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Abstract

Incarceration dislodges youth from society; reentry rituals are needed to help transition young people back. Based on qualitative research with formerly incarcerated women and personal experience teaching in a women's prison, I propose a missional pedagogy that might inform our approach to formerly incarcerated youth. Ultimately, I argue for missional youth ministries that integrate rituals that are reintegrative, incarnational, and communal. I assert that rituals of this sort allow ministries to not only share the content of the gospel message, but also to incarnate the compassion revealed through the gospel message.

Rituals of Reintegration: Practices of Flourishing with Adolescents along the Incarceration Continuum

Introduction

I propose that whether one teaches youth ministry or leads youth in an urban, suburban, or rural setting, ministry to formerly incarcerated youth is a unique missional opportunity. Yet, youth ministers and those who educate them often do not know how to respond to this issue and sometimes do not even recognize mass incarceration as a part of the important work of missional youth ministry. This paper seeks to expand current notions of missional ministry to include youth entangled in the juvenile justice system. Integrating ministry to formerly incarcerated youth into missional activities of churches is essential for embodying compassion, hospitality, and justice. In the first section, I identify some of the primary ways rituals function in society. In the second section, I identify the ways incarceration encompasses rituals of punishment that isolates youth from society. Finally, I propose a missional approach to youth ministry that implements rituals that connect youth back to loving, supportive communities.

Current research reveals that incarceration dislodges incarcerated youth from society; reentry rituals are needed to help transition young people back into the church and the community.

Based on qualitative research with formerly incarcerated women and personal experience teaching in a women's prison, I propose a missional pedagogy that might inform our approach to formerly incarcerated youth. Rather than reinforcing rituals of punishment, youth ministers can be trained to create and conduct rituals of reintegration with symbolic and instrumental functions that promote joy and flourishing in youth who have been incarcerated. Rituals of this sort allow ministries to not only share the content of the gospel message, but also to incarnate the compassion revealed through the gospel message.

This paper represents a turn in many studies concerning youth along the incarceration continuum. Rather than focusing on maladaptive characteristics, I focus on ways to promote flourishing and well-being among formerly incarcerated adolescents that contribute to a healthy sense of identity and belonging within the Christian community. In so doing, I assert that incarceration possesses rituals of punishment that lead to stigmatizing shame and reinforce disintegration and social isolation among adolescents. As youth ministry educators, I propose missional approaches to youth ministry as a viable alternative to working with formerly incarcerated youth, whereby youth ministry begins to enact rituals that are reintegrative, incarnational, and communal. These rituals would ultimately invite youth into a sense of belonging where they can feel accountable, supported, and loved.

Why Rites of Passage and Rituals?: The Symbolic and Instrumental Functions of Rituals

Rituals serve both functional and symbolic purposes. Scholars confirm rituals' ability to serve certain functions within society.¹ These functions include maintaining social order,

¹ Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Bronislaw Malinowski and Robert Redfield, *Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays* (Boston,: Beacon Press, 1948). A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Essays and Addresses* (London: Routledge, 1952.)

communicating social values, and responding to social and psychological conflict. Rituals provide space for celebration, lament, and transitions. In these processes, not only do rituals help manage change, they provide the support necessary to help contain strong emotions.² Rituals also organize and control social relationships and social interactions.³ In other words, rituals help define roles and responsibilities within families, communities, and society. The repetition of these rituals ultimately contribute to group stability and group identification.⁴ In addition, rituals have symbolic functions. Clifford Geertz, for example, described rituals as a representation of culture. Furthermore, he believed rituals could also help shape society and culture.⁵

Apart from any form of incarceration, scholars identify rituals as a significant contributor to the lives of youth, serving both instrumental and symbolic functions that can either promote or inhibit human flourishing. The work of Erik H. Erikson is well known as one approach to thinking about identity formation. Within his theory on identity formation, he also takes into account the ritualization of experience and its impact on the development of adolescents. He notes that formal rites of passages is where “adolescing human beings are enjoined to become responsible members of society (or pseudo-species).”⁶ The term rites of passage, developed by Arnold van Gennep, signifies the various transitions all humans experience throughout their life cycle.⁷ Many of these transitions take place according to structured and natural cycles of time, including pregnancy, childbirth, marriage, and funerals. Transition is critical to Gennep’s concept of rites of passage; his concept integrates the crossing of a threshold.⁸ This crossing signified a geographical crossing,

² John D. Friesen, "Rituals and Family Strength," *Direction* 19, no. 1 (1990): 44.

