



# Can a Faith-Based Prison Reduce Recidivism?

By Byron R. Johnson

It is not a new idea that the life of even the worst prisoner can be transformed. In fact, many churches have some type of prison or jail ministry. However, in recent years there has been a growing trend to go beyond traditional prison ministry to establish more formalized faith-based prison programs, dorms or even entire faith-based prisons. This is important in that one of the common criticisms of traditional prison treatment programs is that they are not effective in rehabilitating inmates. Based on the data, what do we know about the effectiveness of prisoner treatment programs?

During the last two decades there have been a number of studies systematically evaluating the effectiveness of various correctional treatment programs to reduce recidivism. Here's what we know — some programs do reduce recidivism for some offenders, in some settings. Furthermore, the amount of recidivism reduction for those in secular programs when compared to prisoners not participating in any program tends to be rather small (five to 10 percent).<sup>1</sup> In sum, there is research evidence that some programs can reduce recidivism, but these reductions tend to be modest.<sup>2</sup> This observation begs the question, can faith-based prison programs aid in reducing recidivism?

Prison Fellowship (PF) and many other prison ministries still believe religion is the critical ingredient in helping former prisoners to lead crime-free lives. These prison ministries offer prisoners a variety of in-prison programs. These include one-to-three-day seminars and weekly Bible studies. The level of prisoner exposure to such religious programs is a maximum of 50 hours of Bible study and several days of intensive seminars annually — a relatively modest correctional intervention by any measure. There is, however, preliminary empirical evidence that regular participation in volunteer-led Bible studies is associated with reductions in recidivism. For example, a study of prisoners from four different New York prisons who attended 10 or more Bible studies during a one-year period prior to release found they were significantly less likely to be rearrested during a one-year post-release follow-up study.<sup>3</sup> In a more recent study tracking these same prisoners for an additional seven years, it was found that regular participation in volunteer-led Bible studies remains significantly linked to lower rates of recidivism for two years and even three years post-release.<sup>4</sup> If participation in relatively small doses of religious programs can have a measurable and beneficial effect on inmates, might an extended faith-based prison program have more of an effect?

## The InnerChange Freedom Initiative

**Background.** In the mid-1990s, PF decided to pursue an unusual correctional experiment. PF's plan was to locate a willing prison partner that would allow them to launch a program replacing occasional volunteer efforts with a completely faith-based approach to prison programs. The ultimate goal would be to reform prisoners as well the prison culture. Charles Colson, founder of PF, unsuccessfully pitched this idea to a number of governors, before finding an enthusiastic partner in then-governor George W. Bush. The collaboration between the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) and PF represented a first for Texas, if not the country. The InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI) represented the first full-scale attempt to offer religious programs in a prison environment virtually "around-the-clock." IFI is a "faith-saturated" prison program whose mission is to "create and maintain a prison environment that fosters respect for God's law and rights of others, and to encourage the spiritual and moral regeneration of prisoners." IFI is a Christ-centered, Bible-based prison program that supports and encourages inmates through a process of spiritual and moral transformation, which begins while they are incarcerated and continues after release.

IFI was officially launched in April 1997, at the Carol Vance Unit, a 378-bed prison in Richmond, Texas. The Vance Unit, one of more than 100 prisons located throughout Texas, was selected because of its custody level as a prerelease facility and its proximity to the Houston area — the focus of aftercare resources and volunteer recruitment. Only offenders from Houston or surrounding counties were considered for participation in the program.<sup>5</sup> Simply stated, IFI would be responsible for administering inmate programs and TDCJ would be responsible for security and custody.

PF was so optimistic that IFI would be successful in reducing recidivism, it agreed to fund the entire program with private dollars — an offer Texas was quick to accept. Together, TDCJ and PF formed a unique public-private partnership — one designed to test the proposition that a secular/sacred collaboration could achieve the civic purpose of reducing recidivism and thereby increase public safety.<sup>6</sup>

## Three-Phase Program

Anchored in biblical teaching, life-skills education and group accountability, IFI established a three-phase program involving prisoners in 16 to 24 months of in-prison biblical programs and six to 12 months of aftercare while on parole. Phase one provides a spiritual and moral foundation from which the rest of the program is based. Phase two tests the inmate's value system in real life settings in hopes of preparing him for life after prison. Commonly referred to as aftercare, phase three is the reentry component of IFI and is designed to help assimilate the inmate back into the community through productive and supportive relationships with family, local churches and the workplace.

**Evaluation.** PF commissioned an independent evaluation of IFI. The evaluation utilized a quasi-experimental research design and took six years to complete. The evaluation found that 36.2 percent of IFI participants were arrested during the two-year period following release from prison.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, 35 percent of a comparison group (i.e., a comparable group of prisoners with very similar backgrounds and histories — a match to the IFI participants — except they did not participate in the faith-based program) was arrested during the two-year follow-up period. However, when the data were further examined, it was discovered that the IFI program graduates had significantly lower rates of arrest following release from prison than that of IFI non-completers (17.3 percent vs. 50 percent) or the matched group (17.3 percent vs. 35 percent). Similarly, those completing the IFI program had significantly lower rates of incarceration than IFI noncompleters (eight percent vs. 36.3 percent) or the matched group (eight percent vs. 20.3 percent).

**Table 1. Results of IFI Texas Two-Year Recidivism Analysis\***

	Full Sample (n=1931)		IFI Sample (n=177)	
RECIDIVISM TYPE	(1a) IFI vs. (2a) Match Group		(1b) IFI Graduates vs. (3b) Noncompleters	
	(1a)	(2a)	(1b)	(3b)
Arrest				
Percent Arrested	36.2%	35.0%	17.3%	50.0%
Number Arrested	64	614	13	51
Sample Size	177	1,754	75	102
Chi-Square	0.09, p = .76		19.98, p < .0001	
Incarceration				
Percent Incarcerated	24.3%	20.3%	8.0%	36.3%
Number Incarcerated	43	356	6	37
Sample Size	177	1,754	75	102
Chi-Square	1.57, p = .21		18.79, p < .0001	
*Note: All tests used the Pearson X <sup>2</sup> statistic with one degree of freedom for a 2 X 2 table.				

