

“Go Home and Sin No More!” Reimagining Faith that Changes the Lives of Offenders to New Narratives of Rebirth and Transformation

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Thinandavha Derrick Mashau

University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

The justice system in South Africa used prisons as punitive instruments before the dawn of democracy. New developments focus mainly on restorative justice that seeks to rehabilitate, reintegrate, and restore offenders to their communities. This system has allowed space for chaplaincy and spiritual work in South African incarceration centers. This article uses the missional reading of John 8:1–11 and the narrative of David Heritage to demonstrate that faith, not religion, can change ex-offenders' lives into narratives of rebirth and transformation. Ex-offenders are given a second opportunity to serve the *missio Dei* as agents of missional conversion and transformation.

Keywords

faith, religion, mission, conversion, transformation, prison ministry, chaplaincy, spiritual work

Introduction

Life constitutes a struggle for quality of life and social justice, especially in the context of prison ministry in South Africa. While in the past, the use of prisons within the

Corresponding author:

Thinandavha Derrick Mashau, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

Email: mashatd@unisa.ac.za

justice system of South Africa was more punitive, it has since 1996 “transformed from a punitive military system to one aligned with rehabilitation-focused practices.”¹ This change places more emphasis on restorative justice as a way to help integrate offenders to their communities and avoid recidivism in the process. To advance this cause, the government improved the policy framework and allowed space for chaplaincy and spiritual workers from diverse religious backgrounds within the justice system. People in South Africa, including incarcerated offenders, enjoy “religious freedom” and this is “encapsulated in sections 9(2), 15 and 31 of the constitution of South Africa.”² Spiritual workers are allowed to use their sacred writings, including the Bible and the Qur’an, among others, as liberating tools that can facilitate conversion, rehabilitation, and reintegration of offenders into society and their communities.

It is against this background that this article seeks to investigate the use of faith and the Bible by Christian spiritual workers (chaplains) in South African prisons. The main question this article seeks to answer is: What role can religion and faith play in facilitating change in the lives of offenders to new narratives of rebirth and transformation? The following reasons prompted this investigation: First, the general perception that all incarcerated offenders are bad people due to the prevalence of crime in South Africa.³ Second, as much as the church is offering different services to offenders through recommended chaplains and spiritual workers, we still have a substantial section of Christians who are not only judgmental, but also think that “punitive justice” is the way to go. Due to the high crime rate in South Africa, these Christians continue to call for capital punishment. Third, recidivism is very high in South Africa—making it more challenging to think of rehabilitation once incarcerated. Finally, we have a problem with offenders who take advantage of religion and faith to advance their cause to be released through parole. A question that remains is whether there can be true conversion among offenders.

In order to answer this underlying question and to respond to the main research question, I have chosen to use John 8:1–11 and the story of one ex-prisoner, David Heritage, as my interlocutors. I have chosen John 8:1–11 because it speaks about a woman caught in adultery, but instead of allowing her to face the death penalty as dictated by the Law of Moses and her accusers, who were religious leaders, Jesus Christ gave her freedom. As a result, the woman caught in adultery was given a second chance to go home and sin no more. The same applies to the story of David Heritage, who was incarcerated for murder, but received a second opportunity to go home and be a changed person. David’s story is a platform, a model, a strategy for effectiveness, significance, and excellence amid brokenness.⁴ Therefore, it is my hypothesis that faith can transform the lives of offenders to embrace the transformation agenda in their lives if mediated to include grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Setting the tone: Methodological framework

This qualitative literature study is undertaken from a broader missiological framework of transforming mission.⁵ It is qualitative because of the readily available literature on issues of social justice and prison ministry in South Africa, mission and conversion, religion and faith. It is missiological because of its pursuit to locate the church,

represented by chaplaincy in South African prisons, as a missional and transforming agent of the *missio Dei* in the context of prison ministry in the South African context. In their mission, Christian chaplains and spiritual workers should be able to mediate salvation for a broader missional conversion that will assist offenders' narratives of rebirth and transformation that will lead to rehabilitation and reintegration to society.