³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1966.);

⁴ John D. Friesen, "Rituals and Family Strength," 40.

⁵ Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980.)

⁶ Erik H. Erikson, *Toys and Reasons*, 107.

⁷ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 189-190.

⁸ van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 192.

whereby a person would literally move from one place to another place. This movement could take place symbolically, such as the passing from one social position to another. At the same time, he saw rites of passage as very much rooted in actual location. He organized these stages according to separation, transition, and incorporation. The separation, in fact, functioned as an aspect of social organization according to Gennep.⁹ Overall, rites of passage is an important category for understanding youth ministry because it emphasizes the ongoing movement of adolescents, particularly those who are most vulnerable, into spaces of incarnational love where they can receive nourishment while also being full participants in the community. Without this understanding of transition, youth who have been moving towards a counterproductive future, particularly formerly incarcerated youth, may continue to move in that direction due to the stigma, shame, and disintegration associated with incarceration.

Stigma and Shame: Incarceration as a Ritual of Disintegration

An adolescent's arrest, trial, strip searches, and other practices within incarceration represent a systematic process of ritualized punishment that isolates and alienates adolescents from society. I draw on the criminologist Shadd Maruna and anthropologist Victor Turner to further my claim that incarceration creates stigmatizing shame that separates people from society. I use the lens of ritual and cultural performance to reinforce that incarceration shapes internal views of one's humanity as well as external views towards one's humanity. In this sense, incarceration becomes a way for incarcerated individuals to move from the status of human to the status of criminal with little means of ever systematically going through a process of re-humanization. When this de-

⁹ Ibid, 192.

positioning takes place, adolescents become more likely to be recruited into ways of being that counter human flourishing.

Incarceration serves as a cultural ritual or social drama, whereby social tensions within larger society become apparent. Within this social drama, Victor Turner identified four stages that take place—breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration or schism.¹⁰ Adolescent incarceration mirrors these four stages in startling ways. Once youth enter the system, they are constantly moving in and out of this cultural performance of rituals, whereby schism from larger society seems much more realistic than reintegration into larger society. For example, those who are arrested by law enforcement have been accused of committing some “breach” in society. The courtroom drama, another public ritual, becomes a time where others decide whether the person actually committed the breach. If it is determined that the breach has been committed, the guilty party must face consequences for their actions. Although punishment in prison is supposed to function as a repair or redress, it often functions as a schism. In this case, the schism from society actually is the consequence used in order to repair the breach. Being sent to prison and the things that happen thereafter represent a major separation from society that creates disintegration. Without intentional efforts, youth remain in a state of schism and are never appropriately reintegrated into the community.

The public censure and disavowal that adolescents receive from society as a result of their incarceration often leaves permanent scars, human markers that become reminders of pain and guilt. Rituals of punishment, in fact, brand these human markers into a person’s psyche as well as

¹⁰ Victor Turner extended Arnold van Gennep’s portrayal of initiation rites and explored the ways rituals served as social dramas. The social drama begins when someone breaks a rule (breach) in which sides are taken either for or against the rule breaker (crisis). Actions are then taken to repair the breach (redress). Successful repairs result in returning to the community as normal while unsuccessful repairs result in separation from the group. This seems like a fairly linear process; yet, for adolescents on the pathway to prison, this process can be taking place on many levels at the same time and can easily inhibit flourishing. Victor W. Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986), 41.

the imagination of those watching. In the past, executions served as a public ritual. The executed received the marks of condemnation on their body—a public spectacle that served as a reminder to deter others from deviance.¹¹ Officials invited the community to the grand performance. The community could feel a sense of justice by watching those who committed crime pay retribution for their actions. In more recent years, punishment is less public but no less ritualized. The public gaze shifts from the body being a public spectacle of condemnation through execution to the courtroom scene, where criminal selves are placed on trial and sentenced for their crime.¹² In the words of Foucault, “The expiation that once rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations.”¹³ The behavior of the criminal is not only placed on trial; the soul of the criminal is placed on trial.¹⁴

