been in church in a long time. I continue to go to my meetings because if I do not, it will be a violation of my parole. I was arrested on drug possessions, but I am no drug dealer, I admit I am a drug user. I just want to change and become a barber and have my own barber shop.

Javion

“This is my second time being home from incarceration. I am still on parole. I have a job but it does not pay too much. I am barely making ends meet. It is hard right now but I am trying to maintain because I do not want to go back. But every time I try to do what is right and avoid conflict, someone is always trying to test me. I try to avoid trouble but it seems to always find me. I really have not thought about God, because no one ever brought me to church or told me about God. I see people claiming to know God, but they are doing the same thing I am

doing. I know that is not an excuse, but I really want to make a change in my life and most importantly just trying to stay alive.”

Ray

“I have been home for 6 years now. It has not been easy; I still have four more years before I am off supervision. I stay with my mom, I am working. I have two children. But I cannot visit them because my children mom, stays in the housing complex. It is hard having to sneak around to see my children. To make matters worse, my children’s mom and I really do not get along. My mom, constantly tells me to keep working, and things will get better. I believe in God but I have yet to go to church. I am working on getting my education. But everything cost. I try to avoid my old friends but these days it’s not easy. I am trying not to give up but every day it gets harder and harder not to go back.”

These are just a few sample responses, but all of them are facing challenges.

These barriers do not pertain to one entity. There is a plethora of problems that former inmates face when they return to society. Most of the responses identified different reasonings that would help them not return to prison, such as family, economics, community, and church. With these challenges inmates face, how can the church be of better assistance to provide them a path to peace, security, and a better future?

3. Mobilizing the Black Church to Advocate for Support on Behalf of the Incarcerated and Ex-Felons

3.1 Let the Church Be the Church

I, along with the rest of society, live in a world that seems to not care about the people; rather, life is about greed and power, so the church must bring consciousness to the nation and inform the people that our duty as a church is to have concern and care about people. The church must put their concerns and care into actions that foster liberty and the pursuit of happiness to all people, not just a few. Society can become blind to their responsibilities, and it is the church who must open their eyes. The church should become more involved by being more active in speaking out, demonstrating promises through actions, and helping to change laws to bring peace, freedom, and justice to all people from all spectrums of life. In regards to the Black males who are incarcerated and coming home from prison, the church has a duty to provide ministries through development and partnership with other civic organizations that address the physical and spiritual needs of the Black male. What does this type of ministry that the Black church must present entail? What should be the necessary components of this ministry to help the Black male grasp hold of physical and spiritual emancipation?

The Black church was originally an institution that considered its duty to be more than just worship. It had a responsibility to speak and stand up for important social issues that affected not only the individual but community and society as a whole. It was the Black church that created a place for the voiceless and marginalized. It was

the Black church and its leaders that marched for civil rights and equality. Leaders who understood their roles were more than just about themselves. It was comprised of individuals such as Lucius Holsey, one of the early bishops of the C.M.E. Church, who thought it would be robbery if Blacks did not receive proper education to better equip themselves for a brighter future for generations to come. He became one of the founders of Paine College. Bishop Lane, a former slave, founded the HBCU Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee to provide educational opportunities for former slaves and their families. Individuals such as Henry Turner, who stood up and informed the president to free the slaves and stated that the Union would lose the war if they did not include Black soldiers. Turner organized Black soldiers and was commissioned by Lincoln to become chaplain. Turner began preaching liberated theology towards oppression. He would later become Bishop in the A.M.E. church.¹

These are just a few but there were countless others, such as Richard Allen, Bishop Bunton, Bishop Joseph Johnson, Sadie Alexander, Shirley Chisolm, Martin Luther King Sr. and Jr., as well as countless others who knew the importance of breaking strongholds created by the oppressor to eliminate change. The Black church was vital within the reconstruction era. The Black church was a place for people to hold meetings to begin to fight oppression. The Black church was instrumental in fighting for voters' rights. The Black church was one of the first institutions that had church on Sunday, and

¹ L.H. Welch, Jr., *The History and Heritage of African-American Churches* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2011).

during the week it converted into an educational institution for higher learning. If the Black church could do that then with few resources, what more can the Black church do at this time with more access to resources than ever before? Jesus informs the Black church in Matthew 25:35-40, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I need clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me"; the church must have compassion and love for all people from all walks of life so everyone has the opportunity to experience the overflow of God's blessings. But the church must remember that they are a hospital that provides services no matter what the condition, so no one is turned away. The Black church must welcome the former inmate with open arms, and pray to God for their lack of understanding and ask for empathy.

The Black church must become mobilized by first standing on the foundation of God and God's ability to transform or convert the formerly incarcerated. If the church is to be the church, then it must first begin with the foundations upon which it was built, and that is God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This foundation of God that the church is built on is more than just lip service on Sunday morning. It is more than mid-week service; rather, it is the service of God that begins inward and extends outwards. It is a foundation that helps one not only speak about the goodness of God, but demonstrate the goodness of God through the actions one takes on a daily basis. The church cannot

be effective if their only mission is to perform service within the walls. But the church's greatest impact is the ministry that extends beyond the walls. Jesus' ministry was a ministry that was more outside the temple than within. If the church is to be more like Jesus, then it should follow that model. But nothing can be authentic and real until true transformation or conversion has taken place.

