

# Inmate Ministry as Contextual Missiology: Best Practices for America's Emerging Prison Seminary Movement

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Louisiana State Penitentiary, more infamously known as “Angola,” welcomed the first seminary program to offer degrees in Christian ministry to prison inmates in 1995. Inmate graduates of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary enter positions of service and leadership within Angola’s preexisting network of inmate churches, an anomalous holdover from the prison’s plantation era. Meanwhile, they also receive formal recognition as Inmate Ministers by the prison’s administration, which thereby incorporates them into management of the prison as liaisons between its population and security staff.<sup>1</sup> While legal doctrine has long rejected the notion that inmates have anything positive to contribute to the management of prisons, the Angola prison seminary and its unique inmate minister operation powerfully challenge this notion.

Inmate Ministers now lead most of Angola’s roughly two-dozen autonomous churches, but their ministry transcends these formal gatherings. Their unique status also grants them a relative freedom of movement to minister among their peers on a daily basis. As one Inmate Minister describes it, their recognition “gives us the opportunity to actually practice what we preach. It gives us the opportunity to actually *be* the church instead of just *having* church.” His sense of service as the hallmark of authentic faith is a common refrain among Inmate Ministers. As another Inmate Minister summarized, “[M]y status as Inmate Minister makes me even more of a servant to others, to give my time to the advancement of God’s mission, which is the comforting of his people: ‘Feed my sheep.’”

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<sup>1</sup>See Michael Hallett, Joshua Hays, Byron R. Johnson, Sung Joon Jang, and Grant Duwe, *The Angola Prison Seminary: Effects of Faith-Based Ministry on Identity Transformation, Desistance, and Rehabilitation* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

This “feeding” is both figurative and literal at Angola. Inmate Ministers provide not only spiritual counsel but also tangible necessities to their incarcerated neighbors. Churches collect offerings not of cash gifts but of essential toiletry items, supplemental food, and shoes that Inmate Ministers then distribute to indigent inmates on behalf of their congregations. As they make these rounds, the ministers exercise a “ministry of presence” in which they listen to grievances and often intervene before volatile situations turn violent. They walk a tightrope of trust, guarding the confidentiality of these pastoral conversations with their fellow inmates but also serving as liaisons between them and prison staff. As partners in the management of the prison, Inmate Ministers report imminent threats and also notify wardens of more chronic frustrations among the population in order to deescalate mounting tensions.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past two decades, other jurisdictions have adopted and adapted the “Angola model,” with over a dozen states now operating or implementing some version of a prison seminary. None of these subsequent programs, however, allow for inmate church leadership. Meanwhile, some observers have criticized prison seminaries as potentially coercive state establishment of religion that may violate inmates’ religious freedom.<sup>3</sup>

This paper connects three years of on-site research at Angola and other prisons, including over 100 personal interviews and the largest survey of prison religion ever conducted, with best practices from the field of missiology in order to address these concerns. Contextualization proves vital for inmate ministry, recognizing and adapting to the unique culture of each institution. Indigenization carries this contextualization a vital step further; external resources including human capital best serve vulnerable populations by equipping local

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<sup>2</sup>Survey results from over 2,200 Angola respondents have empirically tested and validated theories of desistance by integrating cognitive and emotional accounts together with our own paradigm of existential identity, one’s personal sense of meaning and purpose. Linking these aspects of identity are the personal narratives of conversion that inmates craft and spontaneously share to explain their transformation. In the words of one inmate, “God calls us to himself, then equips us, then he gives us back to the people.” Another says, “Helping people is just who I am, not just something I do. It’s a part of me, you know.” A third insists, “You might out-sing me, you might out-preach me, but you’re not going to out-love me.” Perhaps most surprisingly, we found independent positive effects for both the prison seminary and Angola’s inmate-run churches, seemingly unique within American corrections. Seminary students consistently fared best, perhaps to be expected from volunteers for a faith-based program catering to prisoners motivated for change. Participants in Angola’s over two-dozen religious congregations, however, also outperformed their general population peers with respect to identity transformation, healthier emotional wellbeing, and ultimately reduced disciplinary convictions. See Hallett et al., *Angola Prison Seminary*, esp. ch. 4.