Researchers have begun to identify the varied ways that punishment is ritualized, especially during the criminal justice process.¹⁵ Trials, for example, function as a ritual of blaming. They provide a public way to shift one’s gaze towards a specific individual in order to hold that person responsible for criminal activity. Rituals of punishment then escort people into this diminished status, sometimes marking both the body and soul as condemned. Blaming, in turn, shapes discourses around punishment.¹⁶ Passing through the trial into prison is a ritual space that signifies loss of social spaces and a change in status.¹⁷ In *Good Punishment?: Christian Moral Practice and US Imprisonment*, James Logan describes the alienation that women on the incarceration continuum might experience as a consequence of sin, while also recognizing that the category of

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 1st American ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 8.

¹² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 9.

¹³ Ibid, 16.

¹⁴ Ibid, 18.

¹⁵ Shadd Maruna, “Reentry as a Rite of Passage,” *Punishment & Society* 13, no. 1 (January 2011):13.

¹⁶ David Garland, *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 68.

¹⁷ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 36.

“criminal” works to assign inferior status to those who have committed crimes.¹⁸ This category moves a person from the status of one who is innocent to one who deserves to be punished. This categorizing functions to isolate and stigmatize adolescents so that it is difficult to overcome the negative labeling. Further, the criminal label can have direct influences on the way others treat the criminalized. In other words, the blamed, even when they have served their time, continues to wear the stigmata of blame.

Rituals offer a way for society to categorize the being of others. Culturally, they are human cues that invite or even force people to move into particular statuses of being. They either validate or invalidate one’s own sense of being. The ritual of incarceration, then, is a time that marks the stripping of one’s sense of being. The initiation phase of incarceration is a process of depersonalization and a pulling off of the things that had been identity markers. Shadd Maruna describes this process in the following way

The prisoner undergoes a ‘civil death’, losing former citizen rights and liberties, but also a distinct set of ritualistic admission procedures—undressing, strip searching, and disinfecting the individual, assigning him or her a new institutional uniform, haircut, and living quarters and ‘obedience tests’ meant to break the individual’s personality, including forced verbal acts of deference.¹⁹

In very concrete practices, adolescents are literally stripped of the things that gave them a sense of identity and humanity prior to prison. Adolescents lose their families, their sense of control, and ultimately their physical freedom. They place sharp distinctions upon one’s identity by reinforcing

¹⁸ James Samuel Logan, *Good Punishment?: Christian Moral Practice and U.S. Imprisonment* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2008), 26-32.

¹⁹ Shadd Maruna, “Reentry as a Rite of Passage,” 11-12.

who one is not, while simultaneously claiming who one is. As Sherry, a formerly incarcerated woman describes, incarceration is a carceral stripping of agency. She says:

*You don't have any rights. You don't have a voice. Basically you're just told to do things when someone else wants you to do them, not when you want to do it. You can't go to the refrigerator and look in. You can't sit on your porch if you decide. You can't decide on I don't want to have this today. I want to get something else to eat. It says that you were behaving so awful and so bad that society decided this is the best place for you. You're powerless.*²⁰

This stripping of agency and identity feeds into a stripping of one's very human-being-ness. Further, this stripping is in direct opposition to a humanity that feeds on participation and possibility. Ultimately, the loss of a sense of being disrupts flourishing.

Punishment rituals come with clear consequences for both how we understand punishment and how we come to know those who have committed crimes. Punishment rituals trigger internal misgivings, often resulting in the residue of shame. The feeling of condemnation and shame, unfortunately, robs people of hope. It conditions a person to condemn his or her own self just as much as it conditions society to condemn him or her. This type of moral exclusion and shame led Harold Garfinkel to name punishment practices as “status degradation ceremonies” whereby a person's whole identity is shaped by these practices.²¹ Shame is the invisible cost of ritualized punishment and often lives beyond the public gaze. To escape shame in the face of false visibilities and a condemned self is difficult. Incarcerated populations experience this condemnation externally and internally. Not only do rituals of punishment rob adolescents of hope in themselves,

²⁰ Sherry Interview, 3 January 2015.