Jesus says to Peter in Matthew 16:18, "I tell you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell shall not prevail against it." But this empowerment was given to Peter before his true conversion. Peter would experience setbacks during his walk down the path toward transformation. It was Peter who denied Jesus and began to curse emphatically toward a young child that he never knew Jesus. It was Peter that Jesus had to set straight on more than one occasion. It was Peter who went back to his old form of life after Jesus was crucified. But it was Peter who was filled with the power of God and started the largest church in history.

Conversion does not always happen overnight. The church must have patience and empathy toward the Black male who has been incarcerated and not give up on them so quickly. Jesus told Peter what he was going to be doing, but it did not happen immediately. Peter had obstacles, challenges, and barriers he had to face from within and outside to reach the divine purpose in his life. Just like Peter, the Black males who are incarcerated and those released have many challenges, barriers, and obstacles they

will face. But they cannot face them alone. There must be a strong foundation one can lean on for strength, guidance, love, and support.

One person who demonstrated true spiritual transformation on the inside of prison and outside was Malcolm X. Malcolm X's story is one that gives great inspiration to anyone who seeks to be changed from within and beyond. His story is one that gives encouragement to those who are incarcerated and those being released from incarceration and returning home.

Born Malcolm Little, Malcolm X's father was a Black preacher. His father was murdered by a White hate group who did not take well to Malcolm's father standing up for the rights of those who were being ostracized. His mother was later placed in a mental institution after the death of his father. Malcolm found himself living in foster care and later reform school. He was an exceptional student who aspired to become a lawyer, but his White teacher informed him to think realistically, that he should think about taking up a trade. These sorts of catastrophic events caused Malcolm to not believe in the form of Christianity about Jesus that was being taught. After all, the ones pushing this type of religion were the very ones still placing their knees on his neck, as was done to George Floyd. As Theologian Ryan Lamothe suggested, "No matter how

bright or gifted Malcolm was, he now knew that all that was left to him was the lowest sphere of economic and cultural life."²

Malcolm, like many other countless Black males today, was without guidance from family and found his guidance in the form of the streets. He learned how to hustle and began to immolate those gangsters on a daily basis. He lived a life without merit; one that would find him always on the run from the law and fellow street peers. His mind was on survival and the fast-lane life of money, drugs, and sex. Malcolm stated, "Through all this time in my life, I really was dead mentally dead."³ This life of living on the edge ended with him being arrested and sent to prison. He realized life in prison was hell on earth. He still had a criminal mentality while in prison. Malcolm continued to do things that were not legal, such as gambling, drugs, and other hustles, while in prison. I can attest that prison does not rehabilitate the person, but true rehabilitation comes from within.

Malcom continued down the same path that had him incarcerated. Malcom did not finish high school, although he was a very bright student. Therefore, he was in jail without any skills or education. It was in prison that he would meet a brother named Reginald, who would teach him about God (Allah). Reginald was a Muslim brother. He would continue to sit and talk with Malcom about who God was, especially as a Black

² Trevin Jones, "The Ideological and Spiritual Transformation of Malcolm X," *Journal of African American Studies* 24 (2020): 417–433.

³ Ibid.

man. These lengthy conversations and teachings would lead to Malcolm doing a self-inventory of himself. One of the things Malcolm came to realize was that he was not worthy to even pray to God. I can confirm that one of the steps of conversion is becoming humble and realizing one is not worthy, but through the love of God, God seeks to make one worthy to serve others. Malcom began to pray to God and read every day. This not only bought a change within but also on the outside. He did not talk the same. Malcom did not walk the same. He did not look the same. Malcom had found a new purpose and identity from his past. Malcolm had been converted by God and with the help of his brothers. The conversion did not stop while on the inside, but upon his release from prison, Malcolm was welcomed with open arms by the Nation of Islam, who continued to walk with him, teach him, and provide the necessities of life so he would not be alone in the challenges that he faced.

The Black church must be there for those on the inside to provide teachings, wisdom, love, and support. But the Black church must also be there for the Black male upon his release to welcome him with open arms and examine the needs and challenges he faces upon his return. The St. Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn, pastored by Dr. Johnny Youngblood, is an example of a Black church fulfilling the model Jesus spoke of in Matthew 25. Dr. Youngblood and the St. Paul Community Baptist Church continues to minister to Black men who are incarcerated and formerly incarcerated by creating housing and other programs that provide the needs so many former inmates

require when they are released. Dr. Youngblood partnered with other organizations and advocated for resources to help provide the necessary opportunities for the Black male. The church has helped countless former inmates through spiritual and physical conversion. The church was more than a place of worship; rather, it became a place that addressed the social problems that affected the community. Dr. Youngblood stated, "it is time for the church to reach out to our fallen brothers needs instead of condemning."⁴

Another church is The City of Refuge, pastored by Dr. Louis Threat. The goal of this startup church is to provide worship and programs for inmates on the inside and those returning home. This church continues to assess the needs of the inmates on the inside and once they have been released, they continue to follow up with their program. They have members who have been incarcerated and those who are sincere about working with the formerly and now incarcerated brothers. They continue to seek shelter upon their return and give support to the brothers on a monthly basis. As Dr. Threat stated, "These people coming out are not just inmates, they are our brothers and sisters."

