

“First Stop Dying”: Angola’s Christian Seminary as Positive Criminology

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Abstract

This article offers an ethnographic account of the “self-projects” of inmate graduates of Louisiana State Penitentiary’s (aka “Angola’s”) unique prison seminary program. Angola’s Inmate Minister program deploys seminary graduates in bivocational pastoral service roles throughout America’s largest maximum-security prison. Drawing upon the unique history of Angola, inmates establish their own churches and serve in lay-ministry capacities in hospice, cellblock visitation, tier ministry, officiating inmate funerals, and through tithing with “care packages” for indigent prisoners. Four themes of positive criminology prominently emerge from inmate narratives: (a) the importance of respectful treatment of inmates by correctional administrations, (b) the value of building trusting relationships for prosocial modeling and improved self-perception, (c) repairing harm through intervention, and (d) spiritual practice as a blueprint for positive self-identity and social integration among prisoners.

Keywords

positive criminology, religion in prison, prison seminaries, Louisiana State Penitentiary

In spite of their painful experiences in prison, almost all of the interviewees were now able to recast their imprisonment not as a personal crisis, but as a gift or opportunity. . . . Likewise, rather than the past representing a period during which one wasted valuable years, the time interviewees spent involved with criminality and addiction is recast as valuable experience for one’s missionary work.

—Maruna, Wilson, and Curran (2006, pp. 175-176)

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Introduction: “Angola—The Bloodiest Prison in America”

Grounded in phenomenological criminology, this article explores the “self-projects” and “meaning-making” strategies of inmate graduates of Louisiana State Penitentiary’s unique Christian seminary program. “Phenomenological criminology is an attempt to understand criminal decision making through an examination of the offender’s self-project—the self-image they are hoping to uphold, the ends they aim to achieve, and their strategies for creating meaning in their lives” (Maruna, 2001, p. 38). Upon full matriculation, graduates of the seminary become practitioners in Angola’s unique Inmate Minister program. In the context of a “curious eclipse of prison ethnography in the age of mass incarceration,” Wacquant and other researchers have recently stressed the importance of resurrecting phenomenological research on the experience of long-term inmates (Calverly, 2013; Crewe, 2009; Wacquant, 2002). This article is part of a larger research project exploring religious faith among inmates at Angola, offering a preliminary ethnographic account of Angola’s unique prison seminary program (see Hallett, et al., in press; Duwe, et al., 2015).

Louisiana State Penitentiary (hereafter “Angola”), located in Angola, Louisiana, is America’s largest maximum-security prison, currently housing over 6,300 inmates in five separate complexes spread over 18,000 acres of a working prison farm. Cellblock and dormitory units are still called “camps” at Angola, a remnant of the traditional assignment of slaves to “work camps” across various locations of the property, a former slave plantation (Carleton, 1971, p. 89). The property first became known as “Angola” because it was this region of Africa that supplied its slaves. Roughly 75% of inmates currently serving time at Angola are serving life sentences (Louisiana Department of Corrections, 2015).

A “life sentence” in Louisiana means “natural life,” expiring only upon the inmate’s death (Nellis, 2010, p. 28). The average sentence for “non-lifers” at Angola in 2012 was 92.7 years. One inmate at Angola has a sentence of 846 years. More than 90% of the inmates sentenced to Angola will die there. Almost all inmates serving time at Angola have been convicted of violent crimes or sex crimes, except those housed in the newly annexed “Phelps” complex, “Camp C,” which is now being used as an overflow facility for “short timers” sent from other Louisiana prisons. “Short time” at Angola means 10 years or less, with approximately 1,200 inmates currently assigned to the Camp C Phelps complex unit. Roughly one third of inmates at Angola have been sentenced to life without parole for crimes other than first-degree murder, including second-degree murder, rape, kidnapping, aggravated battery, and other habitual offender convictions. According to Melanie Gueho, Deputy Director of Louisiana Department of Corrections, an astounding 1,459 inmates at Angola are serving life on their first convictions (Melanie Gueho, personal communication, November 18, 2014; Louisiana Department of Corrections, 2015).

By all measures, Louisiana is a national outlier in punitive sentencing, having the highest incarceration rate in the nation at 893 per 100,000 in 2012. The average incarceration rate among U.S. states in 2012 was 480 per 100,000 (Carson & Golinelli,

2013). The harshness of Louisiana's sentencing structure is even more pronounced when examined through the lens of gender, having a 2012 incarceration rate of 1,720 per 100,000 versus a national average male incarceration rate of 910. Louisiana's closest competitor in male incarceration, Mississippi, has a male incarceration rate of 1,370 per 100,000 (Carson & Golinelli, 2013). In short, Louisiana has the highest incarceration rate in the United States by a significant margin, focused disproportionately on Black males. Seventy-five percent of inmates at Angola are Black, and 24% are White. The remaining 1% comprised of Hispanic and "Other" identifiers (Louisiana Department of Corrections, 2015).

