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*“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”*

**BALANCING JUSTICE WITH MERCY: CREATING A HEALING  
COMMUNITY**

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## **Balancing Justice with Mercy: Creating a Healing Community**

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In the past decade, both the public and private sectors have expressed significant concern over the growing rates of men and women returning from incarceration. From the initial (2001) federal agenda for the White House Office on Faith Based and Community Initiatives through the shifts in national faith based organizations' priorities toward the formerly incarcerated, to the distressed, local communities receiving these men and women after their confinement, concern mounts over the supports necessary to facilitate a successful reentry to society. Such successful reentry impacts communities in producing productive citizens in family and community life, reducing recidivism and further crime, and developing the social capital necessary to become a part of neighborhood stabilization and even transformation.

As such, prisoner reentry does not exist as an issue unto itself; it is not a stand alone challenge simply to reduce crime rates. Rather, because men and women, and of course adolescents who are incarcerated have been members of families, communities and other social networks, prisoner reentry stands as a challenge that effects the whole of community and family stability. Because of its work in family and community strengthening, the Annie E. Casey Foundation began its work in prisoner reentry not simply as a "crime and recidivism" enterprise, but rather, consistent with the

Foundation's ongoing commitments, as an issue contextualized by the realities of the vulnerable families and communities the Foundation engages in its regular work. In working in these communities, the Foundation discovered excellent reentry programs. But they lacked the resources to achieve the scale necessary to address the large numbers of persons returning from incarceration. But they also noted the profound resources of the faith community and its heroic efforts to minister to a variety of persons and families in their distressed communities. This led to the question: "What are the distinct contributions made by the faith community in the area of prisoner reentry," and how can the foundation partner with faith based organizations in this work?"

The Foundation convened a consultation of religious leaders, criminal justice experts, community leaders, scholars and others invested in prisoner reentry work. Included on the number were persons who had either spent time in jail or prison and those with incarcerated family members. They viewed the film "A Justice That Heals" detailing the role of a congregation which had used its basic resources of pastoral care, relationships and a theology balancing justice with mercy to provide ministry to two families united by the tragedy of the murder of the son of one family by the son of the other. From the ensuing conversation one significant consensus arose: building relationships serves as the key to successful reentry, and faith communities are repositories of relational capital.

The challenge is to mobilize the relational capital- abilities and infrastructure- of the faith community around the specific population of those returning from incarceration. In addition, the relational focus of such a ministry requires that the faith community both provide relationships that offer social support, but also work to promote, develop and

strengthen familial and other networks of support for those retiring from jail and prison. Indeed, the shift had begun from a model of working with individuals returning from incarceration to a work of family and community strengthening through the focus of energies on a particular population. From the consultation, the Foundation developed a model (Healing Communities) and a manual (*Balancing Justice with Mercy*).

## **Healing Communities: Faith, Redemption and the Ministry of Reintegration**

### **Introduction**

Faith communities play a unique role in healing individuals, families and communities devastated by crime and cycles of incarceration. They can help build a community consensus around the challenges facing families with an incarcerated loved one and facing the individuals returning home from incarceration. Faith institutions, including faith-based organizations, but particularly houses of worship, can serve as resources for transforming neighborhoods into venues where family and social support are offered to those affected by crime and incarceration.

The Healing Communities model engages congregations in the ministry of healing and restoration, beginning by supporting their own members-individuals and their families affected by crime, incarceration and prisoner reentry. It mobilizes the religious values of acceptance, love, personal accountability, mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation, and redemption to create an environment of healthy relationships of support. In these relationships values of forgiveness and reconciliation as well as commitment to redemption can be shared, transmitted and strengthened. Houses of worship, then serve as catalysts that facilitate the transformation of surrounding

neighborhoods into caring communities. Faith communities give specific definition to the concept of community, using the term to refer to the strength of the networks of relationships within their houses of worship. These are places of hope, safe places and safety nets for those returning as well as their families, victims and those seeking to support them (i.e., service providers, landlords, employers). The value resources of “forgiveness,” “redemption,” “reconciliation”, and “healing” common to the majority of faith based organizations and congregations in distressed neighborhoods can be important tools for the reconstruction of a community consensus that welcomes the returning person, and places them in relationships of support, both formal and informal, that contribute significantly to their reintegration.