The Russell Memorial C.M.E. Church in Durham, North Carolina also has an outreach program for those incarcerated and those returning home. This church provides services for the Black male in several capacities. As Lawrence (a former inmate) stated, "this church has been there for me. After my incarceration they made sure that I

⁴ Samuel G. Freedman, "Letting Go, Gradually, of a Life Embracing the Ministry," *The New York Times*, July 10, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/11/us/11religion.html>

stayed on the right path by given me mentors and advocating for programs and resources to help me in times of need. They were there along with my family, with their words, love and action, so that I knew I was not alone.” This church has several people who have been incarcerated and these individuals have shown great promise and success. The church has a partnership with Step-Up Durham, which helps provide housing and jobs for the Black male. The church is also a partner with the Durham Police Department and non-violent coalition. Russell Memorial continues to be more than a church within the walls; rather, it is a vital foundation to the community. The church provides the following programs to former inmates:

1. Addiction and recovery (Celebrate Recovery)
2. Anger Management
3. Life Skills
4. Parenting
5. Release and Reintegration
6. Job training through partner organizations
7. Assistance with Driver’s License & I.D.
8. Financial Literacy

It is the goal of Russell Memorial to ensure that all participants are able to successfully reach their full potential through a holistic perspective that reaches the participants’ physical and spiritual needs.

Black churches such as these are important to the development of the Black male before and after their incarceration. But it is also vital that the former inmate do a personal inventory within their own being mentally to receive the true conversion that is needed to walk a different path.

This was a process I had to face to walk a different path. As stated earlier, I was now home from incarceration, but the challenges were real. It was as if I was released from prison, but the invisible chains still had me confined. The chains of the past were still around my way of life. The chains of the same environment and friends still had me shackled. Then there were the shackles of finances from obscure jobs, along with the shackles of pain, hurt, anger, and bitterness at society and myself. These challenges can weigh an individual down to depths of an abyss. I found myself back selling drugs, on a pathway to recidivism with no return. But on one particular day, I was sitting on my car on the block where I was hustling with other friends, as we did on a daily basis, when a pastor was driving by and decided to stop and converse with me. This pastor knew me and my family, and he did not look down on me, but gave me some encouraging words to make a change. This pastor was the late Reverend Charles Shack. He ended the conversation with saying, "No matter how many times you have messed up, God still loves you and wants to make a difference in your life, give God a chance before it's too late." Those words began to penetrate my soul all day. So, the next day, I decided to go to the church where my grandmother was pastoring. I sat in the back because I did not

want to be noticed. I was wearing athletic gear, no suit or tie. I heard a message preached by my grandmother, the pastor, titled, "It's never too late." The church's spirit, songs, and message were as if it was for me alone. As church ended, I was preparing to walk out without conversating with anyone when many members came up to me and began to welcome me with gladness and open arms. I went home feeling good about being in service. But I continued to live in the hustling lane. I began to talk to my grandmother more about church and she would only say, "Junior just keep coming back." Although I was still living in the fast lane, I continued to come to church. One day, some of the young adults came up to me and asked me to join the choir. I thought about it for a minute, but I noticed that the church was full of young ladies and many of them were in the choir. This may not be a good reason to join, but God has a way of setting you up for a greater purpose. I joined the choir while I was still selling drugs, which many people in the church knew about, but they never turned their noses toward me. They would only encourage me to continue coming to church. Eventually, the Lord had me to use my gift of singing and eventually I became a lead singer in the choir. This led to me have a different group of friends. The choir was very close; we would go to movies, have cookouts, and we loved to be around each other. This began to slowly move me away from the gang and drug life. I was still in the same environment, but my atmosphere had changed. God may not move you from the environment, but God can change your atmosphere.

There was an associate pastor at the church who had been in prison and she would later become my mentor. She knew my family and understood the struggles I was having. She would constantly talk to me about life and how to overcome my challenges. I found myself selling drugs, singing in the choir, and praying at the same time. Finally, one day while coming back from Chicago on a drug run, God began to work on my inner being. It was on a Thursday around 2:30 a.m. that I was sleep and I had an epiphany. A being picked me up and flew me above the clouds; I became like a small infant in his arms and I could see his face, yet I could not explain his face. I could see the wings flapping on his back, and I felt safe in his arms as he carried me; he never said a word, but eventually he let me down at the edge of the block where I always sold drugs. I was shaken in my sleep, and there was a young lady who was with me that night who noticed me shaken and said, "wake up, wake up." I woke up and she asked me, "what's wrong?" I replied, "I think I seen my angel," and I went on to say I could not do this anymore.