<sup>3</sup>See Roy L. Bergeron Jr., “Faith on the Farm: An Analysis of Angola Prison’s Moral Rehabilitation Program Under the Establishment Clause,” *Louisiana Law Review* 71 (2011): 1220–57; Tanya Erzen, “In the Prison of New Beginnings,” *Guernica* (15 Oct 2014), <https://www.guernicamag.com/in-the-prison-of-new-beginnings/>; Tanya Erzen, *God in Captivity: The Rise of Faith-Based Prison Ministries in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Boston: Beacon, 2017), esp. 99–100. For First Amendment critiques of faith-based prison programs more broadly, see Douglas Roy, “Doin’ Time in God’s House: Why Faith-Based Rehabilitation Programs Violate the Establishment Clause,” *Southern California Law Review* 78 (2005): 795–834; Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *Prison Religion: Faith-Based Reform and the Constitution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

leadership. Finally, policy mobilization necessarily complements missionary activity. Public policies have direct consequences for the access and efficacy of missionary efforts behind bars just as surely as those overseas. By drawing prison seminaries and inmate ministry into conversation with missiology, this paper intends to ground a novel rehabilitative program within established ministry scholarship and practice. Resulting reflection may offer greater guidance to faith-motivated practitioners who refuse to accept the conventional despair that “nothing works” in prisoner rehabilitation.<sup>4</sup> Research at Angola documents the profoundly transformational impact religious education and leadership can have on prison life—and careful experimentation should continue.

### Contextualization to the Prison Environment

Since at least the 1970s, missiologists have upheld contextualization as an essential task of cross-cultural ministry: “Contextualization . . . asserts that theology must not only be rooted in the biblical story, it must also engage the concrete (local) realities in which Christians find themselves.”<sup>5</sup> Reflection on this theme has increasingly led to the recognition of contextualization as not only a pragmatic mission strategy but, more deeply, an intrinsic quality of the Christian gospel rooted in Christ’s incarnation.<sup>6</sup> Subsequent studies have revisited New Testament documents as case studies of contextualization in which the apostles transposed the story of Jesus from their own Jewish culture to engage Gentile audiences.<sup>7</sup> In simplest terms, “Contextualization attempts to

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<sup>4</sup>Robert Martinson coined the phrase “nothing works” in his seminal (and cynical) study “What Works? Questions and Answers about Prison Reform,” *The Public Interest* 35 (1974): 22–54. After the most comprehensive meta-analysis to date of findings from arguably the most rehabilitative era of American corrections, Martinson asked, “Do all of these studies lead us irrevocably to the conclusion that nothing works, that we haven’t the faintest clue about how to rehabilitate offenders and reduce recidivism?” (48). He had in fact already answered his own question: “With few and isolated exceptions, the rehabilitative efforts that have been reported so far have had no appreciable effect on recidivism” (25). More recently, criminologists have increasingly revisited Martinson’s question and offered more optimistic answers. See especially Francis T. Cullen and Paul Gendreau, “From Nothing Works to What Works: Changing Professional Ideology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *The Prison Journal* 81 (2001): 313–38; Francis T. Cullen, “Rehabilitation: Beyond Nothing Works,” *Crime and Justice* 42 (2013): 299–376.

<sup>5</sup>T. D. Gener, “Contextualization,” in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, ed. William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), <http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/ivpacat/contextualization/0?institutionId=720>.

<sup>6</sup>See Andrew F. Walls, “The Translation Principle in Christian History,” in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 26–42.

<sup>7</sup>See Dean E. Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005). Lamin Sanneh recognizes the dynamic interplay between Jewish and Gentile cultures as the animating principle behind Christian missionary progress in history. He contends, “Christianity, from its origins, identified itself with the need to translate out of Aramaic and Hebrew, and from that position came to exert a dual force in its historical development. One was the resolve to relativize its Judaic roots, with the consequence that it promoted a significant aspect of those roots. The other was to destigmatize Gentile culture and adopt that culture as a natural extension of the life of the

communicate the Gospel in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context.”<sup>8</sup>

Despite the raft of scholarship on missionary contextualization, almost all of it concerns the gospel’s spread across national and/or ethnic boundaries, particularly from Western evangelists to the majority world.<sup>9</sup> Yet cultural barriers can loom just as largely for domestic missionaries, perhaps nowhere more so than behind bars. The uniquely closed society of the prison creates a distinct culture that religious preachers and teachers must recognize, interpret, and navigate with sensitivity and care. Moreover, “prison culture” is no more a monolithic whole than the “jailhouse religion” by which critics of faith-based interventions pejoratively dismiss inmates’ spiritual claims. Each institution is unique—demographically, culturally, architecturally, administratively, and procedurally. Responsible faith-based programs—including seminaries—must attend carefully to each of these dimensions of a given prison unit’s distinct culture.