Angola is a very unique correctional environment in many respects. Because of Louisiana's draconian sentencing structure, Angola cannot easily avail itself of "good time credit" or other parole eligibility tools that many prisons traditionally rely upon to encourage good behavior. Prisoners at Angola have few options for gaining early release and arguably little incentive to change themselves in any deep way—excepting of course that the vast majority of men at Angola will spend the rest of their lives on its grounds with no hope of release (Louisiana Department of Corrections, 2015; Nellis, 2010).

In no small part due to chronic lack of funding and the historical expectation that Angola turn a profit or at least remain self-sufficient, inmate leadership at the prison has long been a source of both pride and conflict. With good results and bad, inmates have long-held positions of trust on the compound, serving in key roles managing the farm, working the laundry, cafeteria, plumbing and maintenance, and in other key capacities including most recently, caring for fellow inmates at the prison hospice and serving as inmate ministers. The paid prison staff alone simply cannot meet the needs of inmates at Angola.

While operating a farm may seem to provide opportunities for inmate productivity and rehabilitation, overreliance upon inmate labor has historically been a source of rampant violence and discord. As Historian Mark Carleton noted in 1971, prior to dramatic federal intervention at the prison and a near-complete overhaul of Angola's operations structure, inmates by necessity often guarded the prison:

Since 1917 most guards at Angola have in fact been convicts themselves, as many as six hundred at one time. Armed with rifles and shotguns, these 'trusties' have guarded the periphery of the camps, under orders to shoot anyone attempting to escape. While the use of convict guards has saved money, it has also contributed in large measure to the brutality and low morale of prisoners at Angola over the years. (p. 138)

By the 1960s, rampant violence surfaced in headlines featuring a shadowy jumble of inmates and state corrections staff operating prostitution rings and illicit drug markets at the prison. Vestiges of the "old Angola" lingered: "The old Angola had been a Hobbesian nightmare ruled by inmate trustees only more malignant than the guards whose favor they carried in order to maintain the shabby privileges of their office" (Horne, 2005, p. 125). The prison housed Black and White inmates separately until the 1980s, and Angola well deserved its reputation for being the "Bloodiest Prison in

America,” asserts Wilbert Rideau, longtime editor of Angola’s inmate-run newspaper, *The Angolite*. As Rideau (1985) puts it, at Angola:

The strong routinely enslaved the weak, and new inmates entering the prison had to pass a test of violence to determine the status they would have in the prison community: “man” or “slave.” The younger slaves served as effeminate homosexuals, while the older slaves lived as servants who were made to produce income for their owners. In keeping with prison tradition, slaves were bought, sold, and traded among the strong. This practice was accepted as a natural part of prison life by both inmates and security officials. Human life had no value at Angola. (p. 1069)

Method: Participants and Procedure

Criminologists outlining the tenets of “Positive Criminology” stress holistic understandings of inmates that reject totalizing negative labels and promote enrichment programs for achieving desistance among inmates. Positive Criminology emphasizes increasing the self-efficacy of prisoners through improved staff–inmate relationships, providing increased programming resources for prisons, and through cultivating spirituality as a pathway for challenging self-centeredness (see Ronel & Elisha, 2011; Ronel, Frid, & Timor, 2013; Ronel & Segev, 2014). The purpose of this research is to gain understanding of the motivations and self-projects of inmates who enrolled in Angola’s prison seminary and to elicit descriptions of the meanings inmates ascribe to their work as inmate ministers.

Utilizing a semistructured interview protocol approved through a full-board Institutional Review process at a state university and again through the Louisiana Department of Corrections, in-depth interviews of 107 seminary graduates and 19 staff members were conducted at Angola over a 2-year period, April 2013 to March 2015. Of those inmate interviewees, 63 were Black, 40 were White, and 4 were Hispanic. A large majority (87%) of respondents had a life sentence and were, on average, 43 years old at the time of the interview. All interviews were voluntary and confidential, conducted at various locations across the prison compound. All participants received a signed copy of the informed consent form and could withdraw at any time. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hr and were recorded and transcribed.

Struck by a resonance in themes of Positive Criminology expressed in the personal narratives of seminary graduates and staff at Angola (particularly as reflected in Ronel et al.’s [2013] account of inmate participation in a Vipassana prison program), the two lead authors reviewed inmate narratives and separately identified four dominant themes of Positive Criminology prominent in the self-presentations of seminary graduates (see Ronel & Elisha, 2011; Ronel et al., 2013; Ronel & Segev, 2014). Four key themes of Positive Criminology emerged in the narratives: (a) the importance of respectful treatment of prisoners by correctional administrations, (b) the value of building of trusting relationships for prosocial modeling and improved self-perception, (c) repairing harm through intervention, and (d) spiritual practice as a blueprint for cultivating positive self-identity and social integration among inmates.

Exploratory in nature, this study has several limitations. First, because Angola’s seminary is the first and only program of its kind operating in an American prison,

hearing first from inmates about the meaning of the seminary for them—in *their own words*—should precede conceptual framing by researchers for more empirical research. Second, because this study is formative and exploratory, it involves only a sample of inmate seminary graduates and is not intended to be generalizable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The sample, however, does represent over one half of all active inmate ministers at the prison. This project is part of a larger evaluation of prison seminaries in two states, Louisiana and Texas (Hallett et al., in press).

