

PRACTITIONER PAPER

Behold, she stands at the door: Reentry, black women, and the black church

by KATHRYN V. STANLEY
Emory University, Candler School of Theology

Abstract: This paper examines the African American church's response to the special problems of African American women who reenter the community post-incarceration. The first portion of the paper examines the impact of criminal justice policies on women of color and the attending problems of reentry which resulted. It then surveys the black church's response to returning citizens, especially women. It concludes by proposing shifts in perspectives and theologies which create barriers to successful reintegration into the community at large, and the church in particular. The intended audience is individuals and faith communities who seek to work effectively with returning women

Key words: *reentry; women; black church*

Introduction

According to a report published annually by the Prison Policy Initiative, a Massachusetts –based non-profit think tank whose research focuses on the harms of mass incarceration, 636,000 people walk out of prison every year in the United States (Wagner and Rabuy, 2016). Moreover, there are 820,000 people on parole and a whopping 3.6 million on probation (Wagner and Rabuy, 2016). African Americans are overrepresented among those who are both incarcerated, and therefore among those who are reentering society (Brown, 2010).

Like their male counterparts, African American women are also overrepresented among the incarcerated population (Brown, 2010). According to Keri Day, “poor women of color are the fastest-growing group being disenfranchised by public policies that support [the] prison industrial complex” (2012). Over half the female prison population is African American (Day, 2012). Challenges African American women face prior to incarceration, such as unemployment, poverty, addiction, and abuse, which in some cases led to the incarceration, often linger and are also compounded by the incarceration itself. Moreover, policies that deny voting rights and public assistance, limit housing options, and reduce access to educational loans further complicate reentry, not to mention thwart some black women's ability to reunite with their children and other family members (Brown, 2010; Day, 2012).

According to the late Rev. Eugene Williams, III, the Los Angeles-based pastor activist who led the Regional Congregations and Neighborhood Organizations, African American churches are viewed as “first responders” in any crisis, and therefore play a significant role in reentry because the incarcerated and their families often turn to congregations for support and services (2008). Yet, how does the African American church respond?

The late United Church of Christ minister and criminal justice activist, Lonnie McLeod Jr., posited that returning to life on the outside is a much more complex process than most congregations understand to effectively minister to returning citizens (2011). This begs another question: How should black churches respond if our work in this area is to be effective? The following pages will further expound upon the problem of reentry, focusing on the special challenges of African American women, and will discuss the role of the black church in addressing the “unfinished business” of the successful reintegration of returning citizens who are black women.



Mass Incarceration and African American Women

Michelle Alexander's seminal tome, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, focused the world's attention on the problem of mass incarceration in the United States, especially among poor black and brown people, and has led to a movement to address problems in the U.S. criminal justice system (2010). Alexander's work connects policies and practices present since slavery, especially those which deny the franchise, as signs of a continued systemic structure of racial bias. She writes, while "it is no longer permissible to use race explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. [...] We use our criminal justice system to label people of color 'criminals' and then engage in practices we supposedly left behind." Alexander continues, "Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination [...] are suddenly legal" (2010).

The historical roots of the overrepresentation and inequality in the criminal justice system of especially African Americans can be traced to immediately after the end of the slavery. Another seminal book, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* by Douglas Blackmon traces policies and legal practices which had the effect of re-enslaving former slaves (2008). As an example, some former slaves were subjected to involuntary servitude for discriminatory application of laws for minor infractions which normally carried fines, but resulted in incarceration if fines could not be paid. Because these practices were widespread and continued long after Emancipation, Douglass does not date the end of actual slavery until well into the 20th Century.