The distinctly *local* culture of each prison unit is perhaps the greatest obstacle to replication of the Baptist seminary at Angola. Both religious volunteers and corrections professionals have embraced “the Angola model” during brief (and necessarily selective) tours of “the Farm” and hastened to export it back to their respective hometowns and jurisdictions. Motives for their seminary “franchising” range from spiritual zeal to rehabilitative desperation to entrepreneurial capitalism. Whatever their motives, most of these stakeholders neither account adequately for Angola’s exceptionalism nor therefore for the particularities of their “receptor institutions.”

Angola’s physical plant and attendant history and the idiosyncrasies of Louisiana politics combine to shape that prison’s culture. Angola occupies 18,000 acres of fertile delta farmland that originally comprised several antebellum plantations. Its inmates continue to farm this land, cultivating and harvesting by hand the crops that feed Louisiana’s prison system. This expansive agricultural operation allows inmates to spread out and provides an unusual degree of autonomy for those who win the trust of security. Although property abounds, housing remains crowded, and most men reside in dorms of 80 or more occupants rather than traditional cells.

Pelican-state politics also contribute to Angola’s culture. Three-strikes laws<sup>10</sup> and prevalent use of life without parole have contributed to the nation’s

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new religion” (*Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989], 1).

<sup>8</sup>Darrell L. Whiteman, “Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21 (1997): 2.

<sup>9</sup>A few scholars give passing reference to the role of contextualization within the American church. Darrell L. Whiteman, for instance, makes passing reference to Willow Creek Community Church as an instance of domestic contextualization (“Contextualization,” 2).

<sup>10</sup>These statutes, also known as habitual offender laws, mandate lengthy prison sentences upon a third felony conviction. Habitual offender laws at both the federal and state level arose during the “tough on crime” judicial crackdown of the mid-1990s, and Louisiana passed its statute in 1994. Today Louisiana is one of 28 states with heightened penalties for repeat offenders, but Louisiana remains an outlier from most other states that require at least

highest statewide incarceration rate and a much higher than usual proportion of inmates serving life sentences at Angola, roughly two-thirds of its total population.<sup>11</sup> Such draconian sentencing has had the unintended consequence of creating an older and more stable population at Angola compared to the perpetual turnover of most prisons. Meanwhile, Angola has benefitted from comparable stability in its administration. Former warden Burl Cain invited the seminary during his first year in office and oversaw its first two decades of operation, becoming the longest tenured warden in Angola's history in the process.<sup>12</sup> Founding seminary director John Robson also served for the entirety of this span. Together Cain and Robson forged policies and procedures conducive to inmate religious education and persuaded skeptical personnel to support the program.

Proponents of prison seminaries in other locations would do well to attend to these features of Angola exceptionalism and how their own contexts differ. Few other prisons have Angola's physical plant; none have the administrative longevity it had under Cain. These differences need not be prohibitive for other seminaries, but they do demand contextualization to a new environment. Attempts to replicate Angola's success inevitably falter from neglect of differing circumstances.<sup>13</sup> Rather than aiming to carbon copy Angola's

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one violent offense to trigger the three-strikes penalty. Louisiana, by contrast, applies habitual offender penalties to non-violent drug offenders and other non-violent convictions carrying sentences of twelve or more years. These mandatory minimums undermine judicial discretion and consideration of mitigating factors in particular cases. Over 300 Louisiana inmates are currently serving life sentences without possibility for parole without a single violent crime conviction. See Cindy Chang, "Tough Sentencing Laws Keep Louisiana's Prisons Full," *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), 16 May 2012, [http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2012/05/tough\\_sentencing\\_laws\\_keep\\_lou.html](http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2012/05/tough_sentencing_laws_keep_lou.html).

<sup>11</sup>Hallett et al., *Angola Prison Seminary*, 64–70. Furthermore, "the average sentence for 'non-lifers' at Angola in 2012 was 92.7 years," a functional life sentence. "Over 90 percent of the inmates housed at Angola will never leave the prison alive" (16).