We use the term “forgiveness” because of its connotation of “thinking differently” about an offense. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting that an offense has occurred, rather it points to the need to receive the offender in spite of the offense, and not define an individual simply or primarily in terms of the offense. True forgiveness, as a relational transaction, also calls for the offender to acknowledge their responsibility for the offense. But such acknowledgement is not a prerequisite for the offer of forgiveness- often it follows a community’s sincere desire to forgive.

“Redemption” is used because in the religious traditions that pervade reentry neighborhoods, it refers to a “bringing back of that which was originally a part” of something greater. In this case, the neighborhoods and families to which persons return from incarceration is the “greater thing.” Some refer to this process as “restorative justice.” This recognizes that while persons returning from incarceration must take responsibility for their decision making processes upon return to the community, the

community itself is an active agent in the restoration process. The community “pays the price” of mobilizing its resources of care, forgiveness and support to those who return. The community becomes intentional about its role in restoration, creating a sense of welcome and hope for the formerly incarcerated. The community’s agency in this work replaces the numbness referenced earlier.

“Reconciliation” refers to the actual reconfiguring of relationships that occurs as a result of the redemptive process. Those who have been incarcerated have committed acts that have brought harm to their neighborhoods, friends and loved ones, whether intentionally or not. Violent and property offenses bring pain to neighbors. Domestic violence brings clear harm to loved ones, and the reality of incarceration brings a separation that can and does strain, fracture and even end relationships within family and friendship networks. Redemptive processes involve a making right of relationships between all parties concerned, offender, victim, family and the larger neighborhood. All are stakeholders in the restoration of meaningful relationships that sustain not only the person formerly<sup>1</sup> incarcerated, but also those who have been victimized, either directly or indirectly, by that person.

“Healing” refers to the wholeness redemption brings both to the identity of the person returning from incarceration, and the community of reception and redemption. Successful integration comes not simply with access to services- even the successful implementation of the tools of services- but with the wholeness that comes when a community – a Healing Community- has welcomed the returning citizen as one of their own, and that individual has accepted the forgiveness inherent in such reception and

incorporated it in a new identity structure, characterized by self worth and a sense of belonging.

Because of values of forgiveness and reconciliation, Healing Communities reject the stigma and shame associated with incarceration and provide individuals and families with social networks that ensure their continued membership in the neighborhood and restore those to the community that have left it. These values lead Healing Communities to new language and understandings concerning persons affected by incarceration. Instead of traditional notions of “ex-offender,” “ex-con,” or “ex-felon,” the Healing Communities model describes those who have been incarcerated as “returning citizens.” The concept of the “returning citizen,” developed by congregations involved in reentry ministry in Detroit, resists the tendency to identify persons in terms of their past, especially a painful part of that past. Congregations take on the nomenclature of “stations of hope,” reflecting the idea that Healing Communities are not specialized prisoner reentry ministries as much as they are whole congregations mobilizing their resources around incarceration, much as they do around hospitalization, death and other traumatic events.

As a mobilization of congregational resources, Healing Communities draws on assets present in the culture of a healthy congregation, creating a sense of welcome and inclusion, working to reduce stigma and shame, fostering a transformation of hearts, minds & communities and helping individuals to develop acceptance of responsibility for actions and behavior. Just as congregations rally around other families affected by trauma and crisis, the Station of Hope builds networks of support for those affected by

incarceration. Like models of chaplaincy, they develop “ministries of presence” where they *walk* with the person, and provide understanding and empathy. Because returning citizens represent a network of their own, through family and friends, the larger community, and *those victimized by crime*, stations of hope provide presence, support and caring for others as well, in keeping with the principles of restorative justice. And congregations can develop these networks at any point in the continuum of the process of incarceration, from arrest, through, the trial, sentencing and incarceration, to the points of release, reentry and reintegration into the community.

Because the Healing Communities model involves the mobilization of a congregation’s existing asset for care giving, it does not require setting up a program, starting non-profit agency or securing external funding. Rather, it requires a congregation and its leadership to determine that its traditional mission and function includes those affected by crime and incarceration, and develops the willingness to incorporate them into existing and new networks of caring and support. Because the distinctive nature of the impact of crime and incarceration often lies hidden from the consciousness of the larger congregation, the *Balancing Justice with Mercy* handbook attempts to take basic principles of congregational life and apply them to a ministry to those so affected.