While historical images of African American men on chain gangs abound, African American women were also victims of re-enslavement. After 1870, black women comprised the overwhelming majority of inmates in prison camps (Cudjoe and Barringer, 2002). In many cases, sentences were meted out in a racially biased manner. For example, black women served hard time in the fields for stealing property, while their white counterparts convicted of murder served as domestics (Cudjoe and Barringer, 2002). A recent treatise, *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South*, chronicles the experiences of Georgia's most hidden workforce near the turn of the 20th century and thereafter - "black convict women" (LeFlouria, 2015). These women provided free labor throughout the state of Georgia from coal mines, railroad camps, and Atlanta's brickyards, where they were subject to terror and violence (LeFlouria, 2015). Suffice it to say that the re-enslavement through racialized incarceration was experienced by both men and women.

Fast forward to the post-Civil Right era, a second wave of policies which impacted the overrepresentation of African Americans in the criminal justice system is typically traced to the War on Drugs during the reign of President Ronald Reagan, which received vast support from politicians, Democratic and Republican, as well as from the public at large (Brown, 2010). At least one set of researchers traces the explosion of incarceration to right-leaning rhetoric which linked street crime to civil rights protests, embracing a law and order, tough on crime approach (Western and Wildeman, 2009). This so-called war and its attending rhetoric resulted in mandatory minimal sentences, enhanced sentencing for repeat offenders, and increased construction of prison facilities (Western and Wildeman, 2009). Like every war, the War on Drugs had an enemy; in this case, it was blacks and Latinos (Brown, 2010).

One policy which had a particular impact on the incarceration rates among African American was the disparate treatment between powder and crack cocaine possession which became law in 1986. While most authorities as late as 2006 estimated that more than 66% of those who use crack cocaine were white, 82% of those convicted and sentenced under federal crack cocaine laws were African American (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, n.d.). This war would imprison a "generation of African American men and women at alarming rates" (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, n.d.). By 2001, African American males in prison numbered 3,161 per 100,000 African American men, compared to 487 white prisoners per 100,000 white men. For African American women, the rate was 149 per 100,000; for white women 50 per 100,000 (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, n.d.). Today, while the rate of incarceration has gone down to 113 per 100,000, African American women continue to be disproportionately represented in the overall prison population at 22% (Carson, 2015).

Tough on crime policies continue to negatively impact men and women after they are released from prison, due largely to federal policies enacted during the administration of President Clinton. In August 1996,

President Clinton made good on his campaign promise to reform welfare by signing into law, *The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act* (PRWORA) which among other things limits the number of years a family can receive aid and enacted work requirements for aid recipients (H.R. 3734, 1996). A significant provision that received far less attention is the denial of federal benefits (cash and food stamps) to individuals convicted in state or federal court of felony drug offenses (Mauer and McCalmont, 2013). For the 15 year period between 1996-2011, it is estimated that there were 180,100 women affected by the law denying Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TNAF) benefits (Mauer and McCalmont, 2013). Due to the disparate impact of the so-called War on Drugs on women of color, African American and Latinas are disproportionately represented among those impacted by the lifetime TNAF ban (Mauer and McCalmont, 2013).

In its most recent legislative session (Southern Center for Human Rights, 2016), the state of Georgia, which has the second largest number of women impacted by the TNAF ban (over 56,000), has lifted the lifetime ban on receiving food stamps on people with drug convictions. However, TNAF bans remain in place in Georgia and 12 other states; partial bans remain in another 24 states (Mauer and McCalmont, 2013).

Besides policies, other factors adversely impact women who are involved with the criminal justice system - factors which not only lead to incarceration itself but also complicate reentry. For example, the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that incarcerated women are more likely to be HIV-positive; to have suffered domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse; and to have a higher rate of mental illness and reported higher incidences of drug use than their male counterparts (Carson, 2015). These challenges are compounded by racial disparities in health problems, particularly HIV-status. Moreover, black women are also more likely to have been the sole caretaker of their children prior to incarceration; therefore they reenter with the responsibility of having to provide food and shelter for children, or in some cases having to fight to regain custody of them from relatives or the foster care system (Brown, 2010). In some instances, these women have had their parental rights stripped away altogether, a result of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 which stiffened timelines for terminating parental rights of children in foster care (H.R. 867, 1997).