<sup>12</sup>Hallett et al., *Angola Prison Seminary*, 3–4; Kalen M. A. Churcher, "Self-Governance, Normalcy and Control: Inmate-Produced Media at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola" (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2008), 74. Cain's unprecedented tenure, while providing advantageous stability for the seminary and to some degree the prison as a whole, was not without cost. Cain resigned abruptly in December 2015 amidst allegations of mismanagement and dubious business transactions. See Hallett et al., *Angola Prison Seminary*, 240–42; Gordon Russell and Maya Lau, "The Fall of Burl Cain: How One Last Side Deal Led to Angola Warden's Undoing," *The Advocate* (Baton Rouge, LA), 10 Dec 2015, <http://theadvocate.com/news/neworelans/neworleansnews/14248441-123/in-storied-career-angola-warden-was-never-far-from-controversy>.

<sup>13</sup>Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary's program at the Darrington Unit near Huntsville, Texas, claims the "Angola model" as its pattern more overtly than any other prison seminary. Even a cursory visit to the Darrington campus reveals striking differences from Angola, however. The physical plant is far different, with most inmates residing in cell-tiers within a single facility compared to Angola's sprawling complex of scattered dorms. Already in just its first six years of operation, Darrington has experienced more turnover at the head warden position than Angola has in over two decades (Texas Department of Criminal Justice tends to rotate wardens roughly biannually, compared to Warden Cain's two decade tenure at Angola). Most significantly, Texas policy explicitly forbids the formation of inmate churches that are central to Angola's program. The state of Texas recognizes seminary

seminary, seminary boosters should instead contextualize the features of Angola's religious programs most readily adaptable to their own unique settings.

### **Angola's Inmate Ministry as Indigenization**

Angola's religious programs extend far beyond the seminary alone, perhaps the greatest single oversight by most visitors eager to export Angola's success. The seminary is one component of a much broader and older religious tradition at the prison. From the outset seminary leadership recognized the centrality of preexisting inmate churches at the prison and defined the seminary's role to support and equip these "indigenous" churches and their pastors through education. In fact, New Orleans Seminary initially demurred at Warden Cain's request to offer classes at the prison. Jimmy Dukes, Dean of Extension Programs at NOBTS, recalled, "[We've] got to live by our mission. Our mission is to train ministers to minister in local churches." He met with Cain intending to decline his request, but upon hearing of multiple inmate-led churches already in operation at Angola, he replied, "Well, we can do that."<sup>14</sup> Religious faith has long proved valuable for inmates at Angola, helping them survive its longstanding and nuanced forms of what even Robson calls "dehumanizing" methods.

Records document these inmate congregations to the early twentieth century, but they are almost certainly much older, the legacy of slave congregations from Angola's plantation era.<sup>15</sup> At the seminary's advent, these congregations remained overwhelmingly African-American and largely at odds with Angola's then-entirely white chaplaincy.<sup>16</sup> A Southern Baptist seminary appeared an unlikely mediator given the denomination's troubled history and ongoing controversies regarding race, but at Angola at least, NOBTS appears to have had a salutary influence toward racial reconciliation today. Nearly 70 percent of graduates are African-American, closely approaching the prison's

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graduates as "Field Ministers," but it remains rather ambiguous (perhaps deliberately so) what the venue(s) and expectations for their ministry are.

A further distinction of the Texas program is that graduate Field Minister deploy to other units throughout the TDCJ system in four-person ministry teams rather than remaining at Darrington. Louisiana experimented with its own inmate missionary concept, but never with the programmatic expectation or scale that Texas is implementing. This deployment to other units requires a further step in the contextualization process as Field Ministers must exegete the contexts of their ministry assignment. As inmates are quick to emphasize, each unit, even within a single state, has its own unique demographics, social and administrative culture, programming opportunities and challenges, and relational demands. Ministry principles learned at Darrington require fresh contextualization to the each of the nineteen TDCJ units where Field Ministers now serve.

<sup>14</sup>Quoted in Hallett et al., *Angola Prison Seminary*, 14.

<sup>15</sup>Hallett et al., *Angola Prison Seminary*, 41–42, 168–69.

