

BY TANYA ERZEN

Captive Audience

How Prison Ministries Prioritize Salvation Over Justice

In early June at the Faith and Freedom Coalition's "Road to Majority" conference—an annual gathering of Christian Right leaders active in state and federal policy advocacy—Craig DeRoche of Prison Fellowship Ministries (PFM) emphasized to attendees that redemption, rather than punishment, is the key to reforming the criminal justice system.

"There is no such thing as a throwaway person," DeRoche had said previously, "and by granting second chances to those who have earned them, we will be contributing to the restoration of families, communities, and our nation."¹

DeRoche's presence at the conference—alongside Christian leaders like James Dobson and GOP heavyweights including President Donald Trump, Vice President Mike Pence, Sen. Mitch McConnell, and House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy—demonstrated how central prison reform has become to the conservative political agenda.² As author Kay Whitlock described in *The Public Eye* in Spring 2017, conservatives from Newt Gingrich to Grover Norquist have situated mass incarceration as a fiscal and moral problem, and have partnered with both progressives and religious leaders of all stripes in calling to reform the system. Addressing sentencing, juvenile imprisonment, diversion programs for drug offenses, and less restrictive parole regulations, organizations like Right on Crime and PFM have pushed back against tough-on-crime ideology and toward policies that reflect the Christian idea that prisoners can be redeemed. These are significant shifts from the War on Drugs and the specter of "the super-predator," which dominated criminal justice thinking in the 1980s and '90s.³

As bipartisan reform efforts have



According to their website, Prison Fellowship is the nation's largest Christian non-profit serving prisoners, former prisoners, and their families. Photo: Prison Fellowship.

steadily drifted rightward, the heavy hand of evangelicals in prison reform efforts has created new kinds of problems.

In the eight years I spent researching my book, *God In Captivity: The Rise of Faith-Based Prison Ministries in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, I found a tension between faith-based prison ministries that, on the one hand, have challenged conservatives' emphasis on punishment, and on the other, have embraced an idea of reform that demands adherence to conservative Christian theology and social ideas, where rehabilitation translates neatly to being born again.

DeRoche's organization, PFM, is one of the most prominent evangelical groups in the United States, with ministries inside more than 1,300 prisons, jails and detention centers, and Justice Fellowship, its sophisticated public policy arm. Founded in 1976 by Chuck Colson, a former Nixon aide convicted of Watergate-related crimes who emerged from prison born again, today part of PFM's empire includes 24-hour evangelical programs in some prisons that occupy entire

wings, where prisoners work, study, and sleep in an area of the prison dedicated to religious ideals.⁴

While not all prison ministries offer that sort of total segregation from the general population, for many imprisoned people, religious volunteers and programming offer their only option for an education, mental health counseling, addiction services or even contact with the outside world. As state funding for prisons has plummeted and public support for costly rehabilitation programs has declined, faith-based groups claim they can more effectively transform a person from the inside out than can any secular group, through a religion-informed "heart change." They also argue that they save states money. As Pat Nolan, a former colleague of Colson's at PFM (and a former California state assemblyman and ex-prisoner himself), argued in a newsletter, prison ministries "do the work the state just cannot afford to do on its own. And these volunteers will provide something that government employees cannot: love."⁵

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For evangelicals on the outside, faith-based programs have become a means to enter prisons in massive numbers and proselytize a captive audience desperate for a lifeline. On any given day, there are worship services and religious study groups in almost every prison in the U.S. Most are Christian and most require a profession of Christian belief as a prerequisite for joining. Six states have prisons with in-house Baptist seminary programs, where inmates earn a college degree in Christian ministry and are sent as missionaries to other prisons in the same state. Florida has revamped 11 state prisons into faith- and character-based institutions: entire prisons where rehabilitation is supposed to occur through religious practice. Kairos Prison Ministry International, a global Christian prison ministry, offers three-day “Kairos Inside Weekends” for prisoners to form Christian communities in prison.