²¹ Harold Garfinkel, Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies, *American Journal of Sociology* 1956 61(5): 420.

it also robs society of hope in them. Rituals mark people in the public's eye, where society's actions toward incarcerated and formerly incarcerated adolescents communicate a loss in their possibility to be human.

This public marking is known as stigma. Stigma blinds the humanity of the stigmatized in ways that sometimes unconsciously manifest in our actions and attitudes toward that person.²² It is this very awkwardness that causes one to sink within themselves or to seek other groups in which they feel a sense of belonging. Just think back to the garden of Eden when Adam and Eve sinned. The feeling of exposure sent them on a quest to cover up their shame. They did not embrace their wrongdoing publically but sought ways to hide from the eyes of God. Placing adolescents in situations where they are publically shamed and stigmatized does not draw the adolescent closer to community but isolates them. The criminal justice system often employs stigmatizing shaming as an attempt to deter crime; yet, their attempt to deter crime actually further alienates the stigmatized.²³ The stigmatizing shame inflicted by rituals of punishment supersedes simply one's internal experience of shame. As I found in my work with incarcerated women, these stigmatizing rituals may be something as simple as wearing a prison uniform, a public means by which the criminal justice system separates and categorizes those who have broken social norms.

One such ritual of stigmatizing shame stood out among others in my research with returning citizens—strip-searches. Throughout my interviews with formerly incarcerated women, they identified strip searches as one of the single most degrading and shameful practices within incarceration. Strip searches are used to deter crime and help maximize security efforts. The initial mandatory strip search happens when adolescents enter the prison for the first time. Anytime

²² Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (A Spectrum Book. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 5.

²³ Harold Garfinkel, "Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies," 420-424. John Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame, and Reintegration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.)

adolescents transfer between prisons, have visitors, return from court, or return from temporary release, they are also subject to full searches. Additionally, mandatory drug tests and cell searches may also warrant a full search. This is not to mention the random searches that may take place. Those who are considered high security undergo even more searching. One of the most common reasons why officers presumably strip search adolescents randomly is because they are suspected of having contraband.²⁴ What intensifies the stress, however, is the fact that routine searches can happen even when one has not committed a breach. Nona depicts a vivid depiction of strip searching. Nona says:

One of the worst things about being incarcerated is having to take off all of your clothes in front of somebody and...to pull your butt apart, bend over and cough for them to examine all of you and leave you there just to put back on a uniform that has a number on it...If you don't know you -- If you don't have a good name to call you, you don't have a hope to link onto to say I'm somebody even as I'm doing this or God you said I'm -- If you don't have a Bible verse to quote, you will be left there stripped, only to be given nothing...You have to have somewhere else to go.²⁵

To overcome the feeling of violation and invalidation of one's humanity, one must "have somewhere else to go" mentally or spiritually. One must not be left as a stripped body/being but must have resources that enable one to experience a sense of belonging and acceptance.

In Search of Rituals that Reintegrate

²⁴ Contraband can range from more illicit forms like weapons, cell phones, and alcohol to less illicit forms like glitter, markers, or tape. Many things that seem inherently harmless can easily become weapons to harm one's self or others; thus, restrictions against contraband reinforce safety in the prison. On the other hand, often, women are placed in lockdown or wrongfully strip searched for contraband.

²⁵ Nona, Interview, 30 January 2015.