My missional reading of John 8:1–11 and the story of David Heritage is influenced by both the hermeneutics of “madness and naked truth” and that of discernment.⁶ In the spirit of the same madness of flipping the tables, whipping, and driving out those doing business at the temple courts, Jesus Christ refused to adhere to the conventional Law of Moses that dictated that anyone caught in adultery should be stoned to death. Instead, Jesus Christ chose to look at the woman caught in adultery from the missional lens—mediating “the story of God’s mission to reconcile all people to himself and to restore his kingdom reign over all creation.”⁷ Embracing the hermeneutic of naked truth, Jesus Christ realized that if we are to follow the dictates of the law as is, no human being can escape the wrath of justice. In his discernment, Christ was able to set free the woman caught in adultery and give her a second chance at life. Looking at the story of David Heritage through the eyes of John 8:1–11, the African philosophy of life, *Ubuntu*, kicks in with its emphasis in Tshivenda that, “*muthu ha latiwi*” (you do not throw a person away).⁸ In our approach to dealing with offenders in South African prisons, we should remain “*vhathu*” (human beings) who exercise our “*vhuthu*” (humanness) in executing justice.

Literature review: Framing a conceptual discourse

South African prison and the struggle for justice: Historically, the concept of prison in South Africa “mirrored and reinforced broader apartheid policy.”⁹ The policy pushed for punitive justice, of which imprisonment, racialized prison labor, and the death sentence are typical examples. There are many untold stories of hardships and suffering in South African prisons. Nevertheless, there are also stories in the public domain, like that of Nelson Mandela, which reveal how the apartheid regime used prison as a tool to counter the revolution for black liberation and emancipation. The apartheid government used prison to intimidate, divide, isolate, marginalize, and punish persons judged to be instigators of insurrection. In the main, the government abused its power and force to control prison inmates. In this context, the justice system in South Africa could be perceived as retributive, deterrent, and incapacitating, which stands in (creative) tension with rehabilitation.¹⁰

Prison ministry and rehabilitation: The changing paradigm, backed by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and related policies (white papers), seems to drive the transformation agenda by paying attention to rehabilitation issues in executing the justice system of the country.¹¹ The name for prison ministry has since been changed to the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) to accommodate the rehabilitation agenda in the efforts to transform this ministry. According to Cilliers and Smit, “The essence of rehabilitation is to bring positive change in offenders and their fundamental behaviour.”¹² To seek correction more than punishment, the South African

government introduced terminologies such as parole and community services as part of the changing paradigm. In addition, the chaplaincy ministry in South African prisons brings issues of religion and faith as one of the levers to facilitate and drive the rehabilitation process.

Religion, faith and conversion in prison ministry: While the legislative framework and government policy make provision and space for religion and faith in South African prisons, prisoners are free to choose which religion they prefer. In his doctoral thesis, Kruger noted that the following religions exist in South African prisons: Christianity, Islam, Rastafarian Movement, and “Israel Vision” Movement, among others.¹³ It is within this context that chaplains and spiritual workers from various religions can use faith and their sacred writings to mediate salvation among prisoners in South Africa. Writing in the context of Christianity and efforts to mediate salvation with people from other faiths, I opined that the mediation of conversion is also part of the Christian mission.¹⁴ Löffler captures the essence of this as follows: “‘Fellowship’ minus the passion for conversion leads to ghettoism; ‘service’ minus the call to conversion is a gesture without hope; Christian education minus conversion is religiosity without decision; and ‘dialogue’ without challenge to conversion remains sterile talk.”¹⁵ It should, however, be noted that missional conversion in this article is not narrowly understood and defined to refer to the salvation of souls, but a holistic approach that provides space for new narratives of rebirth and transformation.

Church agency and transformation in prison ministry: Prison chaplaincy in South Africa, as is the case in the African continent, is a fairly new and developing terrain.¹⁶ It provides space for religious leaders from different religious formations, including Christianity, to provide spiritual care and counseling among the offenders in their different categories and prisons. As part of the church agency and in driving a missional agenda, which is liberating and transformational at the same time, Christian chaplains and spiritual workers serve as agents of change in South African prisons. Thinane asserts that the church is a change agent or instrument in the hands of a missionary agenda of God.¹⁷

A messy, bloody river: Framing a contextual discourse on South African prisons

The reality of being in South African prisons can be associated with a metaphor of a messy, bloody river for the following reasons:

Overcrowding: There is overcrowding in South African prisons, as in other African states, which comes with challenges such as “poor nutrition, illness, disease, and rights violations.” South Africa is said to have “235 prisons holding close on 160,000 prisoners at an average size of 657 prisoners per facility.”¹⁸ It is therefore critical to rethink the model of imprisonment and mass incarceration as a way to punish and deter criminals from repeating their crimes. As it stands, prisons in South Africa remain penal institutions and not centers that can support the rehabilitation of offenders.¹⁹ It was during the Covid-19 pandemic that this element of overcrowding was exposed, and it forced the President and the Minister of Justice and Correctional Services to release more than 19,000 offenders on parole.²⁰

The economics of overcrowded prisons: It takes more taxpayers' money to keep up with the many incarcerated offenders in South African prisons. What makes prison in South Africa even more expensive is the protected human rights of every offender as espoused in the constitution. "The South African correctional system has a constitutional obligation to respect, promote, and protect the rights of offenders."²¹ The Department of Correctional Services is compelled to provide good and healthy meals to all offenders, including appropriate healthcare and quality education. In a country with high unemployment, where the majority, especially the youths, live below poverty standards, some prefer prison life more than being free and fending for themselves; hence, the high rate of recidivism.