The fact that IFI graduates were significantly less likely to be either arrested or incarcerated during the two-year period following release from prison represents initial evidence that completion of this faith-based program is associated with lower rates of recidivism of former prisoners. Knowing that program completion is significantly linked to reductions in recidivism is an important observation. However, this finding by itself does not reveal how or why there is a noticeable difference in recidivism reduction. Could it be that prisoners completing the program were more likely to experience a religious conversion that was life-changing? Perhaps ongoing studies of scripture and regular participation at religious services and events caused prisoners to adopt prosocial values through a process of spiritual development. What role, if any, might mentors have played in the lives of IFI participants? In-depth interviews with

inmates and former inmates confirm that all these factors were consequential. However, it was the active presence of faith-motivated mentors that was the most important factor associated with lower rates of recidivism.<sup>8</sup>

## Reforming Reintegration Practices for Success

Experts in the field of corrections have identified several major inmate reintegration practices in need of correctional reform. First, it is necessary to alter the in-prison experience and essentially change the prison environment from one fostering anti-social behavior to one promoting prosocial behavior. Second, it is critical that relevant criminal justice authorities revise post-release services and supervision while targeting those with high-need and high-risk profiles. In other words, it is important to provide closer supervision and assistance to those most likely to be rearrested after release from prison. Third, there is a need to seek out and foster collaborations with community organizations and to establish partnerships that will provide a network of critically needed social support to newly released offenders facing a series of reintegration obstacles.

Faith-based approaches such as the IFI attempt to incorporate all three of these critically important correctional reforms. Consequently, faith-based prison programs can be helpful not by only attempting to transform prisoners, but by attempting to change the prison culture to one that is both conducive to and promotes prosocial behavior. Additionally, faith-based efforts in the community can help to mobilize and provide critically needed aftercare services to prisoners following release from prison. Employment and housing, for instance, represent two of the main areas where IFI aftercare workers provided invaluable assistance. Because these faith-motivated approaches rely largely on volunteers, they can help provide extra close supervision and assistance to those thought to be the most likely to get into trouble following release from prison. Engaged IFI mentors were central to this process of aftercare — an asset and feature that is often missing from traditional prisoner reentry initiatives.

Confronting significant social problems requires the involvement of volunteers and networks of support, especially those that are faith-based. This is exactly why IFI made a concerted effort to partner with both prison and parole officials as well as congregations throughout the Houston area. For example, collaborating with parole officials allowed both IFI aftercare workers and parole officers to pool their resources in supervising parolees. Partnerships with churches made it possible to recruit volunteers who would not only become involved in working with prisoners within the prison (e.g., mentoring, teaching, tutoring, etc.), but would also play a key role in the community by recruiting mentors and volunteers to work with former inmates following release from prison. The main takeaway point from this unusual public-

private partnership is that there is now preliminary but important evidence that a faith-based program combining education, work, life skills, mentoring and aftercare has the potential to influence the way corrections professionals think about issues like recidivism and the successful return of inmates to society in a paradigm-shifting way.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Petersilia, J. 2003. *When prisoners come home: Parole and prisoner reentry*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup>MacKenzie, D.L. 2006. *What works in corrections: Reducing the criminal activities of offenders and delinquents*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup>Johnson, B.R., D.B. Larson and T.G. Pitts. 1997. Religious programming, institutional adjustment and recidivism among former inmates in prison fellowship programs. *Justice Quarterly*, 14 (1):145-166.

<sup>4</sup>Johnson, B.R. 2004. Religious programs and recidivism among former inmates in prison fellowship programs: A long-term follow-up study. *Justice Quarterly*, 21 (2): 329-354.

<sup>5</sup>Initially, only offenders from Harris County were considered, and then surrounding counties were added in order to increase the potential pool size. For a complete description of the selection process for IFI program participants as well as other methodological considerations, see Johnson, B.R. and D.B. Larson. 2003 (re-released in 2006). *The InnerChange freedom initiative: A preliminary evaluation of a faith-based prison program*, Institute for Studies of Religion (ISR Research Report), Baylor University. Retrieved from [http://www.baylorisr.org/wp-content/uploads/ISR\\_Innerchange\\_Free1.pdf](http://www.baylorisr.org/wp-content/uploads/ISR_Innerchange_Free1.pdf).

<sup>6</sup>For additional information regarding this collaboration, see the state-sponsored report by Eisenberg, M. and Trusty, B. 2002. *Overview of the InnerChange freedom initiative: The faith-based prison program within the Texas department of criminal justice*. Austin, Texas: Criminal Justice Policy Council, Austin, Texas.

<sup>7</sup>Johnson, B. R. and D.B. Larson. 2003. *The innerchange freedom initiative: A preliminary evaluation of a faith-based prison program*, Institute for Studies of Religion (ISR Research Report), Baylor University (2006). Retrieved from <http://www.isreligion.org/publications/reports/>.

<sup>8</sup>Johnson, B. R. 2011. *More God, less crime: Why faith matters and how it could matter more*. Conshohocken, Pa.: Templeton Press.

*Byron R. Johnson is distinguished professor of the social sciences at Baylor University and directs the Institute for Studies of Religion as well as the Program on Prosocial Behavior.*

**Reprinted with permission of the American Correctional Association, Corrections Today, Alexandria, Va.  
All rights reserved.**