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**Restoring Hope: A Biblical Approach to Mentorship for Justice-Involved Youth**

Young people's involvement in the justice system has been a concern for a long time as most of them become hemmed into cycles of crime and poverty. They struggle to reintegrate due to systemic barriers and personal challenges. While numerous solutions have been proposed, mentorship programs have emerged as an effective means of rehabilitation and reintegration. Valuing the importance of compassion, community and restoration, mentorship programs were rooted from Judeo-Christian beliefs. Christian organizations have been instrumental in impacting troubled youth and providing opportunities for advice and support as they try to get their lives back on track. This essay examines the biblical foundation of justice and mentorship, the historical evolution of youth incarceration and Christian intervention, key examples of faith-based mentorship, and practical principles that can guide contemporary efforts to support justice-involved youth.

**A Biblical Worldview Perspective on Mentoring’s Power**

Looking at God’s Word, the Bible lays a solid foundation for mentoring, rehabilitation, and justice matters. Scriptures such as Micah 6:8 remind us how important it is to extend grace and mercy to others, which helps develop the moral growth of people and offers restorative justice and compassion. That scripture says: "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" The basis of a biblical perspective on young justice-involved youth strengthened with compassion—is caught in this line.

Furthermore, the New Testament talks about mentorship and discipleship as means of transformation. Jesus himself mentored his disciples, showing us the value of not focusing on self but instead investing in the lives of others. Think of the parable of the prodigal son found in Luke 15:11-32. This story shows the importance of offering second chances and reconciliation, which is what mentorship programs for justice-involved youth are all about. When we look at the transformation of Paul, persecutor of the church who then became an apostle, we see how mentorship and faith can put one troubled on a better path toward a life of purpose and service.

Christianity has always responded to juvenile offenders with empathy and redemption. The virtues of curiosity, wonder, and empathy, as Ward (2014) noted, are key to addressing the root causes of incarceration. From a Judeo-Christian perspective, youth are given a foundation for empathy, redemption, and total transformation. Biblical revelation progressively reveals a justice that is punitive and deeply restorative. For example, Joseph’s story in Genesis shows us how we can find faith through restoration and personal growth. Mentorship programs grounded in biblical principles create an environment where justice-involved youth can heal and grow.

Every person birthed in this world should be respected as we are all human beings made in the image of God (Imago Dei), which is very important as it pertains to the biblical view of justice. This dignity reaches every part of creation and reinforces a human rights perspective that honors the essential value of every person. All human beings matter! The ministry of Christ sought to support the dignity of all, including the least of them, incarcerated and underprivileged. Despite their past actions, biblical justice suggests love, grace, and redemption in addition to restoration versus punishment. These coincide with faith-based mentorship, which strives to reorient young people and recognize their God-given dignity and direction.

Hurd (2024) discusses the importance of critical reflection in identifying injustices, a key belief in Biblical practice where God's justice is the focus. As Christians, we are told to fight for those who are oppressed. Isaiah 1:17 says, "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed." Christianity fights for a holistic approach that addresses personal needs while challenging the structures that prolong harm. There is a need for introspection for overcoming biases (Kurnia, 2021). As a juvenile detention administrator with mostly young black boys detained, there are sufferings that many detainees endure, including poverty, the lack of education, and racial biases, and that is why I work so hard to ensure all children are treated fairly and with dignity and given the opportunities they deserve.

**Mentoring in Juvenal Justice in Church History**

The juvenile justice system has evolved over the years. While young people have been engaging in criminal activity for a long time, the origin of youth incarceration can be traced to early legal systems that failed to differentiate between adult and juvenile offenders. In the Middle Ages and Colonial societies, if a juvenile was found to violate the law, that child was viewed as an adult (Lawrence, 2008) and, thus, suffered extremely severe consequences that included jail time or physical assaults. In the early 19th century, one of my professional influencers, a social reformer, Jane Addams, led the initiative to create the first juvenile court system and advocated for rehabilitation instead of punitive sanctions, creating a revolution with juvenile offenders. As a result, many of these changes created an avenue for Christian organizations to provide birth programs, schools, and homes and love, direction, and support for impoverished youth. As a result of Addams’ push to help better the lives of troubled youth, years later, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and the Salvation Army started mentorship and character development initiatives founded on Christian redemption and love principles.

With March nationally recognized as Women’s History Month, as Tait (2021) notes, it is notable that Christian women were crucial in leading social changes. Organizations like the Daughters/Sisters of Charity and the American Imitations, founded by Elizabeth Ann Seton, ran hospitals, schools, and orphanages. Especially by mentoring roles, these women heavily shaped the direction of juvenile justice therapy, which included spiritual guidance and physical care.

Juvenile incarceration is a social problem that can be attributed to society's attitudes regarding children, especially class, race, and education. These harsh legal systems have historically had a more than usual impact on kids from underprivileged environments, typically poor or from minority groups. Stigmatizing and marginalizing these youth, together with the sociological mechanism, served to worsen these problems and make it hard for them to break free from the cycle of incarceration. Viewing it from a theological standpoint, the Christian demand to "serve the least of these" (Matthew 25:40) became a major contrast with the punishing nature of the legal system, supporting restorative justice and youth rehabilitation rather than punishment.

In the history of youth incarceration, there has been documented evidence of racial bias, classism, and minimal learning opportunities over time. Those elements became implications of social views regarding justice and mercy not only in legal systems. Christian groups kept working on influencing juvenile justice policies practically by supporting youth rehabilitation during the existence of sociological and institutional conditions that kept them incarcerated. Mentorship coupled with advocacy helps the church maintain its significant role in confronting these persistent trends that entangle underprivileged youth in the cycle of incarceration while attempting to restore dignity and opportunity for them.