The handbook is structured as follows:

- Story of inspiration
- Background on mass incarceration
- Role of faith leaders
- Role of members of the congregation

- Advocacy
- Resources for users (Appendices)

We have already rehearsed the story of reconciliation as an example of the power of the model of restorative justice. It leads the handbook as a means of getting congregations to both develop hope for this type of ministry, and struggle with their own sense of reluctance, fear, stigma shame and struggle concerning working and ministering in this area. Congregations and clergy who have engaged the opening story and its study questions report both a real sense of being “overwhelmed” by the possibility of transformation, and sensitized to their own biases, often based on experience, concerning the possibility of such an engagement in their own situation. Each chapter in the handbook has a set of questions and/or opportunities for discussion that enable congregations to look carefully at their own attitudes and culture, to determine how to best build a Healing Community.

### **The Challenge: Mass Incarceration**

The most recent numbers on incarceration and reentry press the need for an urgent and complete response. According to a 2008 Pew Center on the States report, more than 2.3 million Americans are in state and federal prisons. The United States incarcerates its citizens at a rate higher than any country in the world. For African Americans, the numbers reflect a more daunting situation. One in fifteen African American males over 18 is behind bars as opposed to one out of 36 for Latinos and one out of one hundred six for white males.

Crime and incarceration does not impact all neighborhoods equally, nor do the challenges of reentry. Disproportionately, it is African-Americans and Latinos going to jail and

prison, and returning to low-income neighborhood with limited resources to support their reintegration. Additionally, the rise in incarceration rates for women has escalated at a rate 1.5 times that of males over the past generation. Indeed, the female inmate population grew by 839% from 1977 to 2006- from 12,279 women prisoners to 115,308. Because a significant percentage of these women have children in their care, the implications for family strengthening and success loom large.

The United States Department of Justice states that approximately 650,000 men and women were to be released from state and federal prison in 2008. Though down from 712,000 in 2006, the numbers still startled, and they do not include those who come home from city and county jails. When congregation leaders discussed this chapter, their emotions ranged from anger over the disproportionate numbers of African Americans incarcerated to regret that religious efforts have not stepped up in significant strategies of scale to engage the returning population and their families. Virtually all could and did share stories about how incarceration had affected individual families in their congregations. Few had recognized the enormity of the issue, and the implication that said enormity suggested that there were additional families in their congregations and communities with members in jail or prison, or in the process of reentry and reintegration.

As noted above, many return to communities already in distress. But while those communities suffer from historically limited resources, they all are home to a variety of houses of worship which can and do provide social and religious capital to support the reentry process. In short, all of the social capital and economic goods that

churches, community based organizations, foundations, and other community stakeholders have worked many years to create can be rapidly dismantled by mass incarceration, high recidivism rates, and ultimately the failure to provide a more radical approach to re-entry ministry. Successful reintegration that breaks the cycle of crime, recidivism and intergenerational incarceration and restores relationships requires more than institutional responses of reentry services.

### **The Role of Faith Leaders**

Faith leaders, particularly clergy, play a critical role in helping a congregation become a Station of Hope. However, the Healing Communities model is consistent with research on best practices in calling for clerical roles to be defined primarily by providing vision for the ministry, organizational structure, and support for volunteers. This means that the primary persons involved in the actual doing of ministry are the laity within the congregation. Healing Communities requires a change in congregational culture; therefore, leadership must provide the means of cultural change, not the primary heads, hearts and hands of the work. Clergy begin by identifying partner pastors and congregations, creating a “prayer circle” of support amongst congregations willing to engage in the work. In most cities currently employing the model (Detroit, Grand Rapids, Indianapolis, Richmond, Washington, DC) a group of six to eight congregations meets together regularly to share information on developments in the ministry, pray through issues of mutual concern, and form a basic peer learning community.

Clergy lead the way in their study of the handbook in order to both learn about the issues involved, and be in a position to lead the congregation in the implementation of the ministry. In their preaching and teaching, as well as by action, they set the tone of

welcome and inclusion, in many cases using their own experiences of encountering the impact of crime and incarceration in their own or families' lives, and pointing to biblical texts and examples supporting the ministry.

As pastors and leaders, they also identify those in the congregation who are in need of support through their experience of crime and incarceration. This can be done through altar calls for those praying for loved ones in jail or prison, basic intelligence through existing relationships, or placing a general call to the congregation. If combined with the development of a welcoming and supportive environment, such a strategy can identify those formerly burdened by shame and stigma to come forward for the support they need. Church leaders also identify volunteers who are willing to provide intentional networks of formal and informal support. Those networks can engage in a number of activities as the chapter on volunteers describes.