Positive Criminology and Angola’s Inmate Minister Program

The Importance of Respectful Treatment of Prisoners by Correctional Administrations

In the context of inmate litigation regarding prison conditions in the aftermath of the turbulent 1960s, new strategies for improving safety in prisons developed nationwide. When he started in 1995, Burl Cain’s first priority as the new warden of Angola was to implement a Unit Management structure across all units of the prison (Glover, 1995). “Management-by-walking-around” and “unit management” are two popularly adopted systems imported from mainstream business and military operations into corrections for the purpose of improving conditions (DiIulio, 1998). According to the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Prisons “Unit Management Manual” (1999),

The concept of Unit Management is to place inmates in close physical proximity to the staff working with them so that staff and inmates are easily accessible to one another daily. This proximity enhances the quality of relationships between staff and inmates by providing: increased frequency of contact, direct observation of inmate behavior and potential problems, and increased inmate access to the staff who make primary decisions about them. Since inmates may be assigned to particular units based on differences in their supervision and program needs, Unit Management often divides inmates into well defined groups which are identified with a specific unit and with staff who are responsible for delivery of specific programs and services. (p. 4)

In no small part because of the racial division in worship practices at Angola, by 1995, the prison had “only approximately 700 prisoners attending worship, many of them not regularly” (Glover, 1995, p. 22). Meanwhile, Congress had abolished Pell Grant eligibility for convicted felons in 1994.¹

[Today], many state and federal prisoners do not have access to prison-based higher education programs due to a provision in the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 that revoked their eligibility to receive Pell Grant awards to support their education. Most of the colleges and universities that provided the more than 350 degree programs to prisoners relied heavily on this funding and were unable to continue their instruction without it. (See Davis 2008).

In the case of Angola, however, the large percentage of inmates serving life without parole or on death row left many inmates already ineligible for Pell Grants in 1992.² Cain felt the removal of these resources was uniquely harmful to Angola. Educational programs kept inmates motivated and otherwise engaged—one of the few personal enrichment tools he had available to incentivize good behavior (personal communication).³ Due to the unique character of Angola, revocation of Pell Grant eligibility affected the prison's population in a particularly negative way, even more profoundly than it did other institutions. Burl Cain felt many aspects of inmate life at Angola were "still inhumane" when he arrived—citing an incident in which, during a rain-soaked inmate funeral, a deceased prisoner's body fell out of the cheap water-logged cardboard box provided by the state for burial. Cain vowed things would change (today, Angola's inmates make their own wooden caskets, with inmate ministers frequently officiating prisoner funerals at which no decedent relatives are present for the occasion).

Searching for options, Cain noted his concerns to a friend, T. W. Terrell, outreach director of education programs for the Baptist Association of Greater Baton Rouge, who recommended contacting New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS). NOBTS operated a Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS)-accredited undergraduate program in Christian Ministry at its New Orleans campus and also delivered courses through several "extension center" programs across Louisiana.⁴ In addition to its religious program, the NOBTS curriculum included courses in science, math, English literature, and history that might be of interest to Angola's inmates. Perhaps NOBTS would be willing to offer a few courses for the men at Angola. Cain asked Terrell to meet with Dr. Landrum Leavell, then President of NOBTS, and Dr. Jimmy Dukes, Dean supervising Extension Programs, to ask whether they could help.

Dukes described NOBTS as being reluctant. First, how could the school pay for it? Second, the guiding mission of NOBTS is to serve as a seminary and "equip local churches," not simply to offer degree programs for students unaffiliated with active congregations. This initial conversation led to more questions, so a follow-up meeting was set up. Explained Dr. Dukes:

All the way up there I was thinking, we've got to live by our mission. Our mission is to train ministers to minister in local churches. I don't see how we can fit Angola into our mission. So when I got up there, that's the first thing I told Warden Cain in the meeting, with all his Associate Wardens present. And he of course said, "Look, we have multiple inmate-led congregations right here at the prison." And I said, "Well, then we can do that. Because that's what we do." (J. Dukes, personal interview at NOBTS, October 16, 2013).

Recognizing the unique needs of inmates serving long sentences, NOBTS modified its curriculum slightly to provide a minor concentration in grief counseling and conflict management:

The needs of men at Angola are obviously different than they might be for ministers on the outside. We realized that these guys are going to need that [training], not only in their

own lives to deal with their own issues, but also in dealing with their peers as well. So, we added things like Conflict Management and Grief Counseling. But we also worked hard to make the degree program essentially the same [as its free-world counterpart]. (J. Dukes, personal interview, October 16, 2013)

Full tuition and board for a typical student at the NOBTS main campus in New Orleans approximates US\$40,000 per year. When asked, “Why would NOBTS spend all that money to teach Greek and Hebrew to a bunch of guys serving life in prison?” Dukes replied,

Well, we pay for this program out of our own pocket as an offering. We’re proud to do it. We certainly don’t force it on anyone. Other programs would be welcome. Where are they? I would say that the best thing that could happen would be where it becomes the norm that people of all faiths—whatever—get to tell their story. That would be the best thing. Perhaps then we can begin to discuss genuine rehabilitation and giving people a second chance; and begin to look at non-violent people in prison. Is their sentence fair? That’s what I would hope.

