

Cognitive Dissonance in the Christian Church Today: When Lives and Failed Relationships Betray the Lack of Faith

- Results from a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this journal article is to report on the significant findings from a study exposing prevalent cognitive dissonance in Christian churches, and the negative impact it has on restored relationships within the Church and outside the Church in the community at large. The authors of this article also offer concrete suggestions to counter the apathy and superficiality. The authors conducted a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study entitled: "Former Mentors' Perceptions of the Faith-Based Approach to Reducing Recidivism Implemented by the Marinette-Menominee Jail Outreach, Inc." In the study, we explored the impact of a faith-based approach to reduce recidivism. The conceptual frameworks guiding this study included the use of belief system theory and self-efficacy theory. Participants consisted of a convenience sample of 21 mentors of the Marinette-Menominee Jail Outreach. The setting was a Christian non-profit organization serving the Marinette and Menominee County Jails located in rural northeastern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Semi-structured interviews, surveys, and a focus group provided data to illuminate common themes. Data analysis included highlighting significant statements from volunteer mentors who engaged offenders to effect change. Through a thematic analysis, general themes emerged to examine the research questions under consideration, and to understand the construct of recidivism by using horizontalization clusters of meaning, and textual descriptions. All inmates had a story to tell: The importance of family and engagement or rejection by the church emerged as themes in this research. Comprehensive aftercare was crucial to reduce recidivism, yet often offenders return to prison because churches do not have the parishioner involvement required to effectively engage released offenders and offer a new environment to promote change. Many church members lack spiritual maturity, evidenced by apathy, complacency or fear. This study revealed that all 21 Christian mentors confidentially interviewed from 15 different churches and 8 different denominations unanimously indicated that the majority of members of their own churches refused to engage other people in evangelism or discipleship, either from fear or apathy, neither of which are biblically justifiable excuses. This unexpected finding was the most significant because of the implications for restored relationships within the Church and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

Former Mentors' Perceptions of the Faith-Based Approach to Reducing Recidivism Implemented by the Marinette-Menominee Jail Outreach, Inc, is a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study completed by the authors (Langteau, 2014). The research was based on a phenomenological study that necessarily considered the lived experiences of those involved. The lived experience articulated the participants' feelings, emotions, and perceptions as they lived it, and not just the individual's reactions to the experience (Connelly, 2010, p. 127). By determining shared patterns, it helped improve understanding of anti-recidivism approaches that were effective. The research plan of the study included three processes: semistructured research questions for 21 randomly selected participants who were all mentors; surveys; and focus group discussions to understand the phenomenon under examination and their shared themes. The focus group consisted of a circuit court judge, an elected county sheriff, an elected state senator, a regional director of a national non-profit, and a tenured university professor.

In the process, the universally shared experiences of the 21 mentors also significantly uncovered the prevalence of cognitive dissonance across the broad spectrum of churches and denominations involved. Cognitive dissonance is defined as "the excessive mental stress and discomfort experienced by individuals who hold two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values at the same time (Craig, 2013, p. 91). In events where a disparity exists between an individual's claimed belief and their observed actions, their actions always betray their real conviction.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The United States incarcerates more people than any other country in the world, and inmates are being released from jails and prisons at unprecedented rates only to commit more crimes and be re-arrested. The U.S. prison population has increased by more than 460% while the numbers of offenders released on parole has increased by over 360% between 1980 and 2006 (Johnson, 2008, p. 2). The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reported that 2,266,800 incarcerated adults were in federal and state prisons and local county jails in 2010, and another 4,887,900 adults were on probation or parole in the U.S. at year-end 2010 (Glaze, 2011, p. 3).

The situation is both ineffective and untenable, demonstrated by the fact that with only 5% of the

world's population, the United States today has about 25% of the world's incarcerated people (Meiners, 2007, p. 23). Not only is this trend unsustainable, but the cycle of arresting and releasing offenders fails to address or correct the underlying causes of recidivism. "Over 60% of released offenders are re-arrested within three years, increasing the burden on society and cost to the government (Hall, 2009, p. 66]. So the cycle continues.

PROBLEM AND PURPOSE STATEMENT

The problem is the prison population in the United States has increased over 460% between 1980 and 2006 (Johnson, 2008, p. 2). Without an inmate's change of values, there is little likelihood of a change in behavior (Markway & Worsham, 2009, p. 99). Correctional officers release offenders from prison unchanged and without support structures, only to recommit crimes, create new victims, and then be re-arrested as the cycle continues (Le Blanc & Nolan, 2009). Over 60% of released offenders are rearrested within three years, creating a high cost to society in terms of new victims and a financial burden on cash-strapped government with limited corrections budgets (Hall, 2009 & Langan & Levin, 2002).