<sup>16</sup>Hallett et al., *Angola Prison Seminary*, 7–8. Determining appropriate racial representation for church congregations among a population over seventy-five percent African-American (per unpublished LSP Demographics, 8 Jul 2013) presents a challenge. The inmate congregation most often criticized by other inmates as "the white church" is far more diverse than most churches on the outside, roughly half black and half white with multi-racial leadership. The salient issue for this paper is that prior to the seminary's arrival, almost all of Angola's churches were *exclusively* African-American, while its chaplains were *exclusively* white.

population demographics.<sup>17</sup> More to the point, all of Angola's roughly two-dozen congregations are now racially diverse, and several of the most racially entrenched congregations prior to the seminary now have multi-racial pastoral leadership. Ministers from diverse backgrounds not only serve alongside one another but also shape one another's hermeneutics and sermon preparation. In the words of one Inmate Minister, "We interact together, we share, we chew the fat over Scripture, we discuss." As they do, theological differences sometimes emerge, but Ministers prioritize unity over central doctrines: "So there are differences and doctrine issues. But my thing is this: I tell them, I say, if it's not dealing with major doctrinal issues, it should not be a big problem. If we believe that Jesus came and he died, and hung upon a cross and died and resurrected and now he sits at the right hand side of the Father, we straight, you know?"

The seminary has succeeded at Angola by bringing external resources—education, literature, and perhaps most importantly human capital—in order to equip local, indigenous leadership. This preexisting local leadership was the non-negotiable condition of NOBTS's extension at Angola, and it begins to answer the critique of cultural imperialism leveled at both prison ministries and other cross-cultural missionary endeavors. Rather than replicating Southern Baptist clones, Angola's seminary equips men with otherwise radically limited resources to engage with Scripture and come to their own conclusions. A cursory survey of the prison's congregations reveals its religious diversity; direct observation of these congregations' worship and discipleship activities reveals even more. Because of the limited chapel space available to Angola's many congregations, worship services are available virtually every night of the week, and inmates avail themselves of these multiple opportunities to gather. According to one, "In Angola it's very much interdenominational, because I attend maybe four or five different fellowships. Now New Destiny [where the speaker is a ministry staff member] is a non-denominational fellowship, but I go to the Baptist, I'll attend the Methodist, I attend the Apostolic. It's common here." Another inmate recounts how this diversity of worship expressions enriches his personal spirituality: "Some churches were liturgical, and some churches were just sort of free-for-all . . . and I love, there's times when I need that order, and there's times when you just need to celebrate and be real exuberant, so I like what it all has to offer."<sup>18</sup>

Of course, missiology reminds us that allowing such indigenous appropriation and expression to flourish demands developing a vernacular that may be unfamiliar and even uncomfortable to outsiders, including the missionaries themselves. Neither NOBTS leadership nor the program's benefactors endorse all that Angola's churches preach and practice. They allow inmates latitude, however, not only from constitutional demands for religious freedom but also

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<sup>17</sup>Hallett et al., *Angola Prison Seminary*, 70.

<sup>18</sup>Survey data reveal that over a quarter of all inmates participate in at least two congregations. "Perhaps counter-intuitively, congregational membership corresponds to increased participation with *other* congregations," and cross-participation is even higher among seminary graduates and highest among current students (Hallett et al., *Angola Prison Seminary*, 178).

from personal respect for freedom of conscience. Both Baptist history and theology uniquely contribute to this attitude conducive to indigenization.

Historically, Baptist origins as dissenting non-conformists inculcated robust appreciation for religious freedom. Early American Baptists like John Leland played a vital role in securing legislative protection for religious freedom, first in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (1786) and then in the First Amendment (1791).<sup>19</sup> Religious freedom guards politically what the Baptist ideals of soul competency and local church autonomy guard with respect to church polity; together, these emphases comprise three of the “four fragile freedoms” central to Baptist life.<sup>20</sup> Autonomous local church governance proves uniquely conducive to indigenization; Baptist church missions may spring up “[wherever] two or three gather in [Jesus’s] name,” without respect to the denominational oversight mandated by presbyterian or episcopal polities.<sup>21</sup>

Indigenization ultimately serves not only the local receptor community but the broader church at large. Under local leadership indigenized churches are free “to develop contextualized expressions of the Gospel so that the Gospel itself will be understood in ways the universal church has neither experienced nor understood before, thus expanding our understanding of the kingdom of God.”<sup>22</sup> Stretching our preconceptions often proves uncomfortable, even unsettling, but ultimately enhances our understanding of God, others, and ourselves. Remember that Jesus told his faithful disciples, “I was in prison and you came to visit me” (Matt 25:36), not that Jesus needed to reach prisoners and therefore needed the disciples to escort him inside.