In partial reflection of the subaltern status of many inmates at Angola, despite existing for almost 20 consecutive years, NOBTS has graduated only roughly 250 students overall, a small fraction of the approximately 5,500 prisoners housed in the prison at any moment. Inmate graduates of the seminary are among the most educated personnel at the prison—with more than 60% of corrections staff at Angola having only a high school or GED level of educational attainment. Not all inmate ministers are graduates of the seminary, however, due to a small contingent of “inmate pastors” leading churches that were established prior to the seminary and who have been grandfathered into the Inmate Minister program. Only inmates with clean disciplinary histories are eligible for the role, with a zero-tolerance policy for infractions: “Inmate Ministers shall be held to a higher standard and are expected to behave in a manner that sets an example for other inmates to follow, in ethics, moral rehabilitation, and moral behavior.”⁵ Inmate ministers are organized, evaluated, and deployed through a coordinated effort by the head chaplain and deputy warden over Programming.

Importantly, Dukes explains that the “lifer” focus of the Angola prison seminary program was simply a by-product of the fact that most inmates there were doing life and that it was not an artifact of trying to obtain a higher “return on investment” from “lifers” versus prisoners with lesser sentences. Today, however, NOBTS has come to believe that serving inmates with life sentences is the primary calling for its prison programs, with a focus on prisons in Southern states. Burl Cain now serves on the Board of Prison Fellowship, Dukes explains, which has a goal of putting a prison seminary in every state. At present, California, Georgia, Mississippi, West Virginia, New Mexico, Ohio, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, and Texas have seminary programs in formation at various stages of development.

No faith affiliation is required of inmate applicants and the seminary has matriculated several graduates expressing alternative beliefs to NOBTS or no religious

beliefs at all (e.g., practicing Muslims and agnostics). All graduates may later serve as chaplain's orderlies rather than inmate ministers if they so choose. A breakdown of the current faith affiliations of active inmate ministers at Angola includes 30 Catholics, 5 Muslims, 1 Jewish, 4 Episcopalians, 9 no religious affiliation, and 86 non-denominational Christians (R. Toney, Head Chaplain, Angola, personal communication, July 16, 2014). Of recent graduates, not all of whom are active ministers, 105 are Black and 57 are White (several graduates have also died or been released). Admission to the program requires recommendation from the program director, approval from security, and a character reference from an existing inmate religious leader. As in the free world, frequently inmate ministers "burn out" or pursue alternative vocations after many years.

Building Trusting Relationships for Prosocial Modeling and Improved Self-Perception

Inmates currently become ministers through two programs at Angola with the stated goal of establishing a "bivocational ministry of presence." The first and largest source of inmate ministers is the NOBTS seminary program, whose graduates currently comprise about 120 active inmate ministers. The second source of inmate ministers is a graduate-level Catholic theology spiritual formation program called Ministry and Theology I & II, started in 2007 and fully funded by the Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge, after Catholic inmates asked to participate. The Catholic program has contributed about 30 active inmate ministers. All inmate ministers undertake an apprenticeship after graduating, being paired with earlier graduates for conducting their rounds and other work. Only upon successful completion of their education do inmates receive full status as inmate ministers, obtaining a prison-issued "Offender Minister" ID card.

All inmate ministers are "class A" trustees—by virtue of their good behavior, not by virtue of their education—which gains them access privileges to parts of the prison that would otherwise be restricted to them. As most inmate ministers also have one or more additional jobs at the prison, inmate ministers refer to their work as "bivocational." As part of the required "field practicum" during their junior and senior years, inmate minister candidates are introduced to the work of conducting rounds, delivering care packages, working in the chaplain's department, and facilitating/leading religious programming and visitations. Upon graduation, students attain the status of full inmate minister, gaining wider access to the prison, including hospice, the outer-camps beyond Main Prison, and occasionally permanent assignment to a specific dorm or cellblock, such as Death Row. In short, rather than being simply selected by the warden, achieving the status of inmate minister requires not only completion of the education and practicum components but also recommendation of at least two ranking security officers, approval from the head chaplain, and nomination from an inmate religious leader.

From the beginning, inmate ministers understand themselves to be "bivocational" at Angola, with most having other regular work assignments in addition to their

“always on duty” status as inmate ministers.⁶ Inmate ministers describe their religious vocations as a “ministry of presence,” not necessarily focused on the Bible or religious education, per se, but on service to the prison: “I’m a servant. Nothing more,” explains inmate minister Kevin Hogarth.⁷

“Sidewalk counseling” is a preoccupation of inmate ministers assigned to the Main Prison compound, where movement is less restricted than over the rest of the complex. *Sidewalk counseling*, a term coined by seminary director Dr. John Robson, refers to the non-interventionist process-counseling method for which inmate ministers are trained in the seminary. Inmate ministers describe “sidewalk counseling” as conversational in character, intended to be a “ministry of presence” rather than overtly scriptural, usually featuring a simple greeting or query as to the well-being of a fellow inmate. Importantly, inmate ministers stress the value of their lack of power at the prison, relative to correctional officers and chaplains, *as their chief asset in ministry*:

Process counseling is a type of counseling whereby the counselor uses great patience and asks leading questions, but never reveals his position—until the very end. A leading question might be: “Now what might God want you to learn from that?” You purposely don’t give them an answer. You give them a question. Because counselees *have* the answer! They just need you to encourage them a little bit, to just guide them a little. Because Doc⁸ taught us this and I’ll never forget it. He said, “If you tell a person your position, then because of who you are—they might just agree with you. However, when they walk away, they will be of the same opinion, and that probably won’t translate into a different lifestyle or a different way of thinking or change of heart. However—if you can allow that person to arrive at his own truth, then he will keep it. Because it’s his—he will own it.” And let me tell you, this has given me the opportunity to minister to people who would otherwise never even have talked to me!⁹

While inmate proselytizing at Angola might be expected, in practice inmate ministers insist they must strive *not* to be “too preachy.” While inmates tolerate faith proclamations, today religious programs are far from the only enrichment opportunities available for men.¹⁰ “So we have always got to use a language appropriate to the audience,” says inmate minister Darius Watkins. “Even behind the pulpit, I would never utilize a Hebrew or Greek term. Why? Why should I? I don’t want to impress anyone. I really would not be smart to try to do that, trust me.”¹¹ Another inmate minister put it this way:

Most of the time I’m just checking in, saying hello to someone, following-up on how their aunt is doing or something like that. Making that connection; nothing Biblical at all. Or I’ll bring a guy a pair of shoes or toothpaste, a care package. That’s my main job. Other times I have to deliver a message that someone’s family member has died.¹²

Inmate ministers repeatedly describe NOBTS’s required minor concentrations in Grief Counseling and Conflict Management as key training for their day-to-day work at Angola. Inmate ministers are required to make at least 25 “contacts” per month, all of which are recorded in anonymous monthly inmate minister logs.¹³ Explains inmate minister Darius Watkins:

You know, we're very pragmatic. We provide toiletries. My lead pastor told us: "Look around in your dorm. Pray and ask God to lead you. If you see a guy who didn't get enough food, you bring him some. If you don't have it, ask me. If you see a guy who needs shoes, man, help him if you can, or find another brother in the Body of Christ who can." And the guys appreciate it. I mean Jesus fed guys. He dealt with temporal needs before addressing spiritual needs. Twice a year my church sponsors an indigent service for guys who have nothing here. We give them clothing, toiletries, food. We might have call-outs just for those guys. We go on the yards when it's hot, we'll give water. Amazingly guys will go to church if you just ask them. . . . But we make sure that we love guys beyond the four walls of the church. Every time a guy sees me, I shouldn't have religious jargon in my mouth. I should be able to reveal Christ to him on the basketball court or walking the yard or give him an ice cream. He needs to see me in other venues—I mean just live! Life is real!

Repairing Harm Through Intervention

Relationship Theology, a term frequently invoked by inmate ministers at Angola to describe their attention to serving the prison through interpersonal relationships, is a central focus of their vocation. Inmate minister Peter Wilson identifies a pervasive sense of hopelessness that takes hold with a "random but debilitating frequency" as justification for the program's method of "counseling through listening." Establishing relationships with fellow inmates and staff literally became a metric through which their work is evaluated: aggregate "contacts" with inmate peers are tracked through the chaplain's office. The theological emphasis on relationships built upon Cain's introduction of "Unit Management" at Angola, as Unit Management places a high priority on developing and maintaining relationships for reducing violence and social isolation. Because all inmate ministers are selected through a process that involves both "bottom up" nomination from inmates, approval by security and the Chaplain's office, and "top-down" veto-power from the warden, Angola's inmate minister program is a collaborative program designed to facilitate greater communication between staff and inmates.

"It's a Grief Ministry"

Dr. John Robson, seminary director, explains,

The education we provide is useful to the prison, but what I had to learn, unlike in the outside world, is that we first have to provide a grief ministry for our students—to help them heal and get over their *own* pain and loss. I tell them, they've got to face their own pain; they need to get over themselves. Only by confronting those demons will they be effective in this ministry.

Men get to Angola broken and alone, having literally lost everything, sentenced to life in prison. "How can I survive *life* in prison?" they ask. "Jesus—look where I am. Are you there Jesus?" And I tell them "The question is not 'Are you there Jesus?' The question is where are you? Where have you been? You are the one who has not been present. Jesus

is here.” And I let them think about that. And only when and if they come back do I ask them: “Are you ready?”

Because of their unique role in the life of the prison, Angola’s inmate ministers repeatedly stress that the penalty will be severe—from staff and inmates alike—should they violate the trust that has been placed in them as servants to the prison. The unique level of trust and discretion granted to inmate ministers, “who walk a fine line between being perceived as spies for the administration and true servants of God,” is arguably unique in American corrections.¹⁴ One inmate minister described the unsupervised process-counseling method he uses at the prison in this way:

The seminary process has helped us, as a community of leaders, teach people how to identify where emotional wounds took place in their life, and with that begin a learning pattern. And it teaches them how to (a) accept that that happened; (b) to stop identifying themselves as a victim, which has been perpetuated by that wound; and (c) then teach them how to bring back the reasonable voice that was left as a casualty when emotional imbalance took over their life. So what happens is, we have learned how to identify and accept the wounds and rehabilitate one another through common love experiences outlined in the Gospel.