Sunday morning came and I went to church and gave my life to Christ. The church was excited, but for me it was like a weight had been lifted off of my shoulders. I flushed all of the drugs I had with no concern about the money I would lose. God began to lead me to place, which I thought was a joke. I even told God, "I think you have made a mistake." I went to my grandmother and told her, I believe God is calling me to preach, and her reply, "if God has called you to preach, you must make that declaration

in front of the congregation.” I was nervous, but Sunday morning I announced God had called me to preach, and the congregation began to shout. After Sunday Service, my old acquaintances came by the house. They had heard the news and one of them asked, “is it true, you were just with me, selling drugs the last week,” but another one said, “yeah, it's true, I can see a different look and talk with him.” They went on to say they were proud of me and continue to pray for them. This would be the start of the conversion of a new life for me.

This conversion took place because of many layers. The layer of the late Reverend Charles Shack, my family, and my new church family. The church is a strong instrument that can play a loud tune in the life of former inmates. Although the church did not have a prison ministry on paper, they had a prison ministry in action because of the mentors and others in the congregation who helped me walk down a different path. This church would soon have over twelve ministers on staff who were all from prison. The Black church has and must be important in the lives of the Black male. I am here because there was a Black church, family, and community who invested time and love towards me. The Black church is more than an entity by itself, but it is a foundation that helps connect God, family, and community together.

3.2 It Takes a Village

There were thirty-seven Black males in my community who were incarcerated at the same time as me. Out of those thirty-seven, only one did not return to prison, and

that was me. Why am I so special? Was I better than the others? I would think not, but there was a support system I had and eventually took advantage of that many did not. I had a family that showed me support through love and constructive criticism and they never let my hand go in spite of the storms. The village is made up of more than one ingredient, but it has many ingredients that help make a delicious pie and one of those ingredients is family.

3.3 Family

The Black church must mobilize for more family support for the Black male. Many Black males who have gone to prison have often times burned the bridges with family members and therefore lost that support. Then there are those who do not have immediate family, but most Black families come from extended family. It is the church that must be a father for the fatherless and a mother for the motherless. There should be some strong men and women who can stand in the gap for the absent fathers and mothers in the Black male's life.

The formerly incarcerated Black male can often times feel isolated, like an outcast. But it is the family that can give one the sense of belonging. It is the family that can help one gain their sanity, health, and strength because family can instill the values of who you are, where you come from, and where you need to go. Extended family has always played a crucial role for African American survival since slavery. When our fore parents were sold to another owner, someone on the plantation would take the

remaining children into their shack and raise them as their own kin. This philosophy is still vital for the Black male today. Dr. James Deotis Roberts suggested, "The family is the cornerstone of our society. More than any other force it shapes the attitudes, the hopes, the ambitions, and the values of the child."⁵ My family would always inform me of who I was and the importance of my name and family. They installed in me a sense of pride, dignity, and respect, no matter the choices I had made in the past. They would always let me know that we will always be family.

The Black church must mobilize and strengthen the family within the community. As stated earlier, there were thirty-seven inmates incarcerated with me from my community. The following is a breakdown of the family structure for those thirty-seven incarcerated:

- Only one Black male came from a two-parent home. (That would be me; I lived with my father and mother present in my life, along with extended family).
- Thirty lived with a single mother and no other support from their father. These individuals had no relationship with their father growing up.
- Seven black males lived with their grandmother as a child growing up.
- Thirty-one had a father, mother, brother, or sister who had previously been incarcerated.

⁵ Dr. James Deotis Roberts, *Roots of a Black Future: Family and Church* (Bowie, MD: Simon & Schuster, 2002) p.15.

These statistics are alarming. The Black family must help bring liberation and values to the Black male for their survival. The Black family must reestablish itself not only for their survival but for the future of the next generation. The Black family must hold on to the values of raising a child not by themselves but with the help of the community, church, and its extended family.

The support system of family comes from more than one parameter, but it is there to help in all spectrums of life. Because family support comes from different areas of experience in their life, it can give support to the Black male as mentor, counselor, confidant, and understanding through the lens of their own life. This is what makes the church so special because the body of Christ is made up of people from different areas of life, but when they come together, they give glory and make disciples through love, wisdom, and empathy.

Incarceration not only affects the Black male, but also his family. The entire family must deal with draw backs from the incarceration, whether it be parenting, economics, shelter, scars of hurt, bitterness, pain, or anger. The children of formerly incarcerated Black males face many challenges because of their parent's incarceration. These challenges can often times place the child on the same pathway to becoming incarcerated. The children many times deal with isolation, depression, delinquent behavior such as gang involvement, drug use, violence, and embarrassment from their

peers. Most children can often times act up in school and have low performing grades. These actions can have them following down the same path as their parents.

The church must mobilize the reconnection of family from the African American experience. This experience suggests the family is more than a two-parent home depicted by western civilization rules and European perception. But it consists of extended family connections such as grandmother, grandfather, uncle, aunt, cousin, and neighbors raised within the family home. The extended family is evident in the Old Testament because it is in the Old Testament where we find an order of the structure laid out for each family member from the youngest to the oldest member. It is the bond of the extended family that helps give strength to circumstances when other family members are not present; their presence helps fill a necessary void as a grandmother, aunt, father, or mother. This family structure is evident in the life of Abraham who had his nephew Lot travel with him along his journey. This helped form a village or tribe. The Old and New Testaments presented the sense of extended family. It was Jesus who stated to his mother and the disciple for whom he loved, while on the cross, "woman behold your son, and son behold your mother." Jesus understood the need for a nuclear family. W.R.F. Browning suggested, "The family in New Testament parlance consisted of parents, children, and servants and the mutual relationships of all these parties are to reflect the kind of love which Christ has for his Church. The performance and integrating of family life was in the interests of society and to that end the Christian

Church...encouraged family life where security and shelter were provided and prayer and worship practiced.”⁶ The Black church must stand on the foundations presented by the earlier churches in which it became more adaptable to changing social conditions.