Slow pace in prosecuting awaiting offenders and corruption within the justice system: The wheels of justice seem to be turning very slowly in prosecuting awaiting offenders which is one of the contributory factors to overcrowding. This is accompanied by corrupt activities within the justice system in South Africa. For example, the smuggling of drugs in prison can only become possible when prison wardens or senior officials are also involved and stand to benefit.

High crime rate in South African prisons: South African prisons resemble a war zone. Crime activities in South African prisons include rape, violent crimes, murder, sex, and drugs, among others. There are serious syndicates that flourish in South African prisons by selling drugs. These syndicates do not only involve incarcerated offenders, but also prison wardens. Overcrowding, gangsterism, and smuggling in South African correctional centers make life difficult for non-gang members and also affect the safety of staff.²²

Recidivism in South African prisons: Ex-offenders in South Africa, either having served their time or being out on parole, are re-offending in huge numbers. South Africa has a high rate of recidivism in the world.²³ Part of the challenge is the lack of an enabling environment when they are released. While some would have received skills to work for themselves after their release, they are met with rising unemployment and poverty statistics. In addition, some are not hireable because of their criminal record.

A missional reading of John 8:1–11 and pursuit of transformative justice

A missional reading of John 8:1–11 in the context of justice reveals the following:

Religion, sin, and punitive justice: The context of John 8:1–11 talks about a woman caught in the act of adultery. Since the woman violated the seventh commandment in the Law of Moses (Exodus 20:14), her action is defined as a religious sin. According to the Law of Moses, anyone (both men and women) caught in this act deserved capital punishment—death through stoning (John 8:5; Leviticus 20:10). When applied in a stricter sense within the context of religious fundamentalism, which disregards God's redemption and restorative grace, the Law of Moses advances a punitive justice system, which seeks to condemn humanity to death.²⁴ This exposes some of the weaknesses of punitive justice, namely, lack of forgiveness, reconciliation, rehabilitation, and restoration.

Mob justice and justice put to the test: When Jewish religious leaders (the scribes and Pharisees) approached Jesus Christ with a woman caught in adultery, they seemed to want justice done. However, three notable things about their pursuit of justice require special mention in this article, namely: (1) It was akin to mob justice or vigilante justice.²⁵ They mobilized people to participate in stoning the woman caught in adultery; (2) Their approach was that of selective justice. Perpetuating a one-sided approach to justice, based on the dominant patriarchal hegemony of the Jewish religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees did not apprehend a man caught in the same act as the woman. This was a biased approach, which sought to humiliate the woman while protecting her accomplice. What is even more disturbing is the deafening silence of the woman throughout this ordeal. Her silence is a sign of the oppressive interpretation of the Jewish religious rules that demanded women to be silent in the presence of men;²⁶ and (3) When they brought the woman to Christ, the scribes and Pharisees wanted to test or trap him (John 8:6). If Jesus had refused them permission to stone the woman to death, they would have accused him of condoning adultery and going against the Law of Moses. On the other hand, if Jesus had allowed them to stone the woman to death, they would have accused him of staging a revolt against the Roman Empire. Since the Jews were under the rule of the Romans, they were not allowed to execute capital punishment within the jurisdiction of the Roman territories (see John 18:31).

Religion and/or faith and justice reimaged: (1) In order to teach the religious leaders what true faith can do in transforming the justice system itself, Jesus Christ instructed those without sin to be the first to stone the woman caught in adultery (John 8:7). It becomes clear that in dealing with the sins and crimes of others, humanity should always be aware of their humanness and inability to fulfill the demands of the Law of God in Scriptures; (2) Upon realizing that all her accusers left her, Jesus Christ asked the woman: where are your accusers? (John 8:10). At this point, Jesus breaks not only his silence, but that of the woman too. His silence was a clear demonstration of human solidarity²⁷ and an indication that he disagreed with her accusers' interpretation of the Law of Moses. By bending down, being silent, and writing on the ground, Jesus rejects the interpretation of the Mosaic Law by the patriarchs of his time.²⁸ When Jesus Christ broke her silence, it was a way of empowering her to go against Jewish tradition when he allowed her to speak before a Jewish man. From this point on, the woman caught in adultery was empowered to stand for her rights and claim her stake against the self-righteous religious leaders, their oppressive religion, and patriarchal system.