Interviewer: “And how does the Gospel do that specifically?”

Because you see the most elemental and primitive display of love that has ever been demonstrated throughout the common history of humanity: The giving of my life for your freedom. And that’s what we do. It turns out that pouring out your life through your time, through your economic resources, your giftings, and whatever else you are given, is the opportunity to use to help your neighbor. We’ve learned by being loved, how to love. Both individuals and the community. And for those of us who have been in pursuit of the foundations, we ministers, it only benefits the community more. Because I don’t have these conversations about our process with the inmates. I tell them, hey: “Do you hear what you’re saying? Where did you learn that?” You know? You employ those counseling motifs, those tactics. You know why? Because I’m not trying to convert anybody. I’m trying to help someone self-identify. My path was not their path. There’s great commonality to it, but hey, it wasn’t identical. Somehow or another you have got to show to a person that you are safe to just emotionally strip down in front of, and then when that happens, they can heal.

Students frequently recount instances of on-the-spot pastoral care from Robson.¹⁵ “When men get here to Angola facing life in prison,” Robson explains, “they’ve got serious work to do if they’re going to survive—spiritual and emotional work, that is.” Robson explains that after a period of brokenness that often comes years into a life sentence and accompanying notification of the death of an inmate’s loved one,

the love of Jesus can turn years of incarceration into easy math. We’re here to pick up the pieces. We’re here to serve the prison in the name of Jesus Christ. And just for the record, I’m *not* here to convert anyone. My cup is full.

Spirituality, Intervention, and “Growth Out of Trauma.”

Ronel and Elisha (2011) suggest spirituality as a resource for inmates facilitates “growth out of trauma” (p. 308). Inmate minister Kevin Hogarth was sentenced to Angola in 1993 on an aggravated first-degree attempted murder conviction. The heavily tattooed one-time White supremacist serves as assistant senior pastor of one of Angola’s largest and newest congregations. Badly scarred from a fire that destroyed his family home when he was 9, Hogarth was a good student and star athlete in high school. The death of his father at age 14 in a tragic accident was devastating. “When I lost my daddy, my best friend, I went crazy” he says. “My mother could not control me. I started doing drugs and joined a biker gang. Just to rebel.” Hogarth’s file shows 98 prior convictions for mostly petty addiction-related charges prior to his being sentenced to Angola. Now 17 years into a 40-year sentence, Kevin Hogarth has yet to receive a single disciplinary write-up at Angola. He attributes his quantum behavior change entirely to the “Gospel of Jesus Christ,” to which he was first deeply exposed in the parish jail awaiting sentencing to Angola. While working as a maintenance man in the seminary wing of the old education building “while replacing a toilet,” he overheard classroom lecture from a Biblical counseling class and applied to the seminary. Frequently quoting scripture and the Apostle Paul while citing present-active-indicative verbs in Greek, the “precious opportunity” Hogarth had to study the Gospels and language in seminary was transformational, he says, helping him lose the “everyday pain of a life sentence.” In reference to faith and his long-term incarceration, he states:

This Jesus, came into my heart, within the confines of His consequences—Angola—and gave me a peace, gave me a love, gave me a forgiveness that flipped all that *hate* to love. And it didn’t happen overnight. But I began to watch. And the closer I got to Him the more He was pointing, showing me “Look, this is for you. This is for you. You’ve got *me*. Don’t worry about if you’re ever getting out of here. Quit worrying about that.” And He’d begin to just give me a peace that surpasses all understanding. And I’ve told (people) time and time again. I don’t care if I ever leave here. Do I want to go home? Sure. But now, for me, it’s more about the Twelve Gates than the main gate.

After being accepted into seminary, Hogarth cites a deepening sense of community and camaraderie he never previously experienced, even within family, and highlights a palpable catharsis in his “discipleship.” Gregarious by nature, Hogarth had no special training or deep personal religious transformation prior to his arrest, conceding near total ignorance of Christian practice.

I was so green, as green as they come. I was attracted here being the maintenance man. I didn’t even know the books of the Bible. But when I was invited and approved to go to school—sitting in class day after day after day and working together and struggling together and getting to my wounds and my scars that I could share with many of them through the various tests, and yet it comforted me with a love—and not at all one time forcing me to become Baptist. There’s a camaraderie in the midst of the preparing, the equipping, that I learned in seminary that you’re just not going to get apart from that.

Spiritual Practice as a Blueprint for Identity Change and Social Integration

The work of the seminary is “inconceivable” without the preexisting churches at Angola, Robson says, pointing to the tagline of NOBTS: “‘To Equip the Local Church.’ That’s what we do here,” he explains.