The church and family must present itself as an authentic sanctuary of forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation and restoration. The family of the Black male must find a way in their heart to not continue to cast a shadow on their past. This is not an easy task when hurt, pain, and shame is involved. But it takes a willing and empathetic spirit to help one rebuild relationships that were once broken. If the church stands on the foundations of redemption through Christ and the family is what makes up the church, then it must be willing to reach out a loving hand to those who are returning home from prison.⁷

Forgiveness is one of the main ingredients that must be applied to help the Black male transition home. There cannot be forgiveness without redemption. The church family must be genuine in true forgiveness of past mistakes. Forgiveness helps bring one closer to reconciliation. When the family can cast off the old hurt, anger, and resentment caused by the past actions of the formerly incarcerated, it gives hope to a direction of forward progress.⁸ This can help build the relationship that was once torn down by the individual’s past. The forgiveness can lead to a repair of love that seemed unrepairable.

⁶ W. Wilson Goode Sr., *Ministry with Prisoners and Families: The Way Forward* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011) pp. 59-60.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

When this happens, it can give the Black male a new sense of purpose and hope. This becomes the glue that holds the church family together, no matter the obstacles. Linda Mills stated, "We care because it is our children, our families, our neighbors who are being arrested and imprisoned and are coming home from prison. We are talking about our families, our communities. We care because it is our mission to care."⁹

The reconnection of family with the Black male can help bring purpose and hope. Dr. Roberts stated, "The family is a dike against the adverse sea of circumstances external to it. It can take on a warmth and an acceptance of persons that provides resiliency and strength to face adversity. The faith of the black church tradition can enrich the strengths of the black family. At the same time, it can heal the wounds of families beset by pressures from sinful structures."¹⁰

3.4 Education

The Black church must advocate support for education to assist the formerly incarcerated Black male. The Black church has long been an important vessel to the instruments of education. To the Black church, education is the key to freedom from societal bondage. It is the tool used to open the mind to a new world of ideas and possibilities. It was the late Bishop Lucius Holsey of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, a former slave from Georgia, who sought the importance of education within

⁹ Ibid p. 100.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 102

the Black race. The desire to learn how to read and write inspired him to reach for higher heights. It was White children and Black elderly women who taught him how to read and write. Bishop Hosley once stated the following:

Day by day, I took a leaf from one of the spelling books, and so folded it that one or two of the lessons were on the outside as if printed on a card. This I put in the pocket of my vest or coat, and when I was sitting in the carriage, walking the streets or working in the yard or using the hoe or spade, or in the dining room I would take out my spelling leaf which was finished by this process. I would refold it...with a new lesson on the outside...Besides, I could catch words from the white people and retain them in my memory until I could get my dictionary. Then I would spell and define the words, until they became perfectly impressed upon my memory.¹¹

It was the C.M.E. church who would begin to start schools such as Lane College, Miles College, Texas College, and Phillips School of Theology. All throughout the diaspora, Black churches were establishing schools to help combat the challenges bought upon them through slavery.

For many formerly incarcerated Black males, the lack of education is one of the leading forces to recidivism. As stated earlier, out of the thirty-seven incarcerated with me, only two had a high school education. Many who are incarcerated can barely read

¹¹ Whelchel, Jr., *The History and Heritage of African-American Churches*, 94–95.

past the seventh-grade level. The Black church can help reduce recidivism by establishing or connecting the formerly incarcerated to educational institutions of higher learning. There must be more prison educational programs offered to everyone and not just a selected few. The Black church must advocate for education to help the Black male make a successful transition in their life. Education increases the odds of post-release employment by fifty-nine percent.¹² When there is a lack of education, the obstacles become much harder to handle for the Black male.

As I was called to preach after my incarceration, I still lacked the skills or education to open doors to a brighter future. I had a high school diploma, but that only provided me with jobs that paid little with no potential future upward mobility. The support system of family and church continued to encourage me to persevere. God was changing me from the inside out. But with no skills, there was only so much I could do for myself or others. It was not until Bishop Thomas Brown Sr. came into my life and set me on the path of higher education. He would often times come up to me and ask, "have you considered going back to school?" I would always say yes, but I really did not consider or believe I could go back to school. I began to look at my past and allowed it to build a wall of resistance to school. I really believed there was no way a school would accept me with the past record I had accumulated. But Bishop Brown insisted I go back

¹² Grant Duwe, "The Effectiveness of Education and Employment Programming for Prisoners," *American Enterprise Institute* (2018): 5.

to school, and he even went as far as to have a recruiter of Rust College speak to me with the paperwork in hand for me to get activated in school. Eventually, I enrolled at Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi.