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<sup>19</sup>Rosalie Beck, “John Leland: The Consistent Separationist,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 47.3 (Fall 2012): 65–75, esp. at 68–70; Daniel L. Dreisbach, “Virginia’s Contributions to the Enduring Themes of Religious Liberty in America,” in *From Jamestown to Jefferson: The Evolution of Religious Freedom in America*, ed. Paul R. Hanson and Richard E. Bond, 166–92 (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 175–76.

<sup>20</sup>Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2013). The fourth freedom, “Bible freedom,” actually appears first in Shurden’s list as foundational to the other three, and all four interrelate closely with one another.

<sup>21</sup>This observation is not to say that Baptist churches are the only ones that can indigenize effectively within a prison environment, nor that Baptist churches within prison must or should be unrelated to sister congregations and larger cooperative structures beyond. To the contrary, Angola hosts Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and Greek Orthodox congregations, and in several instances visiting priests “deputize” inmates to serve as lay Eucharistic ministers licensed to lead worship and administer the sacraments in their absence. This arrangement highlights the contrast between the clericalism of more sacramental traditions and the Baptist emphasis on the priesthood of every believer, another theological distinction that uniquely fosters indigenization among Baptist churches. Meanwhile, however, Baptist congregations at Angola actively solicit partnership with outside churches. Paul Will, pastor of Angola’s Grace Baptist Church, received ordination through Hillcrest Baptist Church of Franklinton, Louisiana, in 2014 and led Grace Baptist to join the Washington Baptist Association the following year (Mark H. Hunter, “Angola prison church joins Baptist association,” *Louisiana Baptist Message* [24 Nov 2015], <http://www.bpnews.net/45906/angola-prison-church-joins-baptist-association>).

<sup>22</sup>Whiteman, “Contextualization,” 4.



### Policy Mobilization in Concert with Faith-Based Rehabilitation

Fresh understandings of the gospel through indigenized expressions from the prison context should reframe understandings of criminal justice policy among Christians at work in prison seminaries and other religious rehabilitation programs. In other words, direct interactions with incarcerated men and women should sensitize us to their concerns as an expression of neighbor-love. Even Tanya Erzen, vocal critic of religious prison programs, acknowledges,

Volunteering in prison as part of faith-based ministry enacts the charitable impulse, but it can enable people to move beyond simplistic understandings of victims and criminals, punishment and forgiveness. . . . [A] form of identification and compassion occurs that leads [volunteers] to think more critically about incarceration.<sup>23</sup>

When contextualization and indigenization are working best, this compassionate response of solidarity is the product not only of personal interaction and identification *with* inmates but also of hearing *from* inmates. Outside witnesses—the sending culture—respond to the fresh theological articulations of the receptor culture as it reframes the original message in light of local circumstances and experiences. This process capitalizes on “the prophetic or critical function of doing theology as it engages a changing society.”<sup>24</sup> Such prophetic insights from those on the inside can help to expose blind spots in the theologies of the sending culture, a perennial theme in the history of mission. As political scientists David Dagan and Steven Teles write, “Suggestive qualitative research with conservative Christians engaged in prison ministry shows that they are, in fact, much more likely to embrace a framework of compassion than their larger community, which is characterized by a disproportionately punitive approach to law and order.”<sup>25</sup>

Embrace of new, synthetic theologies emerging from indigenous churches—in this case, prison churches—reinforces the credibility of religious missionaries, volunteers, and seminary personnel. Taking contextual concerns including criminal justice reform seriously can catalyze further evangelistic ministry in a synergistic cycle. Neglect of such contextual theologies, however, can have disastrous consequences for mission. “The silence of black and Latino Christian, Jewish, and Islamic congregations in urban communities,” write students of New York Theological Seminary at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, “makes them unwitting accomplices to the plight of prisoners.”<sup>26</sup> Failure to stand in solidarity with inmates while presuming to preach a message of

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<sup>23</sup>Erzen, *God in Captivity*, 126.

<sup>24</sup>Gener, “Contextualization.”