The first prisons in the U.S. were built on the premise of redemption through religious belief. Quakers and Methodist reformers who first designed penitentiaries in the early 1800s believed that isolation, prayer, and reflection could turn prisoners away from a life of crime. In the colonial era, crimes were seen as sins against God and the community, and transgressors were punished swiftly and publicly by hanging, stockades, or banishment. Quakers and Methodists fervently believed that prisons, modeled around Quaker reflective practices of silence and isolation, were a more humane alternative that would foster redemption in those who had strayed. (Some of these early prisons also inadvertently created the model for solitary confinement out of Quaker principles of solitude.) But while groups like the American Friends Service Committee and the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference (a network of Black churches focused on social justice) have made ending mass incarceration a priority, they and mainline Protestant groups are not represented inside prisons in even close to the same numbers as conservative evangelical ministries, which number in the thousands.⁶

Today, given the option between a lack of programs and the advantages provided by faith-based groups, large numbers of

prisoners apply to faith-based prisons and programs. In the notoriously harsh Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, for example, prisoners vie to be chosen for college programs run by seminaries affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention that allow them, upon graduation, to be sent as “agents of moral rehabilitation” to other state prisons. The prison is careful to use neutral terms to avoid accusations of violating the Establishment Clause of the Constitution, but the reality is that joining these religious programs is often the only means available for prisoners—most in the program are serving sentences of 20 years to life—to get an education and improve their lot.

For the few non-Christians accepted into the program, the instruction can feel marginalizing. As one Muslim inmate in Texas told me, “I have been here my whole life... What else is there for me to do while I am incarcerated? I cannot work, we do not get paid for working. I cannot go to college, because I do not have the money to pay for it. So, this is the best thing going.”⁷

In 2000, Congress unanimously passed the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), which assured that the religious freedom of those confined in government institutions such as prisons would be protected. Evangelical groups like Prison Fellowship helped draft RLUIPA, but there are no equivalent programs for Muslims or members of other religions. Non-Christian groups still face obstacles at the state level from recalcitrant or hostile chaplains and prison administrations, who tend to identify as Christians themselves.

Yet, despite these troubling patterns, evangelical prison ministries can seem like one of the only voices available to challenge the resurgent law-and-order focus of the Right. Before Jeff Sessions was confirmed as Attorney General, DeRoche published an article on the Fox News website urging Sessions to resist simply warehousing more people and instead focus on rehabilitation and diversionary programs as a matter of public safety and fiscal responsibility.⁸

Sessions instead announced, in a memorandum issued in May, a stunning reversal of the Obama administration’s

efforts to scale back the War on Drugs.⁹ Where Obama had called for shortening sentences for nonviolent drug offenses and phasing out the use of private prisons, Sessions, by contrast, instructed prosecutors to pursue drug charges to the most serious degree.

In the wake of this, DeRoche has distinguished between “real criminals” who commit serious crimes and the vast majority of people who he believes should be given a second chance. The moral argument DeRoche makes is directly at odds with the private prison industry, which benefits from prosecutions of low-level drug offenses. One of the largest for-profit prison operators in the country, GEO Group, contributed to the Trump campaign and hired two of Sessions’ aides as lobbyists.¹⁰

But while DeRoche represents an important ideological shift in thinking about punishment, his broader aims for criminal justice reform aren’t shared by his peers. Prison ministries are primarily concerned with salvaging individual souls rather than questioning the purpose of prisons, and why so many people inside them are serving long sentences. Ministries and seminaries, which have more access to the prison system than most, could have a profound effect on policy were they to publicly address the ethical, social, and economic consequences of mass incarceration on individuals, families, and communities. But as it stands, the question of prison ministries’ motivation may be best summed up by Norris Henderson, director of Voice of the Ex-Offender and an Open Society Foundations Soros Justice fellow, who spent 27 years in Angola. As Henderson put it, “Are you giving people the help they need or the help you think they need?”¹¹

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