That’s what we do in all our programs—equip the local church to better minister to those in need—this one is no different. The *particular needs* of this ministry are different, but the function of the ministry is the same. Angola is full of human suffering and we’ve simply helped to build up a unique church that was already here to meet those needs.

A small-group interview gleaned this exchange:

John Robson, prison seminary director: What I tell them is this: “First you have to stop dying—stop dying within yourself, so that you can help others stop dying. Men reinterpret their personal history through worship. You have to find the pain. Guess what the Gospel tells you? Endure the pain. Look at the pain. Isolate the pain and make it a sacrifice to the loving God and He will transform that pain into what He wants it to become. It’s called the crucified life. Every man is dying. No matter where he exists. Every man is an orphan. Every man is lonely. The Church at Angola de-institutionalizes the dehumanization of punitive justice—because the Church gives a man the responsibility of making the *right choices* for the *right reasons*. Whereas dehumanization within a punitive system demands simply making choices for the wrong reasons—because they fear punishment.”

Inmate minister Peter Wilson: “Look, I died yesterday. I *serve* today. I’m *resurrected* today. Those people who don’t believe in prison religion— they don’t believe in religion period! And that’s the issue. So don’t waste my time. Until you realize that you’ve sinned against the law of love, all you produce are prisoners of war. Now that prisoner is going to obey, for a while, but he has not been set free— free to enter into loving relationships.”

Interviewer:

How does that make you free?

Inmate minister Peter Wilson:

“Because I don’t have to control any of it. Because I already know the answer. It’s not a formula for an outcome. It’s a matter of being. When you demand a behavior without setting a man free to love, you will fail. When you become a son of God, you become human again. You make right choices for the right reasons—in relationship. How we help inmates is we enter into their suffering with them and help them come to a point of freedom. The primary opportunity is to love an individual, not create blanket programs for the entire prison. It’s just one-at-a-time, you know? When someone meets me, they are not meeting a program. They are meeting me; and I am meeting them. There is only one thing that is urgent—and that is to be a martyr and a witness to life found in the fabric of relationships. The urgency is to know that you’ve encountered that person in God’s timing, with at least a small dose of human love—that you source to God. Love work is the only work.”

Staff and Religious Worship at Angola

Deputy Warden Richard Peabody began his career at Angola on August 2, 1976, as a clinical social worker. Today, he serves as supervising warden over all programming at the prison, a post he has held since 1984. Under his direct supervision are all volunteer visitation¹⁶ programs, all education and family-visitation opportunities, the bi-annual Rodeo, and the prison seminary program run by NOBTS. Peabody stresses the importance of inmate litigation and subsequent federal intervention for improving conditions at Angola:

When I came to work here, we were coming out of the period of being the bloodiest prison in the country. And then we were under the court order—and that’s the reason I stayed—is because we were under the Federal court order, which did away with the inmate guards, increased the staffing, increased mental health, medical, maintenance, everything—and over time—the court order definitely assisted in bringing violence down. It was an Eighth Amendment case because of the food, shelter, medical care, mental health care and violence at the prison. But I think the biggest change since I’ve been here is trying to

change the culture from ‘them and us’ to not trying to control the institution by force. But trying to control it by being fair and giving people opportunities to do the right thing. So like the whole issue of solitary confinement. If you keep putting a person back in solitary at some point in time you have to say, is this man ever going to come out and if he is, how can we assist him to come out and function? Instead of just leaving him there. I view positive programming as a more effective means of keeping peace at the prison than discipline. (Personal interview, Richard Peabody, March 17, 2013)

In the aftermath of inmate litigation regarding conditions at Angola, a new emphasis on building positive inmate leadership bolstered programming resources for inmates and staff, including the chaplain’s office. New rules empowered prisoners to create self-help programs and organizations of all kinds, including religious organizations (Anonymous, 1992). By 1992, there were eight inmate-led religious organizations at Angola, comprising half-a-dozen inmate-run churches and two non-denominational Bible study “clubs.”¹⁷ “Inmate Religionists, who had always banded together in small informal groups to worship, began to form their own religious organizations, conducting religious services and activities on their own” (Anonymous, 1992, p. 34).

Conclusion: Faith as a Resource for Long-Term Inmates

The framework of Christianity provides the master story that allows individuals to “read” the world again. The interviewees for this research, many of whom attributed their conversion experience to deep, private reading of the Bible in their cells, described using the stories and lessons in the Bible as strategies for interpreting their lives and making sense of their own struggles. (Maruna et al., 2006, p. 161)

This article offers an ethnographic account of the self-projects and meaning-making strategies of Angola’s prison seminary graduates. Positive criminology’s refusal to impose permanent negative labels upon inmates and its emphasis on spirituality as a pathway for positive growth and self-change among prisoners is well reflected within the narratives of Angola’s seminary graduates. Angola’s inmate minister program and its administration’s facilitation of inmate-led worship empowers inmates with opportunities for service—that graduates say are both personally transformative and valuable to the prison. Having often lost meaningful social contact with family and friends and facing a lifetime of incarceration in the austere environment of Angola, many inmates describe losing hope. Scholars have identified religiosity and faith practice as key resources for long-term inmates confronting a “crisis of identity” during the experience of incarceration (Maruna et al., 2006; see also Giordano, Longmore, Schroeder, & Seffri, 2008; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