I began to experience a new world while enrolled in college. My mindset began to change on how I perceived the world and myself. God put professors in my life who set me on a different course. People such as Dr. Gemma Beckley, director of the social work department, opened my eyes to see things from a different perspective. There were new friends that I begin to associate with in my life. My friends had changed from the environment of friends I once had in my circle. I would listen attentively to the lectures and personal conversations with intellectuals such as Dr. Stovall and Dr. Samuels. The life I once lived seemed like a whispering memory. God, through this education process, began to open doors to new possibilities. I ended my first year of college with a grade point average (GPA) of 3.8. For the next two years I would have an accumulated GPA of 3.75. I was asked by Dr. Samuel to go to India during my senior year at Rust College to complete my summer internship. I accepted the offer and traveled to India with Dr. Samuel. It was one of the most educational and humbling experiences in my life. For three months I worked as an intern in drug treatment and juvenile detention centers. I stayed with families and learned their culture. I traveled and visited different religious sects. The internship in India is something I still cherish to this day. Upon my return home to Rust College, I began to work as a youth counselor while finishing my senior

year. Finally, the time had come to graduate. I graduated Magna Cum Laude, one of the best in my class. I was so excited that as I walked across the stage, tears began to stream down my face. In that short walk, I began to thank God and reminisce how far God had bought me.

But it did not end at Rust College. As I began to pastor, with the assistance of Bishop Brown, I enrolled at Interdenominational Theological Center (Phillips School of Theology) in Atlanta, Georgia. It was at this school that my knowledge of God and people was broadly opened. I met professors who are still part of my life and who gave lectures that would inspire and encourage me to be better person. This school bought a sense of liberation that I never fathom existed. I would graduate at the top of my class with a master's of divinity. As I write, I am now on track to receive a doctorate of ministry from Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina. Who would have thought a former gang member, drug dealer, and inmate of a correctional facility would now be a college graduate with a bachelor's, master's, and now pursuing a doctorate degree? I am not bragging by any means, but I am just giving homage to God, church, family, and others who sowed into my life.

Education is very essential to reduce recidivism. Without leaders such as Bishop Thomas Brown Sr., along with assistance from the church, I could have easily slipped back into the old patterns of life. But education opened doors to a new found freedom. Education gave me hope and encouragement to seek a better life. Education allowed me

to see more than just myself on life's journey. Education must be one of the focal points the Black church mobilizes for the formerly incarcerated Black male. If education can help open doors for me, it can open doors for many other formerly incarcerated Black males.

3.5 Employment

The Black church must partner and become an advocate for stellar employment for the Black male returning home from prison. When the formerly incarcerated returns home, finding a job is not an easy task. Many employers are hesitant to hire ex-felons. The church must be the advocate to help create employment for those returning home. There must be job training on how to help the Black male obtain the skills necessary to fulfill the job in which they are applying. The Black church can partner with other agencies, or they can themselves create training on how to properly dress and interview for employment.

It is upon the Black church to become a voice for better jobs instead of low paying jobs that do not touch the surface of creating a better future or improving their living conditions. With limited employment or jobs that pay below the living standards, recidivism is the next alternative without a steady median average income. The church must be involved with advocating for new laws that help support the ex-felon in things such as expungement of records. When an ex-felon has returned home, and their record is one that is not murder or sex-offender, all other criminal records of non-violent

offences should be expunged from their record. But unfortunately, that is not the case.

The Black church can partner with legal teams, such as the legal team of NCCU, who has advocated for expungement of records for ex-felons, and learn the rights for those citizens returning home from prison when it comes to their criminal record. But there is only so much a legal team can do when the laws that are put in place are systemically against people of color. The Black church must become a voice for the ex-felon and reach out to courts, judges, and politicians, the ones who make and pass laws, and demand a change within the system. The following is a list of a few non-violent felonies and misdemeanors that may be able to be expunged from one's record as of now in the state of North Carolina, but not in all cases, according to the North Carolina Record

Expungements¹³:

- Computer trespass
- Concealing goods in a store
- Disorderly conduct
- Embezzlement
- False swearing
- Falsifying documents
- Forgery
- Graffiti

¹³ North Carolina record Expungements, 2018, p.2.

- Larceny
- Permit violation
- Possession of drug paraphernalia
- Possession of alcohol
- Possession of Marijuana
- Possession of stolen goods
- Trespassing

Here is a list of crimes that cannot be expunged from record in North Carolina:

- Class A through Class G felonies
- Felonies that include assault as an essential element of the offense
- Felonies that require you to register as an offender (such as sex offender)
- Offenses that involve methamphetamines or heroin
- Offenses that involve the intent to sell or deliver cocaine¹⁴

There is a great discrepancy in these offenses when it compares to the Black male. The offenses that can be expunged are mostly crimes that are committed by people not of color. Even those Blacks who do commit those crimes mentioned on the expungement list have a difficult or no chance of having their record expunged because of many dynamics, one being the lack of resources to obtain legal counsel, and the other being the lack of knowledge or resources to get the record expunged. But the laws that

¹⁴ Ibid, 3.

are passed throughout the United States when dealing with crimes that can and cannot be expunged disproportionately affect the Black male. For instance, many Black males who are arrested for crimes that seem minor are more likely charged with a felony other than a misdemeanor. Most Blacks who receive drug charges, no matter the amount, are grouped in the felony and charged with intent. The prison system is full of Blacks who are disproportionately charged on minor drug offenses that are elevated to felonies. The idea that many cannot get their record expunged because of a non-violent drug charge is ludicrous. But it shows the war on drugs and the crime bill that was passed back in the 1980s still has a wide effect on the systemic racism of Blacks.