To facilitate human relationship and counteract the rituals of separation and exclusion enacted through incarceration, I advocate for what Shadd Maruna calls reintegration rituals.²⁶ Reintegration rituals are communal attempts to invite those who have been separated from membership to reestablish their membership within the community. These rituals prioritize the role of relationship both in how beings are exiled and how they are restored to community. In the context of community, these rituals would serve to wash off the garments of negative perceptions that society has put on incarcerated and formerly youth and that youth on the incarceration continuum have so often worn. At the heart of rituals of reintegration, the relational being finds a home. No longer in exile, the one who has been excluded is fully accepted back into the human family and given the support needed to be an authentic and resilient self. In this sense, rituals of reintegration are a mutual process that requires a significant other, namely the community, to demonstrate full acceptance and belonging to those who have been othered. These rituals would include officials from the criminal justice system who could endorse the returning citizen and close family and friends who will actually receive much of the burden of reintegration.²⁷ In the words of Maruna:

Successful reintegration is a two-way process, requiring both effort on the part of the former prisoner (e.g. desistance, repentance), but also on the part of some wider community (e.g. forgiveness, acceptance). As such, reintegration appears to be an ideal candidate for the implementation of rituals that, by their nature, are supposed to generate feelings of solidarity and community among participants.²⁸

²⁶ Throughout this section, I draw on the criminologist Shadd Maruna and anthropologist Victor Turner to further my claim that incarceration, as a ritual of punishment, alienates incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth from the community. Shadd Maruna, "Reentry as a Rite of Passage," 18.

²⁷ Shadd Maruna, "Reentry as a Rite of Passage," 18.

²⁸ Shadd Maruna, "Reentry as a Rite of Passage," 13.

Instead of being stripped of one's being, rituals of reintegration strip off the identity of non-being by a mutual participatory process of returning citizens' commitment to being authentic to who they are and the community's commitment to creating a space where they can be who they are. I hypothesize that rituals of reintegration are mutually-humanizing, reminding the community too of who they are and pushing them to become who they will become.

The Faith Community Is Not Innocent: Resonances of Stigma and Shame

As I turn to missional forms of youth ministry, it is important to acknowledge that the faith community has participated in enacting rituals of punishment that promote stigmatizing shame and disintegration. Youth ministries never post a sign on the door that says "DO NOT COME IN!" But the faith community find ways to communicate it. Moreover, there is no shortage of research that talks about the startling gap between youth and the church.²⁹ Yet, so much attention has been focused on trying to reach out to formerly church youth who have left the church that not as much attention has been given to youth who do not have access to youth ministry opportunities. Some of the work of youth ministry, then, is to gather scattered sheep back into the fold. This work of gathering and scattering is a feature of missions. My assertion is not that we need to turn away from this important function of missions rather that we need to expand who we gather and where we gather. The who we gather and where we gather naturally leads us to rethink how we gather. Quite frankly, chaplains employed by the juvenile detention centers or state should not be the only ones offering services within youth facilities. Knowing that over ninety percent of these

²⁹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity-- and Why It Matters*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007.); David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church-- and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2011.); Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.).

adolescents will return to our communities should provide enough urgency to help us think of ways to engage them within our ministries.

How often has the faith community held stones in their hand, ready to publically shame adolescents for misbehaving? Stones that have often been reserved for “those” children outside church, outside the youth ministry, children who the kids from within dare not come in contact for fear of contamination. This public ritual of stoning was an ancient Jewish practice of execution, mentioned in the Bible several times. It sought to deter others from committing crimes; yet, Jesus so keenly illustrates a missional approach to ministry. Incarnational love reveals itself in the flesh through Jesus’ response to stigmatizing shame in John 8:1-11 when a woman is caught in adultery. The community brings the unnamed woman before Jesus (the judge) and publically exposes her with the intent of punishing her. Any desire to hide her sin now is overcome with the community’s insistence to name her as adulteress and one deserving of death through stoning. Jesus replies, “All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!”³⁰ Instead of shaming the woman, who I’m sure at this time already wrestled with shame within herself because of the public exposure, Jesus the Christ resisted condemnation and offered mercy. Jesus also communicates an expectation that she would no longer lead an adulterous life. His message begins at ground-level; he bends down on the ground to write a message in the dust. Scholars contemplate what that message could’ve been. Apparently, those ready to condemn could not understand because they continued to demand a response. Jesus’ response required those who sought to condemn to get in touch with their own humanity as a point of departure for judging this issue. Jesus’ anti-death statement gives us insight into a message of flourishing, which can be proclaimed within youth ministry. How might the practices we engage within youth ministry embrace the message of

³⁰ John 8:7.

flourishing that Jesus proclaims through this illustration? What sorts of rituals can we create that reintegrate the marginalized into the family, incarnate the love of God, and ultimately care for them as whole persons?