<sup>25</sup>David Dagan and Steven Teles, *Prison Break: Why Conservatives Turned Against Mass Incarceration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 52; see also Kent R. Kerley, John P. Bartkowski, Todd L. Matthews, and Tracy L. Emond, “From the Sanctuary to the Slammer: Exploring the Narratives of Evangelical Prison Ministry Workers,” *Sociological Spectrum* 30 (2010): 504–25.

<sup>26</sup>Ja’Far Abbas et al., “New York Theological Seminary Prison Program: Sing Sing Correctional Facility,” *Souls* 2 (Winter 2000): 13.

rehabilitation and reconciliation to them constitutes unwitting complicity in their oppression, another theme tragically familiar from the history of mission.<sup>27</sup>

As Erzen summarizes, “Today, in many faith-based prison ministries, social justice as a driving force of religious belief is absent.” She holds out hope that “churches involved in prison ministry [may] begin to conceptualize their role in the prison as one of spreading faith *and* justice.”<sup>28</sup> Such a paradigm shift will require “rethinking the connection between individual salvation and collective forms of responsibility.”<sup>29</sup> Angola demonstrates the potential of such an approach: religious engagement by both outside stakeholders and inmates themselves dramatically emphasizes social justice and human rights at the prison through “bottom up” policies largely crafted by inmates themselves. More holistic reflection on the gospel will hopefully transform prevailing attitudes about justice and mass incarceration among the church more broadly—not just among those personally involved in prison ministries—but renewed public advocacy is also a pragmatic concern for evangelism. Policy positions have direct impact on the efficacy of personal evangelism and discipleship. Christians of course do not have unilateral control over sentencing and correctional policies, nor operational practices at Angola, but they do constitute a formidable voting constituency, and their political choices bear directly on their more personal witness to inmates.<sup>30</sup> Analogously to how U.S. State Department policies impact the work and reception of American missionaries globally, for better or worse, the church’s response to mass incarceration and criminal justice policies more broadly will shape the future of prison seminaries and other religious rehabilitation endeavors.

### Conclusion

Prison seminaries present an emerging missionary frontier for Baptists and other Christians. As fiscal austerity triggered by spiraling incarceration rates demands increasing cuts to rehabilitative budgets, faith-motivated communities willing to offer services at low- or no-cost are likely to find increasingly receptive corrections departments. Theological resources from the Baptist tradition are particularly suited to this ministry of planting and equipping churches on the inside. In short, the prison seminary movement faces a potential boom in the near future, with Baptists largely at the vanguard.

To engage wisely with this trend, practitioners, promoters, and people in the pews alike would do well to attend to lessons from the broad literature of missiology. Prisons, even those in our own backyards, present cross-cultural opportunities and challenges. Prison seminaries that recognize this analog with international mission work remain sensitive to the need for contextualization,

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<sup>27</sup> Angola inmates dismiss with disdain the “drive-by” preachers, typically from distant mega-churches, who “preach at” them without “talking with” them. Inmates perceive these endeavors as self-serving attempts to gain cachet within the evangelical community by preaching at “America’s bloodiest prison.” These “drive-by” evangelists often come and go within a single hour, leaving the facility without interacting personally with a single inmate.

<sup>28</sup>Erzen, *God in Captivity*, 180, emphasis in original.

<sup>29</sup>Erzen, *God in Captivity*, 182.

<sup>30</sup>See Erzen, *God in Captivity*, 160–77; Dagan and Teles, *Prison Break*, esp. 43–64.

indigenization, and policy mobilization. First, religious workers must contextualize their message in a vernacular appropriate to the prison environment. This process requires exegeting that environment alongside the biblical texts and resisting the impulse to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach that neglects the distinct characteristics of each prison unit. Second, seminaries must nurture indigenous churches to appropriate the gospel message for their own setting. Preexisting churches are unlikely to emerge beyond Angola, at least at the level of organizational sophistication found there, so seminaries must seek out how inmates congregate for worship and how to equip these new groups. Finally, respect and love for prisoner congregations demand listening to both their theologies and their social concerns, while also remaining attentive to the overall lack of resources provided to America's inmates. Christian volunteers working in prisons and stakeholders in the prison seminary movement should not be misunderstood as content with the state of American prisons. Our research indicates the contrary. Sensitive, discerning response to the challenges facing America's prisons is incumbent upon both Christian prison volunteers and the congregations that they represent in order to advocate on behalf of compassionate and just policies.