As I had graduated from college, and was now pastoring, I wanted to enter the professional workforce and become a social worker. I had the experience and notable GPA, I interviewed well, and eventually I was offered over twelve jobs. But there was a problem. Every time I was hired, they informed me to go and get my fingerprints done at the law enforcement agency. Every time my prints would come back, the job offer was discontinued toward me. This happened so many times that I became angry at society, the government, and eventually God. I began to tell God that I was done preaching and pastoring and I was leaving the church. I called my father and informed him that going back to school was a waste of my time, that there is no such thing as another chance. I began to talk about doing what I once did, which was selling drugs. But my father gave me some encouraging words that would lead me to continue to trust God and follow

God's plan for my life: "Junior, why are you trying to find a job, when God is trying to give you a career." It was right at that moment that God showed me you are already a social worker and counselor, and you have the training to do it through the church. I began to put my heart and soul into pastoring and reaching out to the people and community through gang intervention, drug and alcohol addiction, family counseling, and teen mentorship. I continue to work in that field of expertise today.

But what about other ex-felons who do not have this fortune? What can they do when a door is slammed in their face? How can they find hope through employment when they continue to face an uphill battle? How can they find employment that will provide a decent living for them and their family? Where are the employers that are willing to give them another chance? These are some challenges the Black church must be mobilizing to secure a better living through employment on behalf of the formerly incarcerated Black male. Helping the Black male find secure decent employment helps build his confidence in self-reliance and build up the community. A decent job can help reduce recidivism because the risk of going back to jail has been refilled with a decent living in their life. They begin to see a glimpse of hope, which helps build character, reputation, and self-esteem about one's self and those around him, such as the family, community, and church.

3.6 Housing

Housing is another great challenge with which the Black church must become more involved on behalf of the formerly incarcerated Black male. When the former incarcerated Black male returns home, there is the challenge of where they are going to stay because many who come home face restrictions that come with returning home as set by their parole or probationary officers, such as they cannot be around anyone who has committed a felony. That condition is difficult for many Black males returning home if they are going to stay with their parent(s) who also lives with the extended family, such as an uncle, a sister, or brother who has a record. This creates a challenge because if the formerly incarcerated individual is staying there and the state finds out, one can be violated and sent back to prison. Then there are those who stay in half-way housing for a period of time, but it is sometimes run like prison. Many former inmates seek out shelter, but they have to leave in the morning and carry all their belongings with them. This can lead to homelessness and recidivism. When one does not know where they are going to lay their head, the old familiar patterns of what got them into prison to begin with creep into a person's thought. It is hard for the ex-felon to rent an apartment or public housing because most residential facilities have a clause that do not allow them to rent to ex-felons. With these challenges, the Black church must establish homes through funding that builds up abandon buildings or houses to make it affordable for the Black male to have a place to stay. There must be formed relationships with other agencies

such as Step-Up Durham, who helps provide housing and employment. The Black church cannot do it all alone, but it can be the leading advocate on behalf of the Black male who has been incarcerated in making sure he can have a place to lay his head without worrying about where to sleep tomorrow.

3.7 Voting

The right to vote is one of the basic civil rights given to all citizens.

Unfortunately, for many Black males returning home from prison, those rights have been stripped by laws that continue to support the Old Jim Crow laws of yesterday and plague our system today. Many with felonies have lost their right to vote or do not know the proper channels to go through to regain their right. The Black church must educate those returning home on the voting process, along with fighting on their behalf with the court system and politicians who continue to create a blockage for those to vote. It is no secret that mass incarceration is majority people of color. If the prison system is majority people of color, that would signal that many Black males returning home have lost a right and privilege that is supposed to be for all citizens. If the former incarcerated Black male is required to get a job and pay taxes, they should also be allowed to vote. When one is not allowed to vote, it promotes a system of second-class citizenship, a new way of treating one as less than a person. Many states have found ways to prevent voting by imposing that the ex-felon must have all their restitution paid or owe no fines. This is nothing but a new form of poll tax. Many can vote, but they must know their

rights, thus the Black church must train, teach, and promote the rights of the ex-felon to restore their voting rights and help make a difference for the things that are important within their community. It took me a while to get my voting card, but I now vote with extreme pride and confidence that my vote makes a difference. The Black church must continue to engage with the Black male, along with legal aide, to inform what can be done to ensure voting rights are restored to all formerly incarcerated individuals. It also must push for laws that equally represent everyone in the voting process.

