

The Christian Connection in Prison Ministry

In a dark, crammed room the dampness rises like an invisible oppressive enemy, piercing every joint and bone; whilst the foul stench of urine, faeces, dirt and sweat completely overwhelm all senses. Fear replaces sleep, as the most hardened criminal men share this misery alongside petty thieves, women and children.

Such was the setting of a typical 19th century English prison. A world far removed from the wealthy Victorian society life of advantage and security, the kind not unfamiliar to people like Elizabeth Fry – a rich banker’s daughter and mother of eleven children – who would later become known as ‘the angel of prisons’.

First prompted through a sermon, Fry would later visit and spend a night in the notorious Newgate prison. The core motivation for Fry’s deliberate action to expose her self to the unsettling sights of society’s underbelly was her vigorous Christian faith that penetrated far deeper than mere casual Sunday observances. The words of Jesus, “I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me”, became the bedrock for launching ground breaking humanitarian transformation within the prison walls and beyond.

These achievements would propel Fry into the Britain’s ‘age of benevolence’ hall of fame; a time categorised by a growing class of well-bred individuals whose abundant wealth was matched with even greater personal piety and audacious generosity. Individuals such as Robert Nelson and William Wilberforce that sought to influence public life through social activism and moral entrepreneurialism. ¹

Fry would go on to found *The Association for the Improvement of Female Prisoners* with the goal of “provid[ing] for the

¹ “The First Big Society: Eighteenth-Century Britain's Age of Benevolence”, Brent Sirota, ABC Religion and Ethics, 9 Jan 2014

clothing, instruction and employment of the women, introduce them to scriptures and form habits of sobriety, order and industry...rendering them docile and peaceable in prison, and respectable when they leave it". It was an overwhelming success, arousing public, government and even royal interest to the "orderly, disciplined inmates...known for their work ethic". Later Fry proposed reforms for mental asylums, promoted nursing standards, education of working women, low-income housing along with founding hostels and soup kitchens.

Fry's legacy, though troubled by personal family struggles, depression and self doubt, demonstrates the power of Christians wholeheartedly invigorated towards a form of radical kindness that profoundly impact society for generations. It was Fry and the Quaker Christian tradition that also helped instil the practice of prison visiting as an important part of community church service.

Given such a rich history it is disappointing that this tradition has been in perpetual decline. Prison Fellowship's former Victorian field director, Kevin Maddock, agrees that churches today haven't kept pace with their prison ministry legacy. "There were parts in history where prisons had to plead with churches to keep people away," he says. "There were so many Christians visiting the prisoners and supporting ex-prisoners that the corrections of the day had to plead with the churches to ease up."

In part this is explained by the increase in government planning over all layers of social welfare including prison management. Prisons today are equipped with improved infrastructure, sanitation, amenities, rehabilitation, education and job training. These factors together with a governmental policy framework driven by criminology's humanist paradigm, that is, criminality stems from poverty and under-education, means year-on-year increasing demands for taxpayer money to expand the social welfare system and leave the problem of crime with the 'experts'. But the trade off inevitably leads to less direct

community participation and/or disinterest. In Australia, each year every inmate costs taxpayers about \$80,000 (some estimations are higher).²

This trend in limiting or crowding out voluntary community involvement from prison doors has its critics. Many are now rediscovering the public good of restoring community, and particularly church involvement, as part of the suite of prison services. A Canadian report on corrections to Parliament highlights this exact need, “No penitentiary service can succeed without public participation...the community should participate with the job the prisons are doing, if for no other reason than for its own safety.”

Kevin Maddock’s over 50-year involvement in prisons has convinced him that prison visiting establishes social contact, relationships and normalisation of daily routine, which better prepares offenders for post release life. “Churches become like a Christian AA meeting. Church gives accountability and deep friendship,” says Maddock.

Moreover, whilst there is merit in helping reduce socio-economic inequality to counter crime and disadvantage, when relied on as a primary strategy it fails because it oversimplifies the complex nature of both society and criminal offenders.

According to Charles Colson – former US president Nixon adviser and founder of *Prison Fellowship* – his brief time spent behind bars revealed, “Inmates are a diverse group of individuals who represent a cross-section of society, though comprising a somewhat higher percentage of the minority peoples and the poor”. Colson goes on to explain that the reason for higher representation of the poor is more likely due to lack of financial means to procure better legal representation not

² <http://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2017/justice/corrective-services/rogs-2017-volume-c-chapter8.pdf> <http://www.businessinsider.com.au/australia-put-more-people-in-jail-than-ever-before-in-2015-and-its-costing-taxpayers-2-6-billion-2015-6>

necessary a greater disposition to criminality than the rest of society.

Samenow and Yochelson's famous research *The Criminal Personality* (1977) was the product of fourteen years of study. Both researchers trained in the Freudian School of Psychoanalysis and sought to uncover the cause of criminality.