### **Role of Volunteers/Parishioners/Disciples**

In the various iterations of the handbook, volunteers are also referred to as parishioners (helpful for Catholic congregations) and disciples. The latter designation reflects the thinking of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, which has developed their own version of the handbook for denominational training and use. This chapter focuses on the role that the entire congregation can play, with emphasis on the work of those specifically designated to provide the support networks for returning citizens and their families.

As in any ministry of presence, the primary role is simply to be present and listen. Empathy and ears make for a strong universal starting point to those whose stories and pain have been hidden by shame. Presence requires visitation, not just to the correctional

facility but also to the home of the family as well. Church members should be prepared to welcome returning citizens without stigma, though clearly congregations need to make space for those who return to be responsible for their actions, which include some level of accountability. In creating formal and informal networks of support, church members help individuals and families to know that they are heard, welcomed and valued.

Activities within these networks are often determined by the need of the moment- a ride to an appointment, prayer while job seeking, a meal for a family while the returning citizen is out job hunting, financial support for bus rides, phone calls, etc.

In learning about the criminal justice system and mass incarceration, congregations come to know both the guidelines within which they must work with regards to the system's strictures, and the challenges facing those for whom they provide assistance. Congregations should also learn about other supportive systems and services available. Not every congregation can find or create a job for someone, but any congregation can discover where those opportunities exist for training and placement. In many locations there are reentry task forces, committees and agencies operated by state, county, municipal governments, or in partnership with departments of corrections and/or community agencies. These should be part of the larger network into which a congregation can fit.

Specific support for the families of incarcerated persons and returning citizens often requires special support as well. The Amachi Mentoring Partnership is one of a number of growing agencies that provide mentoring to children of the incarcerated, and training for congregations that wish to become involved in such mentoring. Children often need some assistance staying connected with incarcerated parents. In one city,

African American sorority members visit the county jail and video tape mothers reading stories in a nursery setting for their children at home. The price of phone calls from a correctional facility is astounding, reaching \$2.50 per minute in some places. This becomes one of several areas where financial support can be important. Also, in one city, congregations use church vans to shuttle family members to correctional facilities on visitation days.

Congregations contain members who have been victimized by crime as well. The story in the front of the manual details how a churchwoman overcame her grief, with support, and became reconciled to her child's killer. But this required a process where people were available to understand the anger and grief and support the healing process. Movement toward reconciliation requires a community of support.

### **POLICY ADVOCACY**

The final chapter contains suggestions on policy awareness and advocacy. We place the chapter here in the handbook form two reasons. First, Healing Communities recognizes that many of the barriers to effective reentry and reintegration reflect policies forged in an era where public safety fell under the strong influence of a corporate will to punish. While true that good criminal justice policy must be in place for measures of public safety, there still exists the need to see to it that policy is both effective and breeds the common good—including the ultimate good of the incarcerated, returning citizens and their families. The passage of the Second Chance Act represents the type of

progressive legislation championed by people of faith, both in the legislature and the community that moves toward a common good.

Second, the chapter comes last in the handbook because best practices research indicates that congregations are best mobilized to social action and advocacy when they encounter the issues through the lives and stories of those with whom they live and minister. To wit, if a congregation gets involved with the incarcerated, returning citizens and their families, they will both hear and experience firsthand the implications of current policy in their lives. They will hear of prison overcrowding and be able to relate first hand to the need for reform in prison conditions. They will encounter stories that will lead them to call for stemming prison growth, stopping gun violence, improving rehabilitation in prisons, developing reentry strategies and solutions at the level of policy and the mitigating lifetime consequences of a record. The latter deals with the “collateral sanctions” of post release that affect where a person can live or work, whether they can vote or qualify for educational opportunities, etc.

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The opportunity to present this material at a conference of social work professionals comes with the notion that the Healing Communities model offers a means for persons who work with a variety of agencies involved with providing services to the incarcerated, returning citizens and their families, the opportunity to enlist congregations in the important work of developing formal and informal support systems that readily supplement service provision. As a model that

mobilizes social capital, it provides a welcome complement to the type of specialized services an agency can provide. Consistent with the norms of congregational practice, it resists the temptation to turn congregation members into social workers, and offers a relational context for those receiving services to make the steady progress necessary to move from vulnerability to sufficiency, and isolation to community.

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<sup>1</sup> See resource package and website prepared by Outreach Extensions [www.mediareentry.com](http://www.mediareentry.com) (check)