3.8 Next Step (Conclusion)

If the church is the cornerstone of the community, then it must extend a helping hand to all people from all walks of life, and that includes the Black males who are incarcerated as well as those returning home. There must be a collective effort lead by the church to combat mass incarceration and recidivism of the Black male. As Christians and followers of Jesus Christ, it is our duty as members of the Black church to bring about hope, change, and love to the former incarcerated Black male. The church must advocate for more faith-based programs. The next step should include support for more social program funding and fewer prisons for profit. The Black church has a crucial role in reducing recidivism among Black males because it can bring about restoration through a collective effort. Change can only come through doing something different if one wants to achieve different results, and that includes the Black male, church, family, community, and society. There are benefits when recidivism is reduced. It helps create a

safer environment. Reducing recidivism helps foster change in the community and lives of people to achieve economic empowerment, future success, and holistic transformation.

The church cannot wait to help reduce recidivism only when the Black male comes home; it must begin inside the prison walls. These faith-based programs must begin inside the prison walls and work themselves from inside to outside. There must be an assessment of the former incarcerated to examine where the Black male is in their life and thought process. After the assessments, there should be actions taken to ensure the lack of return to old behavior. The church can provide practical, emotional, and spiritual assistance to the Black male that can help make the transition more accommodating. I recommend the following formula the Black church can follow to help reduce recidivism:

- Create or partner with faith-based organizations that are really making an impact on the lives of the Black male.
- Help provide needed education such as GED/diploma or higher education
- Provide job/skills training
- Form a partnership with employers in the city to ensure an equal hiring process
- Advocate for more needed social programs to help assist with the needs of the former incarcerated
- Fight against more for-profit prisons being built

- Provide training for willing congregates to help assist the former incarcerated male
- Provide legal assistance in getting records expunged (if possible)
- Help seek affordable housing within the community
- Educate the community and church on the impact of incarceration on the Black male, community, and family
- Provide leadership skills through biblical principles
- Provide proper assessments in coordination with the correctional board upon the Black male's return.
- Provide family support through meetings and counseling
- Provide assistance in drug/alcohol rehabilitation
- Anger management evaluation
- Understand challenges (how to face adversity)
- Mentoring programs
- Motivation programs/gang intervention

If the Black church can follow this type of formula (principles) it will help reduce recidivism considerably. This cannot work without a collective effort on behalf of all. The Black male must also be willing to rewire the brain. This simply means the Black male must be willing to change the way it thinks and reacts to challenges. One cannot make a change if one continues to resort to old behavior. This only leads to the same

direction that has been destructive in the Black male's life. The formerly incarcerated must be willing to accept constructive criticism and tough love. The Black church must be patient but not crippling to ensure the survival and success of the Black male.

The Black church must be willing to reintegrate the Black male into the community and reduce recidivism by providing love and support through connecting the Black male to the services needed in his life. There must be ongoing support in the church, community, and forgiving family members to help the Black male from reoffending and staying clear of old friends and behaviors. The Black church must be more like the father in the prodigal son parable in Luke 15. When the Father saw His son from a distance, He ran to meet him and showed him authentic genuine love. He not only showed him love, but also clothed, fed, and housed him. He looked beyond his faults, mistakes, and failures. This is how the church must respond. The church should respond with love and provide assistance to help the Black male get back on his feet. The church must have a forgiving and welcoming attitude. But the Black male returning home must also be kind to himself; he must be willing to humble himself and face the shame and guilt of the past so he can press on toward the future. But unfortunately, many times the church takes on the attitude of the elder son. The church never forgets the past and can in many ways turn a deaf ear and cold heart toward the Black male coming home. The anger, hypocrisy, and bitterness of family members inside the church and community can cause both parties to never become transformed or redeemed.

The church can make a difference in the life of the Black male. I am a living witness. But it will take a collective effort. I was one of the blessed ones who did not return to prison. It is because first I came to myself and took a personal inventory of my life. But it was also God, church family, and an immediate family who watched over me. Although life was not easy, and I found myself going down the same old direction, it was my church and family who helped steer me in the right direction. My support system helped me get my mind straight and walk down another path to see the future that God has blessed me with in my life. If it can happen to me, there is hope for the Black male returning home, but the church must play its part. So, one day the Black male can allow society to see that change can come through the village of help.

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Biography

Jerry Christian, Jr. is a native of Booneville, Mississippi. He is currently senior pastor of Russell Memorial C.M.E. Church in Durham, North Carolina. He is a member of the Inter-ministerial alliance in Durham, North Carolian. He is a graduate of Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi. During his tenure at Rust College, he was a member of the social science club. He was also selected internship in India. Pastor Christian graduated Magna Cum Lauda with a Bachelors of Science in Social Work in 2006. He is also a graduate of Interdenominational Theological Center, Phillips School of Theology, where he received his Master of Divinity in 2010. He has pastored several churches, Yarbrough Chapel C.M.E. Church in Holly Springs, where the congregation grew tremendously. He also pastored Popular-Salttillo Church in Tupelo, Mississippi, where he led the congregation in a 1.5-million-dollar construction of a new facility. It was there that the congregation grew from a membership of fifty to a membership of four-hundred. He is a certified counselor with concentration in Alcohol/drug addiction, gang intervention, & STD, HIV/AIDS 101. Jerry Christian, is a husband, father, who is married to Yolanda Christian, and they have five children to their union, Kobe, Imaih, Jayla, Patrick, and Chase. He is currently a Doctoral Candidate at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.