Rituals of Reintegration as a Form of Missional Youth Ministry to Incarcerated Youth

Missional approaches to youth ministry transgress the boundaries that have so rigidly defined who can or cannot gain entrance into the community. Research demonstrates that it is the open arms approach to adolescents from all backgrounds that holds value for enriching youth ministry. For successful parachurch organizations like Youth for Christ and Young Life, their intentional outreach efforts that reach adolescents where they live have historically set them apart from the rapidly declining youth ministries housed within the church.³¹ Perhaps if we allow God's mandate of bringing the kingdom of God to every adolescent to pierce our hearts, then this mandate would begin to transform our ecclesiological norms.³² While acts of service (which are typically defined as missions) and sharing the gospel (which is typically defined as evangelism) is a significant component of missions expand beyond these practices. Missions is, as Brian Kirk and Jacob Thorne assert, "God's self-revelation to the world." Missions serve as a vehicle to express the divine love and incarnational presence of God in the world. Ministries who engage in these endeavors become the bridge by which adolescents, particularly those not connected with a faith community, come to encounter Christ in an authentic way.³³ Missions is demonstrated by our actions and reinforced by our words.

³¹ Chap Clark, "The Missional Approach to Youth Ministry," In *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church: Inclusive Congregational, Preparatory, Missional, Strategic*, ed. Senter (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Youth Specialties, 2001): 83-84.

³² Chap Clark, "The Missional Approach to Youth Ministry," 81.

³³ To be clear, I use faith community rather than church to assert that the church is not a location rather a community of believers who exemplify Christ's divine love in the world. Thus, my understanding of a faith community is not limited to traditional church settings but can be manifested in multiple ways through multiple settings.

Missional approaches to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth must employ innovative ways to reveal Christ to the world. One such way is creating protective spaces against the stigmatizing shame that comes with incarceration. Rituals can counter stigmatizing shame and subsequently invite youth back into community. Within the context of youth incarceration, an instrumental function of rituals is its ability to contribute to an adolescent's successful reintegration back into community. Research suggests, for example, that the engagement of older caring adults including family members in the lives of youth are a primary factor to successful adolescent development upon release from prison.³⁴ Rituals, then, present an opportunity for youth ministries to be the family of God by inviting youth into fellowship with other youth who are on a journey toward Christian maturity.

Overall, work within juvenile detention centers and upon the release of youth from detention centers creates a unique opportunity for youth ministry leaders to demonstrate a missional approach that is reintegrative, incarnational, and communal.

Rituals as Reintegrative

Rituals of reintegration as a form of missional youth ministry restore youth to communities that have been broken apart by crime. Rituals of reintegration ultimately counter the stigma and shame produced by incarceration through their emphasis on full adoption into the body of Christ. In *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith* Chap Clark crystallizes the essence of adoption. He writes that “the inner circle or the gathering does whatever it needs to do to make sure that the adopted person experiences the family of God as a

³⁴Barry Holman and Jason Ziedenberg, *The Dangers of Detention: The Impact of Incarcerating Youth in Detention and Other Secure Facilities* (Washington, D.C.: Justice Policy Institute, 2011), 15.

fully embraced and included participant.”³⁵ In other words, those in power must see themselves in divine relationship with those who are vulnerable and embrace the theological mandate to include them at the center of family life. They are seen as a son, daughter, brother and sister. The “us” and “them” mentality that creates barriers between people of difference are shattered as the community recognizes that all are welcome to the communion table. They serve to bridge the gap between incarcerated youth and their families, between law enforcement and suspicious citizens, between the church and those disconnected from the church. Overall, missional youth ministry does not invite incarcerated youth into the community to remain on the periphery of community life but adopts youth who are or have been incarcerated as living, moving, and indispensable members of the family.