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to examine the impact of a faith-based approach to reducing recidivism for offenders involved in the Marinette-Menominee Jail Outreach, and to do so by examining the lived experiences of the volunteer mentors who worked with offenders in the context of a surrogate family. Recidivism is the re-arrest within three years of release from incarceration, which was the definition accepted for this study. The participants were asked interview questions to focus on the perceptions of volunteer mentors who engaged offenders through participation in the faith-based approach to reducing recidivism implemented by the Marinette-Menominee Jail Outreach organization. The purpose of the interview questions was to determine the impressions of what aspects of the approach were effective and what aspects were not effective in reducing recidivism based on the lived experiences of the participants.

Van Manen (2016) stated that phenomenological research and interview questions need to be formulated "from a posture of wonder (Van Manen, 2016). The researchers will be inquiring into experiences that have arisen in the daily life of the voluntary mentors; that is, in life worlds in which any ordinary experience may become important and extraordinary for an offender if approached from wondering and the phenomenological point of view. Thus, through phenomenology we can understand that day-to-day experiences are wondrous, and less simple than we initially think. Thus, the attitude of wonder is a fundamental necessity when framing the phenomenological research question (Ayala-Carabajo, 2017). In a good study, we almost always

begin in or pass through a phase of wonder. Wonder, according to Van Manen (2016) is a disposition that has, in turn, a dispositional effect: it both unsettles and moves us. Wonder should not be confused with delight, admiration, curiosity, fear, etc. Wonder, seen as an attitude, cannot appear automatically; and neither can it be artificially induced but may help us understand why certain strategies may be useful in reducing recidivism (Ayala-Carabajo, 2017; Van Manen, 2016). In the same way that imagination can be the spur to creating an artwork, our qualitative study can also begin with several questions that will be refined, redefined, etc. during the study. Feelings of wonder can prompt phenomenological questioning. In the space between wonder and phenomenological questioning, we hope to find knowledge, reflective skill, and intuition (Ayala Carabajo, 2017). Wondering may also mean that embracing the fact that things may also exist in a different way to the way they are which, assumes that there may be a distinction between appearance and reality (Beltrán, 1982, Waldenfels, 2017). This distinction between appearance and reality means that experiences can sometimes be shown through a lens and appearance that distorts them (this does not mean that they are not real).

RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the lived experience of volunteer mentors when they are involved with offenders in the context of a surrogate family?

The Interview questions for this study were:

1. What do mentors perceive as the factors or beliefs that contribute to offenders re-arrests?
2. How have offenders gained mastery over their thoughts, emotions, beliefs and actions?
3. How has the greater faith community worked together or failed to work together to support offenders?
4. How have learning from and interacting with members of the Jail Outreach, in the context of surrogate families, impacted offenders' beliefs, thinking and behavior?

Importance of these Questions:

Recidivism is a serious problem with negative social and economic impacts on communities, and the majority of incarcerated people are repeat offenders. To know what mentors attribute to offenders, repeat arrest patterns would be valuable in determining the most useful approach to reduce it, and what would be useful for future research. It is also important to determine what if anything has changed with offenders, and how these factors contributed to breaking the cycle of recidivism. How has the greater faith community worked together or failed to work together to support offenders? If a comprehensive

approach is necessary, it is useful to know what aspects of broader faith organizations cooperating together have worked, and what aspects may not work in relations to impacting offenders. How have learning from and interacting with members of the Jail Outreach, in the context of surrogate families, impacted offenders' beliefs, thinking and behavior? It may be useful to determine how offenders' understanding of themselves and their environment may have been impacted by association.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study was grounded in the research of theorists who have studied human development and change, and had researched social learning. Festinger's theory on cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), Rokeach's belief system theory (Rokeach, 1960) and Bandura's self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977) have provided a broad conceptual foundation for this study. In addition, the Bible was a catalyst from which many of the principles incorporated in this theoretical framework have been instructive and applied.

- Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT)

Festinger (1957) stated that non-fitting relations among cognitions or thought patterns and how they generate a state of discomfort involving negative arousal, that motivates people to cope with this situation, typically by adjusting one cognition to the other. Dissonance was the term he used to refer to this state of discomfort. To stress the homeostatic nature of dissonance, he made a parallel with hunger: Deprived of food, people feel hungry and find a way to cope with their hunger. However, as if the same construct defined food deprivation and hunger, Festinger used the term dissonance for both the triggering relation and the state of discomfort that occur. Although CDT has been extensively revised, the original theory is still a central point of agreement and constitutes the core of the theory¹ (see Harmon-Jones, 2019).