In spite of the fact that women experience a host of factors which may lead to imprisonment and complicate reentry (e.g., history of sexual and physical abuse, substance abuse and mental illness, and economic disadvantage), most tools that assess women's needs during and after incarceration do not consider these special circumstances. Moreover, the need to reestablish family relationships, which is shown to be as essential as the need for employment, and the effects of trauma and violence on the lives of women offenders are often ignored. Failure to consider gendered circumstances results in "over-classifying the risk level of women offenders. In other words, the highest risk women are almost inevitably lower risk than the highest risk men" (Berman, 2005). This underestimating of the needs of women post-incarceration may result in increased recidivism among women, especially among those who are unable to find community support. For black women, this may be exacerbated because, according to Anthony C. Thompson, author of *Releasing Prisoners, Redeeming Communities: Re-entry, Race and Politics*, community support may be particularly lacking for African American women whose incarceration is viewed as their having acted outside of accepted gender and race roles (2008).

The Black Church as "First Responders"

Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. When he knocked on the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she insisted that it was so. They said, "It is an angel." Meanwhile Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate they saw him and were amazed. (Acts 12: 11-16 New Revised Standard Version)

The above episode from the biblical text is an example of the early church's response to a person who returns to society after being incarcerated. The Apostle Peter had been jailed by the government for preaching the Gospel. Peter went almost immediately to the church after his release. The church's response is notewor-

thy. First, instead of opening the door, Rhoda left him standing there while she went to tell the others. Granted, she was excited, but Rhoda still didn't open the door. When Rhoda went to tell the others, they said to her, this servant girl, "You must be crazy." They ostracized and labeled her. Interestingly enough, the church had been praying for Peter's release according to Acts 12:5, yet when Rhoda told them that Peter was at the gate, the church folk didn't believe her. Poor and female, and perhaps accustomed to being disbelieved, Rhoda insisted that she saw what she saw. The church, which had been in the middle of prayer meeting, still didn't believe her. Meanwhile, Peter continued to knock, while the church folk, moved from praying to engaging in what Dr. King called the "paralysis of analysis," wondering whether what Rhoda had really seen at the door was an angel. Peter kept knocking, and finally they stopped talking and opened the gate.

What if Peter had stopped knocking? Moreover, what if instead of Peter, the fearless leader of the early Christians jailed for the sake of Christ, it was Rhoda or someone like her-- young, poor, female and jailed for selling drugs to feed her children-- standing there? If Rhoda had been standing on the other side of the gate, the same Rhoda whom church folk had already accused of being "out of her mind," would she have been allowed in?

E. Eric Lincoln wrote, "The Black Church has always stood as a *symbol* of freedom, even when the exigencies of the times made it the "Negro" Church. But it was never completely unanimous on the issue of whether it must not also be the *instrument* of freedom - a dilemma which shadows it to this day" (1974). Is the church an instrument of freedom for the African American women who are reentering society after prison? Or are reentering black women a part of the "unfinished business" of the black church? The next section of the paper will address the black church's response to reentry in general, and of women in particular, as well as suggest strategies and rituals to better respond to black women who return from prison.

Traditional prison ministry consists of church folk going into the prisons for the purpose of "saving the lost." The ministry team enters, reads a few scriptures, sings a few songs, and prays a prayer, which invariably seeks to rehabilitate the soul of the "prisoner," so that he or she might become "saved, sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost," and as a result "go and sin no more." After the benediction, the ministry team gets in cars gloating at the fact that they've saved another soul for Christ, take the long drive back and return to comfortable homes, cushy jobs, and circumstances, until the next month or year when they return to repeat the Hallelujah feel good moment. Rarely do we think about where the incarcerated person whom we've led to Christ will live or work once she's released. That's not our area. God will make a way. As long as she goes to heaven when she dies, how she lives isn't our concern. Or, during Christmas time, we take a name from the angel tree of a child whose mother is locked up, go buy a toy truck from Wal-Mart, wrap it really nicely and take it to the church. We may never give a second thought to the child's mother, whether she gets a chance to visit with her child whom she parented alone before getting locked up. We seldom wonder if upon her release she will be able to purchase food for her children, let alone purchase the shiny red truck, which required minimal sacrifice for us.