**Exemplars of Religion nd Society Integration: Mentoring for Restorative Justice**

One example of how religion and society integrate in the rehabilitation of justice-involved youth is found in the Prison Fellowship, which was founded by Chuck Colson (Sexton, 2024). He once served under President Richard Nixon and was imprisoned during the Watergate scandal. While incarcerated, Colson developed a new spirituality and converted to Christ. This awakening led him to implement the organization Prison Fellowship, which spun a worldwide movement for the detainees, presented them with discipleship programs, helped integrate reentry into their communities, and advocated for criminal justice reform. Furthermore, Colson believed that it was not the behavior of those living in inner-city America but rather the less structural and institutional trials they endured. For him, he had grown up with his own biases along the racial lines, but after God tugged his heart and he converted, Colson applied actions following his critical reflection. He became very instrumental in advocating for prison reform. Over the years, the Prison Fellowship has evolved.

The work of Father Greg Boyle and Homeboy Industries is another example as this organization focuses on the anti-recidivism of former gang-affiliated and/or justice-involved individuals (Homeboy Industries, n.d.-a). Father Boyle, a Jesuit clergyman, and his organization’s priority is to ensure they work closely with the least of them, the ones who are often left hopeless and forgotten by society. Homeboy Industries recognizes how vital youth mentoring in childhood is and its contribution to the mental health of young people, particularly those who are touched by incarceration and unstable family conditions. It is true that, unfortunately, some families may not like the idea of having mentoring programs on their calendars. However, trials and experience have proven that adequately directed mentoring sets a base for character-building and long-term personal development. This organization strives to offer the love, support, and resources these individuals need to transform their lives (Homeboy Industries, n.d.-a).

**Applicable Principles for Today of Mentoring for Restorative Justice**

Outside of individual leaders, scholars such as Freeks (2021) also urged the importance of fatherhood in a child's psychological development by stressing that church-based mentoring programs are not limited to helping only young people but will also act as a catalyst for absent fathers to get closer to their children. It is inevitably the first step for those to break the cycle of criminality. In this case, the stories serve as proof of people of faith affecting justice issues. Faith-motivated mentorship by which belonging in the middle of going through punishment and rejoining society is established is a good example of how religion and the social rethinking of prisons can build relations and rebuild lives. The role of mentoring as it concerns the mental wellness of youth, specifically those impacted by the justice system, is vital, according to Werntz et al. (2025).

The previously mentioned historical examples that involve Christian engagement in justice-involved youth mentorship are driven by five essential principles: redemption, justice, mentorship, social reform, and integration of faith with society. Prison Fellowship and Homeboy Industries prove how faith-driven programs offer the opportunity for redemption, mentorship, and being reintroduced to society for justice-involved youth (Sexton, 2024; Homeboy Industries, n.d.-a). These initiatives comply with biblical philosophy that stresses the second chance and the inherent dignity of all human life, regardless of past failure. History also supports that reform social movements like Jane Addams have led the argument for juvenile rehabilitation over punishment according to the Christian call to do justice to the poor (Tait, 2021). When faith and justice come together, there is a representation of the importance of addressing comprehensively and identifying the spiritual and social needs, which could encourage resilience in justice-involved youth (Koper et al., 2024). The American father crisis, such as the high rate of fathers behind bars and generations affected long term by their absence, is labeled by Brewer (2022). This is in line with the social reform policy, for in religious ways, such issues can be eliminated, and restoration and healing of such communities can be guaranteed.  In the modern world, faith-based mentoring initiatives have a transformative impact on stemming recidivism and serving justice-involved youth.

In addition to encouraging justice-involved youth, I understand that faith-based mentoring programs hold the solution for change and preventing recidivism. This is only one of several reasons why, as a juvenile detention administrator, I work diligently to encourage alternatives to detention, such as community service, circles of restorative justice, and faith-based mentoring. Seeking input from the youth and their families also helps build relationships within the justice system. I want to hear from the juveniles and their parents. I want to know what they are thinking and what ideas they might have. Above all, I want them to know that I care for them and want all youth and families to succeed; thus, I promote parental and familial support for my detainees. Studies indicate the negative impact of parental incarceration on kids, establishing economic risk and emotional upset (Johnson & Arditti, 2023). Through mentorship, religious counsel, and reconciliation opportunities, I hope to address such underlying issues and disrupt the cycle of incarceration. Mentoring disadvantaged young people—offering educational support, spiritual direction, family engagement and resources—reflects the model set by historical Christian reformers and organizations. Hegeman (2007) discusses the biblical teaching that although man was tainted with sin at the time of the fall, we are not lost. The teaching does vindicate the value of faith-initiated action in changing the lives of the young and inducing them to change their ways. The experience of a transformed life, such as that of the early Christians (Schmidt, 2004), also urges me to become an exemplar of faithfulness and integrity in the professional workplace. By continuing to integrate faith with justice reform, we can create pathways for redemption, hope, and transformation in the lives of justice-involved youth.

**Conclusion**

From this research, I reaffirmed the conviction that, like the twins called grace and mercy, faith and justice must go hand in hand to benefit justice-involved youth. The examples of Christian intervention throughout history and the practical application of biblical mentoring principles show how faith-based practices can redeem lives. As a leader in the juvenile justice field, advocating for programs to better the lives of youth can become overwhelming; however, in conducting this research, I have been renewed in my calling and encouraged to become even more directly involved in promoting justice reform. These individuals need me! I find solutions to issues. After researching, I am more motivated to ensure youth in the justice system are met with open arms, compassion, empathy, opportunity, and hope.

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