One of the prevailing strengths of rituals is their ability to create spatial boundaries in which adolescents can contest and confirm their identity.³⁶ In particular, rituals within the context of a youth ministry offers not only the symbolic space to contest one’s identity but the physical space to engage in activities that promote flourishing in adolescents. The movement into one’s church family is more than a symbolic representation of adoption; it is an embodied act that requires an actual movement of the youth into the space of youth ministries. Subsequently, it is a reallocation of physical and spiritual resources that acknowledges that these adolescents have access to the same resources as other youth within the family. In this sense, reintegration is a recognition from the faith community that certain adolescents belong just as much as it is a recognition from adolescents that they belong. The role of a significant other, once again, is critical in the

³⁵ Chap Clark, *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith, Youth, Family, and Culture Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 2.

³⁶ Kira Krenichyn, "Messages About Adolescent Identity: Coded and Contested Spaces in a New York City High School," in *Embodied Geographies: Spaces, Bodies and Rites of Passage*, ed. Elizabeth K. Teather (New York: Routledge, 1999), 54.

development of youth's identity formation and their capacity to be more. As Erik Erikson states, "the process of identity formation depends on the interplay of what young persons at the end of childhood have come to mean to themselves and what they now appear to mean to those who have become significant to them."³⁷

The *missio dei* serves as a central focus of missional youth ministries. In this sense, God's focus becomes the primary focus of youth ministry efforts. Rather than simply attracting youth to the church, missional approaches to youth ministry find innovative ways to extend the church beyond the church building. They integrate practices within their ministries that invite, adopt, teach, and ultimately disciple youth into engaging the *missio dei* out of their own love and passion for Christ. The priesthood of believers is enacted even as incarcerated youth begin to play a role in enriching the kingdom of God. Membership within community invites mutual accountability. The most effective form of accountability takes place when people are in community, when they know their actions will impact those whom they care about in a negative way. Creating a context for reintegration, then, simultaneously creates possibilities for more effective accountability where the anticipated disappointment an adolescent may encounter if they commit a crime deters them from actual criminal behavior. In other words, they actually care about and consider the feelings of those in the community in which they have been adopted.

Rituals as Incarnational

Rituals of incarnation witness of the love of Christ in tangible ways. These rituals are particularly important for those who have been incarcerated and continue to wear the residue of incarceration in their bodies. These rituals counter the corporal feeling of stigma trapped in the

³⁷ Erik H. Erikson, *Toys and Reasons: Stages in the Ritualization of Experience* 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1977), 106.

bodies of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated populations. They represent embodied experiences of acceptance, movements that resist isolation, glances that refuse pride and superiority. Rituals of incarnation bear witness to a compassionate love that is willing to suffer with and bear the burden of love through acts of service and justice that communicate God's grace.

As Kenda Creasy Dean notes in *Practicing Passion*:

Whether (adolescents) discover the true source of passion—whether they ever connect their desire for love with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ or with the church at all, for that matter—largely depends on whether the church bears witness to a love more true than those available in popular culture and that, of course, depends on whether the church practices the passion we preach.³⁸

Youth ministry is not about making youth “church kids;” it is about expressing the love of Christ through on-the-ground approaches to ministry that seek to restore communion rather than condemn.

It is important to note that often adolescents who become entangled in the criminal justice system experienced diverse forms of stigmatizing shame before they ever commit a crime. The criminalization due to social status, race, or other factors make marginalized youth most susceptible to systemic practices that point toward criminality. These practices include “stop and frisk” searches and profiling. Victor M. Rios identifies this early form of social death as “social incapacitation;” it is the “process by which punitive and social control becomes an instrument which prevents marginalized populations from functioning, thriving, and feeling a sense of dignity and humanity in their daily interactions with institutional forces.”³⁹ Knowing that there is a history

³⁸ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, CO, 2004), 6-7.

³⁹ Victor M. Rios, *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 160.

of criminalization makes it increasingly important for youth ministries to approach incarcerated adolescent with not only compassion, but incarnational love that manifests in advocacy, social services, and tangible ways of gaining a sense of social and institutional integration after incarceration. To love with physical actions and deeds, then, counteracts the unconscious and conscious ways we respond to stigma. It resists the tendency to paternalistic forms of acceptance and creates opportunities for us to embrace adolescents as not only human beings but family.