Thousands of hours were dedicated to examining two hundred and fifty incarcerated men, probing fantasies, psychosexual developments, early life experiences, conflicts, and socio-economic conditions. Their conclusions were unexpected. "Our criminals have eventually revealed to us that what they did was an exercise of choice. In fact, because of our procedures, it was demeaning to them to deny the role of choice... From very early, the oxygen of the criminal's life is to seek excitement by doing the forbidden." Criminals, argue Samenow and Yochelson, needed to correct their thinking. From white collar criminals to inner-city street drug dealers the core thinking that motivated criminal activity was broadly identified as, "consistently superseding their wants and desires over those of others". In laymen's terms: selfishness.

As John Allen, in his book *Assault with a Deadly Weapon: The Autobiography of a Street Criminal*, puts it: "Everybody wants to have their own joint, own their own home, and have two cars. It's just that we are going about it in a different way. I think keeping up with the Joneses is important everywhere."

Samenow and Yochelson suggested a "deliberate conversion of the offender to a more responsible lifestyle". This method involved confronting a criminal with their choices and consequences, suggesting alternative outcomes.

This counter populist notion that values not unemployment play a crucial role in crime rates is supported with a brief historical survey. The 1960s experienced similar unemployment rates to

the late 1990s and early 2000s, but crime in the 60s was higher while in the later it dropped.

A more dramatic example can be seen when comparing the Great Depression, where official unemployment hit 25 percent, but once again the crime rate in many cities went down.³

Helping restore an inner framework for moral and work values was exactly the point of Fry's prison work and it makes a compelling case for the return of modern day prison ministry, namely, adopting a two pronged approach - meet the worldly and spiritual needs. This was the focus of Christian based prison programs such as *Inner Change*. Due to the programs largely volunteer driven base and private funding, it was objectively assessed as both cost effective (reducing the drain of public coffers) and successful at reducing reoffending rates.⁴

Similarly, a preliminary evaluation into largely faith-based programs in Victorian prisons concluded that overall the results were positive and particularly participant's lower recidivism rates.⁵

Like Fry, these programs focus on using the time in incarceration to challenge often deeply held values that motivate criminal behaviour.

Times Journalist, Matthew Parris, grew up in Malawi. He returned there as an adult to follow the work of a *Pump Aid* appeal. In the article, *As an atheist, I truly believe Africa need God*, Parris describes the impact of Christian and secular NGOs to individuals and communities. Reluctantly, he maintains that

³ <https://www.city-journal.org/html/crime-and-great-recession-13399.html>

⁴ <https://csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc/publications/estimating-the-benefits-of-a-faith-based-reentry-program/>

⁵ <http://prisonnetwork.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Monash-post-release-report.pdf>

Christianity offers the most hope for transformative personal change.

“Those who want Africa to walk tall amid 21st-century global competition must not kid themselves that providing the material means or even the knowhow that accompanies what we call development will make the change. A whole belief system must first be supplanted... (or Africa will be left) at the mercy of a malign fusion of Nike, the witch doctor, the mobile phone and the machete.”

“Now a confirmed atheist, I've become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa... Education and training alone will not do. In Africa, Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good,” says Parris.

Parris' observations confirms the view of former psychiatrist Theodore Dalrymple who worked in prisons in the UK as well as in some of the poorest and most disadvantaged areas in Britain, Africa and South America.

He is a critic of the welfare state, decries the demise of personal responsibility, a unifying culture and family values, where in his long experience, something as ordinary as a family meal is now an unfamiliar habit for the underprivileged classes.

Society, concludes Dalrymple, is broken. But how do we begin putting such a colossal fragmented system back together? The answer is also vital to how we manage prisons.

Like Parris, Dalrymple also identifies as an atheist, but has developed a sympathetic view of religion compared with secularism when comparing how each informs individuals and society. In the final analysis, Dalrymple says that humanist determinism has done more to drive primitive/base desires and the pursuit of self-centredness, whereas religion, particularly Christianity, takes a deeper, compassionate view of the world on

the one hand seeing humanity as inherently morally broken yet without skirting the need for individual responsibility. ⁶

“The secularist de-moralises the world, thus increasing the vulnerability of potential victims and, not coincidentally, their need for a professional apparatus of protection, which is and always will be ineffective, and is therefore fundamentally corrupt and corrupting.”

Renowned criminologist Byron R. Johnson agrees. In *More God, Less Crime*, Johnson argues that religion can be a powerful antidote to crime. He describes how faith communities, congregations, and faith-based organizations are essential in forming meaningful relationship to give the human and spiritual nexus that is necessary to deal with crime, offender rehabilitation and the post prison release problems facing former offenders.

It was this dominant worldview and practice that prevailed during Fry’s time and probably accounts for much of her success.

However, regardless of today’s prevailing ideology it is time to acknowledge and revisit the great societal benefits that the first efforts of prison ministry gave to restoring some of that brokenness. The older adaptation of a two pronged approach - meeting the felt need (shelter, food, employment, education) while not abandoning the deeper spiritual need (value system) seems the right place to start.

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⁶ <http://www.newstatesman.com/node/194716>