Traditional prison ministries serve an important function. Research suggests that religious beliefs do reduce crime and recidivism among adult prisoners (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004), so evangelism components are useful. It is also important that the vulnerable population of children whose parents are incarcerated are given hope for another day through various acts of charity. However, traditional prison ministries which limit their work to inside the walls of the prison do not provide for the full breadth of the needs of the incarcerated. Moreover, these acts of evangelism and charity do not answer questions about what happens when these citizens return to the community.

"The predominant model of going in to pray and sing hymns is not enough," says Rev. Madeline McClenney-Sadler, founder of the Exodus Foundation, a Charlotte-based faith-based organization which offers trained mentors to returning citizens. "It reflects our own standoffishness and fear [of this population] that causes us to limit our ministry to the safety of prison. True ministry requires a greater level of comfort with the risks involved" (Newsome, 2012).

Given the growing population of returning citizens, there is a movement underway to expand the role of congregations in the quest to help with reintegration. One such program is Healing Communities, whose mission is building "relationships of healing, redemption and reconciliation in families and communities im-

pacted by incarceration” (n.d.). Healing Communities does not provide direct services, but rather “challenges congregations to become Stations of Hope for those persons affected by the criminal justice system.” The organization trains faith communities in the following:

- walk with the returning citizens (connect returning citizens to resources that will help set attainable goals)
- help them connect with their faith (provide spiritual support)
- open their hearts to them (foster positive relationships)
- embrace them (extend open and affirming fellowship)
- provide understanding (collaboration with family and friends to rebuild relationships)
- advocate for political change on a local, state, and federal level.

Healing Communities embraces a restoration justice model, and has as a primary aim to remove the stigma, suspicion and shame which often attends returning citizens. Its focus is not on programs, but on perspective. One researcher notes that of the congregations he studied, many view the most marginalized families and individuals - ones least likely to feel welcome in church - as symptomatic of the evil in the world that is to be avoided (McRoberts, 2002). So the Healing Communities approach is a much-needed one. The Healing Communities model also gives faith communities the agency to develop programs based on the needs of their own communities.¹

There are a number of “high profile” congregations that have done work in the area of reentry. For example, the Potter’s House ministry led by Bishop T. D. Jakes has as one of its affiliates The Texas Offender Reentry Initiative. Founded in 2004, TORI is a 12-month intensive program which offers support in six areas: employment, housing, education, family reunification, health care, and spiritual guidance (Archer, 2015). The program is offered to men and women, and contains components which would support their successful reentry, such as family reunification and health care treatment which includes HIV/AIDS. TORI’s literature and news stories feature women who have matriculated through the program. Since its inception, TORI has served over 10,000 returning citizens (Youngman, 2015).

Another congregation, Baltimore’s Empowerment Temple, led by Jamal Harrison Bryant, was asked to forgo new Easter outfits three years ago in order to give new or gently new clothing to returning citizens (Kaltenbach, 2013). “We want to help our brothers and sisters who have been newly released make a fresh start and put their best foot forward,” said Bryant (qtd. in Kaltenbach, 2013). While only a symbolic gesture, this act indicates that the needs of the growing number of returning citizens are on the radar of some black congregations.

There are a number of organizations that focus exclusively on women’s reentry. An Atlanta ministry, Alpha and Omega Society, an organization affiliated with the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church, has as its mission “to facilitate the successful transition of women and girls from the criminal justice system back into the society by mobilizing community, service and faith-based organizations” (Alpha and Omega Society, 2015). The organization’s Women in Transition program provides mentoring, personal development, skills building and advocacy.