Rituals as Communal: Communal Affirmation and Embracing the Capacity to Be More

Communal rituals grounded in incarnational love create opportunities for the community to embrace its role in the lives of incarcerated youth while at the same time inviting incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth to embrace its role in the larger community. Rituals that engage the community represent a mutually affirming process that encourages adolescents to develop into competent and mature young adults who are attentive to the needs of the community. Community presence affirms the inherent value of a person's being while also demonstrating a belief and expectation in the adolescent's capacity to accomplish particular tasks. This is more than a belief statement about who one is; it is a declaration of who one can be. Developmentally, youth and young adults are left with the task of maturing in a variety of ways. This maturation process can be either encouraged or discouraged through community affirmation.

Adolescent's acknowledging their capacity is simultaneously a way for adolescents to acknowledge their place in the world; it "maps the body on the world by making an assessment that this body age or this particular body (individual) is 'able to' accomplish this or that task."⁴⁰ For adolescents who have often been regarded as disposable, knowing they have gifts and talents

⁴⁰ Michael Baizerman, "Rites of Passage: From Here to There, from Now to Then, Along These Roads and Paths," *Child & Youth Care Forum* 27, no. 6 (December 1998): 441-45.

that can contribute to society adds value to their self-worth. While the emphasis should never be solely on productivity, knowing that one can produce valuable assets in the world becomes a critical component of assessing one's own value. As Walter Arthur McCray indicates, this greater sense of independence manifests economically, psychologically, socially, spiritually, emotionally, and within one's values, volition, agency, and level of accountability.⁴¹ In other words, youth make a volitional declaration: "I will grow; I will mature; I will become."⁴² This automatically shifts the role of the community from observer to participant; the community becomes witnesses to the adolescent's desired transformation. The presence of the Christian community then plays a critical role of witnessing this declaration, providing accountability, and offering support when needed. The incarcerated or formerly incarcerated youth transforms from a criminal to a human, from a stranger to a family member, from a prodigal child to one who has been found. The youth ministry or community of faith transforms from a place that stays within strict borders to a place that transgresses the boundaries in order to see and find God's children.

Beyond the faith community, the presence of other community members and officials in these rituals is also paramount. The community rituals might include parents, other youth, teachers, a parole officer, local clergy, and extended family. I want to draw specific attention to the presence of law enforcement, particularly because an antagonistic relationship between incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth often exists. Inviting law enforcement to participate in communal rituals break barriers between law enforcement and youth on the incarceration continuum. Further, it affirms that law enforcement seek to protect and serve rather than punish and exert undue power as might be the prevailing assumption in an adolescent's mind. Ultimately, the rituals I envision

⁴¹ Walter Arthur McCray. *Black Young Adults: How to Reach Them, What to Teach Them*. 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: Black Light Fellowship, 1992), 14-24.

⁴² Walter Arthur McCray, *Black Young Adults*, 24.

within Christian communities are ones that clearly push adolescents beyond group affiliation to a commitment to faith in God. In this sense, their dependency to “be good” does not rest solely on their ability to act or think good but rests on their membership in the Body of Christ. This Christocentric orientation sets these rituals apart from ones that can be practiced in non-Christian spaces.

Conclusion

This paper explores a missional approach to youth ministry through the lens of incarceration and rituals. Within incarceration, dehumanization takes place in a ritualized way that shapes internal views of one’s humanity as well as external views towards one’s humanity. Punishment becomes a systematic process of dehumanizing individuals during their arrest, trial, strip searches, and other practices within incarceration. Through incarceration, it is easy for incarcerated individuals to move from the status of human to the status of criminal with little means of ever systematically going through a process of re-humanization. These makes it easy for adolescents to be recruited into ways of being that counter flourishing. Missional youth ministry, on the other hand, finds innovative approaches like rituals of reintegration to restore an adolescent’s sense of self by emphasizing God’s love and full acceptance into the Body of Christ. Specifically, rituals that reintegrate youth into loving community helps protect them against stigmatizing shame and invite youth into a relationship with God, where they are empowered to act courageously and in partnership with God.

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