(3) Jesus Christ gave the woman caught in adultery a "not guilty verdict," "Neither do I judge you" (John 8:11). Jesus Christ gave her this verdict not because she deserved it, but he wanted to demonstrate God's mercy and compassion towards sinners who deserve God's punishment; and (4) In giving the woman a second opportunity to restore her life, Jesus Christ told the woman to "go and sin no more" (John 8:11). This clearly demonstrated that God's law and its intent are not punitive, but restorative. As defined by Christ in this text, restorative justice is about respect for human life and dignity. It is about creating new beginnings. Jesus Christ gave the woman a creative moment to rewrite her story by participating in God's moment of

mercy, grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This *missio Dei* encounter is one that is life-affirming, life-giving, and life-transforming. In this instance, Jesus orders the adulteress to become a woman disciple²⁹—a woman with a new narrative of rebirth and transformation.

David Heritage: A narrative of rebirth and transformation

Caught and incarcerated for murder: In his testimony, “Grace beyond understanding,” David Heritage shares a story of why and how he killed his adopted parents. David was adopted just before his first birthday after having lost his parents. He was raised in a violent and abusive environment where his adopted parents constantly fought in his presence. In addition, his adopted parents physically, emotionally, and psychologically abused David. Consequently, David did not just develop the need to get away from his adopted parents’ home, but resentment and anger towards them also grew. In his testimony, David captures this as follows:

I felt alone and needed to do something to get away from my adopted parents. I could not speak to anyone and did not have the self-confidence to walk away. I felt the strongest feelings of hatred and anger towards my adopted parents; I felt an intense feeling of loneliness and despair. The buildup of feelings over the years came to a head in December 1994 when I walked into my adopted parents’ bedroom and shot and killed them both instantly.³⁰

After killing his adopted parents, David tried to hide his crime from the church and his fiancée, whom he married in April 1995. It was in June 1995 that David was arrested and charged with murder. It was only then that he opened up and admitted to having killed his adopted parents.

Faith journey and a narrative of rebirth: It was in his disclosure of the crime that he had committed that David felt a sense of relief from the heavy burden that he carried while he was a fugitive of the law. While recounting the tough and rough life in Leeuwkop Maximum Security Correctional Centre, David admittedly encountered God and sought forgiveness. In his testimony, he recounts that God instructed him to do four things, namely: “Firstly, humble yourself sincerely and seriously (earnestly) before Me and seek My forgiveness; secondly, forgive yourself; thirdly, forgive your adopted parents for what they have done to you; and lastly, seek forgiveness from the community that you have lied to, betrayed, and hurt.”³¹

David’s narrative of rebirth includes, among others: (1) keeping in touch with the pastor of Bryanston Methodist Church (BMC); (2) studying theology to a level of Bachelor of Theology with Honours at the University of South Africa; (3) having a chaplain whose counsel led him from time to time; (4) contact with members of BMC, Jonathan and Yvonne Miles; and (5) attending church inside the incarceration center, among others.

Transformative faith, restorative justice, and agency: There are six critical scenarios or cases in David’s life that point to his transformative faith and his agency in

pursuit of restorative justice that deserves a special mention in this article, namely: (1) While serving his sentence in Leeuwkop Maximum Correctional Centre, David joined the school project. He spent most of his time teaching fellow inmates English, numeracy, Afrikaans, human sciences, and orientation for levels 1–4;³² (2) As part of his restoration and healing, David recounts that in 2000, he discovered that he had a brother that he had no previous knowledge of;³³ (3) After twelve and a half years in various incarceration centers in South Africa, David was released on parole. This is after the BMC, through the assistance of Reverend Christopher Harrison, provided a letter of employment and accommodation upon release; (4) His restoration journey with BMC became a reality on November 1, 2009, where he asked for forgiveness. David received an overwhelming reception and was also accepted to serve in their Outreach Cluster. His tasks included, among others, working with the homeless and unemployed. David also offered the Alpha course in Leeuwkop Correctional Centre. He recounts meeting his wife Tracey at the first Alpha course;³⁴ (5) In 2001, David started presenting the Heartlines course in Medium B Juvenile Boys Centre at Leeuwkop, and this program extended to other facilities; and (6) Today, David is the founder and director of Revive Initiatives, a non-profit organization that supports parolees and ex-offenders. The motto of the organization is “Redemption, Reintegration and Restitution.” As it seeks to rehabilitate, it also promotes giving back to the communities as part of restorative justice.