Over the long duration of their confinement, Angola’s inmates face profound personal crises, particularly at the beginning of their incarceration, but also at several points during the life course of their sentence (Liebling, 1992; Maruna et al., 2006): “For prisoners, religious conversion can be seen as an adaptive mechanism that helped to resolve psychological conflict, resolve ‘emotional ambivalence,’ and unify a previously ‘divided

self” (Maruna et al., 2006, p. 174). Previous research on religiosity among long-term inmates reveals several outcomes of faith practice for prisoners (Maruna et al., 2006). Specifically, faith and religiosity

- create a new social identity to replace the label of prisoner or criminal,
- imbue the experience of imprisonment with purpose and meaning,
- empower the largely powerless prisoner by turning him into an agent of God,
- provide the prisoner with a language and framework for forgiveness, and
- allow a sense of control over an unknown future.

When Angola’s seminary graduates recount stories of what they describe as the social death of their conviction and incarceration, they highlight the usefulness of religious self-narratives for reconstructing a sense of purpose and belonging. Sociologists frequently uncover religiosity as a source of “quantum change” among prisoners and ex-offenders, highlighting the cognitive and linguistic resources of faith as foundational to their identity change (Giordano et al., 2008; Goodwin, 2001; Hallett & McCoy, 2015; Maruna et al., 2006, p. 161). Maruna and others characterize this process of “identity work” as uniquely important to the setting of prisons (Giordano et al., 2008; Johnson, 2011; King, 2012; Maruna, 2001; see also Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Above all, Angola’s seminary graduates describe the message of love and service outlined in the Christian gospel as their blueprint for personal change—and the inmate minister program as an opportunity for them to demonstrate that change in practice. As recommended in the literature on Positive Criminology, future research should explore the effects of empowering inmates with self-governed religious programming across all faiths (see Ronel & Elisha, 2011; Ronel et al., 2013; Ronel & Segev, 2014).

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Notes

1. For the full revocation language, see U.S. Congress (1994).
2. "In the 1992 amendments to the Higher Education Act (HEA) (P.L. 102-325), Congress prohibited persons who were sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole and those who were sentenced to death, from receiving a Pell Grant. Persons who were incarcerated but not serving life sentences without the possibility of parole or sentenced to death remained eligible for Pell Grants until 1994." <http://congressionalresearch.com/RS21785/document.php?study=Federal+Pell+Grants+for+Prisoners>
3. Personal Interview Burl Cain, March 19, 2013. In addition to President Bush, several high profile criminologists have advocated on behalf of restoring Pell Grant eligibility for prisoners, including Jeremy Travis: http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/web_images/Ford_Foundation_speech.pdf
4. "SACS"—the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools—is the regional accrediting body for all public institutions of higher education in the Southeastern United States.
5. LSP Document: "Inmate Minister Duties and Qualifications. Louisiana State Penitentiary, Chaplain's Department."
6. Inmate minister Rob Hawks.
7. All inmate names are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.
8. Dr. John Robson, director, NOBTS Extension Center, Louisiana State Penitentiary.
9. Inmate minister Darius Watkins.
10. States Warden Peabody: "Recreation is very big out here. We have a lot of team sports. There's a lot of healthy competition. You can generally see as a sports season comes along, some inmates make sure they're not in the cellblock when football comes around. They may not be as careful when it's not football season. So I think recreation is a big part of it. I think the education programs also. I do think the seminary just kind of added to all that, but it's not the only thing." Preliminary data indicate violence began falling at Angola long prior to full implementation of the seminary (see Hallett et al, in press).
11. Inmate minister Darius Watkins: "Let me tell you something. These guys will scrutinize you for months—and years—they will actually make you a project! They will study you for months and for years. Watching you, waiting for you to mess up! One time I sat up in my bunk and hit my head—hard! I mean I had a little blood coming down my head! And when that happened—it went silent all around me! Those guys told me, "Man, I just need to hear you say one curse word!" They watch you in different situations, they wait until, you know, your letters stop or you've got no money or there's chaos at home—they're waiting for those moments. And if you can weather enough of those storms? You'll have the best allies you could ever actually ask for. Those guys will actually protect your testimony, you don't have to. Once you have been proven. *That's Angola.*"
12. Inmate minister Jamie Davis, Death Row/Camp F: "Delivery of a 'death message' occurs when the prison receives notification that an inmate's loved one had passed away on the outside. Passing on the information about a loved one's death has been relegated to Inmate Ministers, due to successful experience of Inmate Ministers employing methods of grief counseling and their status as fellow inmates."
13. While "contacts" are tracked, details are purposely kept informal and inmate minister interactions are unsupervised (Darius Watkins).
14. Inmate minister Peter Wilson.
15. Inmate minister Kevin Hogarth.
16. Angola has incorporated an extensive list of outside visitors allowed to enter and serve the prison.

17. "Six of the Main Prison's eight religious organizations are mainline Christian and preach that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Five of the six consider themselves to be 'churches'" (Anonymous, 1992).

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