Release to Reunion is a local nonprofit which helps women who have lost custody of their children gain jobs skills, steady employment and housing to position them to reunite with their children. The organization’s founder, Marjanet Wilson, who provides program participants with computer keyboarding skills and office management training which they use in a virtual office environment, says she’s reached out to congregations for assistance but some have been reluctant to assist women with a drug history (M. Wilson, personal communication, April 17, 2016). Rosie Palmer, founding director of Connecting Communities, which provides a host of services to women --many of whom are returning citizens --says churches have supported her clients through food and clothing distributions, but she too notes that churches often judge the choices of the formerly incarcerated, and often do not want to provide help beyond evangelism (R.T. Palmer, personal communication, April 17, 2016).

State governments have begun to seek out congregations as partners in reentry, providing for example

¹The writer has been trained in the Healing Communities process, so these thoughts represent my reflections on the program.

mentorship and other direct services. The state of Georgia Office for Reentry Services has adopted the Healing Communities model and recently launched a faith-based mentoring program called “I Choose Support.” While faith communities are an important partner in assisting returning citizens in reintegrating, government should not abdicate its role in supporting returning citizens. Moreover, churches should be careful about abdicating their prophetic role by getting too cozy with the government.

The church must also advocate for criminal justice reform in order to counteract the policies which led to mass incarceration which disproportionately impacted African American women, children and men. For example, *The New Jim Crow* author Michelle Alexander advocates for the decriminalization of marijuana, noting that there many young black and brown men and women whose lives have been ruined over possession of a little bit of weed (2010). Policy is shifting in this area. Many states have decriminalized and even legalized recreational use of marijuana. As a result, what landed many young black and brown bodies in jail is the equivalent of a parking ticket or poses no penalty for others. As a moral matter, while the black church may not be inclined to openly support legalizing drugs, the church may consider “standing down” and not thwart this current policy trend (unlike what many congregations did just with respect to condom distribution and needle exchanges at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic). Moreover, churches can use the fact that the policy has shifted to advocate for the release or to have expunged the records of those whose act has now been decriminalized.

There are a number of signs of hope in the area of criminal justice reform, including movement to Ban the Box, which removes questions about criminal history from initial job applications. Several states and municipalities including Georgia and the city of Atlanta have adapted Ban the Box policies (Rodriguez and Avery, 2016). The Federal government has also instituted a ban the box policy, as have leading corporations such as Target, Wal-Mart, Google and Starbucks (The White House, 2016). Also, the state of Virginia recently lifted its lifetime disfranchisement of convicted felons (“Secretary of the Commonwealth Kelly Thomasson,” 2016).

The black church, especially, with its rich prophetic heritage, must continue to be an instrument of freedom for returning citizens in these and other ways. Black churches can encourage members to support businesses which have banned the box. The church must hold the government’s feet to the fire when it comes to the removal of policies which create barriers to successful reentry, such as those mentioned earlier. If the systemic causes of incarceration are not addressed, like poverty, inadequate health care, abuse, and if barriers to reentry such as employment opportunities, housing limitations, disenfranchisement are not lifted, returning citizens will not have the necessary support for successful reintegration.

The Church and Returning Black Women

Given the special circumstances that complicate the reentry of African American women, what else must the church do to support women who return to the community after prison? Because the common mental picture in the black church of an incarcerated person is male, there may not be a level of familiarity with the special needs of returning citizens who are black women. Therefore, there needs to be some education around issues affecting women’s successful reentry. In addition, ministry to returning women must contain particular aspects of pastoral care, which provide space for grief, a sense of agency, and avoids patriarchal theologies which are not empowering to women, and may be particularly damaging to reentering women.