Transformative faith and justice: Reimagining the future

In reimagining faith and a transformative justice system that can change the narratives of offenders positively, as in the case of a woman caught in adultery and the story of David Heritage, this article proposes the following:

- Mob justice and capital punishment are not always in the best interests of justice. In the South African context, where mob justice is still prevalent, those alleged to have committed malicious crimes against humanity were subjected to the court of public opinion. They were beaten, stoned, or necklaced, and burnt to death if they were found guilty, whether rightly or wrongly accused. This kind of action is punitive in nature, but includes both elements of deterrence and retributive justice. Deterrence justice because the mob, while playing the prosecutor and judge roles, punish the perpetrator as an example to others, and as a lesson not to be repeated by the offender. Retributive in that the offender is expected to pay back or face a similar fate as in biblical terms, “an eye for an eye” (Leviticus 24:19–21).
- Patriarchal hegemony towards the justice system is very selective and biased towards men’s rights, as in John 8:1–11. It is selective justice in that the religious leaders only brought a woman to face the music in the hands of men, while a man who was an accomplice was set free. We see a justice system that marginalizes, stigmatizes, and shames women, stripping off what remains of their human dignity.

- True faith (transformative faith) and not religion can change the narratives of the offender into narratives of rebirth and transformation, as in the case of a woman caught in adultery and the story of David Heritage. Religion and religious affirmations are not pro-life, but they promote punitive justice, as in the case of the Jewish religious leaders. They encouraged death as the necessary penalty for the woman caught in adultery.
- Transformative faith and justice provide offenders with second opportunities. While punishment remains a requirement, transformative faith and justice provide space for correction, rehabilitation, and reintegration to society. For example, the narrative of a woman caught in adultery and that of David Heritage represent what Jesus Christ meant by, "Go and sin no more" (John 8:11). In this instance, "rehabilitation is achieved through interventions to change attitudes, behaviour and social circumstances."³⁵ Jesus Christ's approach was more holistic to include these values: "the gospels are saturated with accounts of Jesus's forgiving and restoring love touching the lives of those whom mere human beings would have 'written off'."³⁶
- Jesus Christ teaches us to move beyond the death penalty narrative to transformative justice. He cautioned the scribes and Pharisees about their imperfections before dishing harsh judgment on others, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7b). In order to adopt this approach to or application of transformative justice in South Africa, we need to embrace the African religiosity and African philosophy of life of *Ubuntu* which teaches us that "*muthu ha latiwi*." Jesus affirms this by saying to the woman, if those who accused you are not here, "Neither do I judge (or reject you)" (John 8:11). While religion wanted to punish, faith wanted to correct, rehabilitate, and empower offenders towards transforming life as in the case of the woman caught in adultery as well as the case of David Heritage.
- The kind of faith espoused in John 8:1–11 and demonstrated in the life of David Heritage teaches us, especially in the area of chaplaincy and spiritual work in South African prisons, that we need restorative justice, which is centered on pro-life, rehabilitation, and reintegration of offenders to their communities.
- Similar to both the narratives of the woman caught in adultery and David Heritage, restorative justice can only occur when all stakeholders are given equal opportunity to engage. In Jesus's case, he gave the woman caught in adultery space for her voice to be amplified; by so doing, the woman was treated with empowerment, care, and dignity.³⁷

Conclusion

Only transformative faith, not religion, can help change the stories of offenders into new narratives of rebirth and transformation, as in the case of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11) and that of David Heritage. This kind of faith pushes us to look beyond our religious boundaries because they are limiting, exclusive, and judgmental in nature. While embracing the African philosophy of being human in every given

context, it is also important to be reminded of the golden rule, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you. . . .” (Matthew 7:12). In this instance, we should seek to be more human, tolerant, loving, compassionate, forgiving, and reconciling as we push to transform life for both the offender and the offended, including how we approach the justice system.

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Author biography



Thinandavha Derrick Mashau is Professor of Missiology and Chair of the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History, and Missiology at the University of South Africa (UNISA). He is General Secretary of the Southern Africa Missiological Society and Deputy President of the International Association for Mission Studies.