Incarceration is replete with losses - loss of life, loss of liberty, economic, relational and emotional losses. As with most any loss, those experiencing incarceration - the incarcerated person him or herself, her or his family and the community- suffer “sorrow and grief,” in this case, “for both the victim of the crime and their [own] kin...” (Family Freedom Kit, 2008). However, because the source of the loss is incarceration, the grief that often attends it is coupled with “shame and embarrassment” (Family Freedom Kit, 2008). Dr. Kenneth Doka has explored the concept of “disenfranchised grief” which he defines as grief that develops from a loss that “cannot be socially sanctioned, openly acknowledged or publicly mourned” (1990). Returning citizens may not have had the opportunity to mourn the losses that they sustained prior to being imprisoned. Coming out into the community may serve to reopen the wounds from those losses. If a woman has lost her children to the foster care system, a feeling of loss continues post-incarceration. Moreover, an added loss might be losing a sense of community developed while incarcerated.

The black church must provide space for women to authentically mourn their losses. It is situated to do so since all churches have developed rituals around death and dying. Indeed, African American religious traditions which began prior to the formal institutions grew out of the ritual assistance given on slave plantations around issue related to life events, including death and dying (Mintz and Price, 1992). Consequently, the black church is particularly well situated to support reentering black women in moving through the grief and losses suffered.

The black church must also provide support to empower African American women to develop a sense of agency and independence. Harold Dean Trulear, Ph.D., Associate Professor at Howard University Divinity School, national director of Healing Communities and himself a returning citizen stated anecdotally during a Healing Communities training that whenever he runs into a woman who is a returning citizen his first question is, "What's his name?" Meaning, what man did you get caught up with that led to your incarceration? (Trulear, 2015). There is some research to support Trulear's presupposition: One of the casualties of mandatory minimums was low-level drug dealers, many of whom were young women intimately involved with higher level male drug dealers (Levy-Pounds, 2006). Trulear opines that women getting hooked up with wrong men may be due, in part, to the church's ostracizing unmarried women as being less valuable, less whole. For some, these choices, made out of the desire to conform to religious teachings, may ultimately have led to prison.

Also, returning women have been in an environment where much of their agency has been removed. They are told what to wear, when to rise, given limited choices in everyday decision-making. Moreover, even post-incarceration, returning women may be under court supervision as parolees or probationers, which means they still do not have freedoms which provide some sense of agency and independence. The church, therefore, can be one space where returning women are empowered. This empowerment must also include space for women, who are often seen through the lens of their deficiencies, to exercise their God-given gifts and abilities.

Finally, because returning women have disproportionately experienced the trauma of sexual abuse and domestic violence, the church, especially during the preaching moment, must be careful how it handles biblical texts in which women are victims of violence. How will the story of the Levite's concubine, where two women are offered to strangers for sex, ring in the ears of a woman who has been raped or trafficked? Or how does a biblical story of Jephthah's daughter, offered as a sacrifice by her father, ring in the ears of a child who's been molested or has suffered the loss of her own child?² Even innocuous stories like the Proverbs 31 woman or those stories where a woman's most treasured function is her ability to bear children (sons especially) may bring up for returning women a sense of shame, guilt or loss. If these texts are not handled with care in the presence of returning women, who have experienced for themselves the wounds therein, and especially if the texts aren't challenged, the church risks losing the body and souls of these women. A woman who has been through hell doesn't want a God-experience that reminds her of the hell she's been through, and even sanctions it.

In conclusion, effective ministry to black women who are returning from prison is a blessed opportunity for the black church to cast a wider net, to embrace those whom it tends to "other," and to be a voice for the voiceless through advocating systemic societal changes which hinder the successful reintegration of the formerly incarcerated. Ministry to returning women also provides an opportunity to move forward a theological framing that is healing and empowering for all African American women. Lessons of courage, resilience, and ingenuity abound in the lives of returning women. The black church which historically has exhibited similar courage, resilience and ingenuity is a ripe space for all people, but especially those who have been marginalized by their race, gender, and the experience of incarceration, to bear witness to that which has made the black church strong.

² See Tribble (1984) for a broader discussion of these and other violent biblical texts.

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Kathryn V. Stanley is a candidate for the Master of Religious Leadership degree at Candler School of Theology at Emory University, whose degree emphasis is justice, peace-building and conflict transformation. A former attorney, the author directed a program that helped women remain connected to their children during incarceration.