- Rokeach's Belief System Theory

The belief system theory, with Rokeach as a primary theorist, postulated that belief systems are the framework that stimulates cognitive and motivational processes. Rokeach viewed the relationship between beliefs and behavior as interrelated and predictive, and suggested that the changing of central beliefs had great impact on behavior (Grube, Mayton, II & Ball-Rokeach, 1994). Values transcend situations and are viewed as single beliefs. As such, values are significant because they are cognitive representations of personal desires (Grube et al. 1994). Self-conception is the most central belief affecting the belief system theory and includes "all of an individual's cognitions about those qualities that define the self. As a result, "All other

beliefs and all behaviors are organized around self-conceptions and are in the service of maintaining and enhancing positive self-conceptions (Grube et al. 1994). Belief system theory recognizes that changing an individual's self-conception belief is a catalyst for life transformation. Rokeach believed that there are three levels in any belief or disbelief system. The first level involves a basic outlook on the world, and the individual either sees it as threatening and dangerous or as safe and accepting. The second level of any belief system addresses an individual's perspective on authority, and specifically who has legitimate authority, what it is based upon, and whether it will be respected. The third level of any belief system details the structure of living and how this varies based on what authority is accepted at any given time. Rokeach demonstrated the connection between people's patterns of belief and their underlying personality structure and their conduct (Rokeach, 1960). When an individual maintains two or more contradictory beliefs or values at the same time, however, cognitive dissonance creates excessive stress. Yet the process of change is incorporated in specifically held values which, when confronted with altered perceptions, is a psychological mechanism for transformation. A significant relationship was found to exist between self-dissatisfaction and change in target values (Grube et al. 1994).

- Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy theory relates to an individual's ability to organize and execute various courses of action. Self-efficacy is a person's effective interaction with the environment. Self-efficacy is demonstrated through exercising influence competently over events that impact one's life. Self-efficacy may be exemplified in mastery over thoughts, emotions, and behavior (Bandura, 1977). Bandura, who developed the self-efficacy theory, said, "It is hypothesized that expectations of personal efficacy determine whether coping behavior will be initiated, how much effort will be expended, and how long it will be sustained in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences (Bandura, 1977, p. 191). Self-efficacy theory is insightful in developing the concepts behind mentoring offenders, and the role played in developing the self-efficacy of individual inmates. Bandura defined self-efficacy as "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of actions required to manage prospective situations (Bandura, 1997, p. 192).

Individuals do not live their lives in independent autonomy, and self-efficacy is developed in relationships. Self-efficacy is critical to an individual's ability to effectively learn and successfully complete tasks, and is often acquired by modeling the behavior of those one identifies with and with whom frequent contact is sustained (Bandura, 1994). Self-efficacy has relevance outside the classroom because it "is a socially created propensity to view oneself as capable

of responding to a range of life contingencies (Allred, 2013, p. 211). To hold the necessary skills and possess the ability to master a certain task is not enough unless individuals also perceive themselves able and capable of actually using their skills to accomplish the task (Miller, 2011).

Christian mentors who are willing to invest time with offenders both while incarcerated and upon their release are ideally situated to help offenders develop realistic self-efficacy because of their commitment and because of the shared values they possess and model. Bandura's self-efficacy theory relates to the current research regarding volunteer mentors working with offenders in a faith-based approach to reducing recidivism. Former offenders face a great degree of rejection, and "high self-efficacy is essential for persisting in the face of rejection (Miller, 2011, p. 244). Also, Bandura postulated that people learned from the behavior of those they associated with, and endeavored to emulate the lifestyle of those who model behavior with which they can identify. By placing a highly functioning and morally committed Christian mentor with an offender or group of offenders, a relationship develops in which the individual offender may learn both from what the mentor teaches and from what the mentor models. Offenders who are open to this relationship but lack in motivation or self-efficacy will be exposed to a mentor with whom they can identify. By beginning while still incarcerated, this relationship can grow and continue after the offender is released, and it can expand and strengthen with a group of mentors who reinforce transformational behavior. When embarked upon in the spirit of acceptance in a surrogate family with the offender that maintains boundaries and accountability, these mentors will increase the offenders' perception of their own genuine needs while demonstrating where their needs can legitimately be met. According to Bandura's theory, this exposure to positive mentors will enhance the offenders' recognition of their own abilities and motivate them to imitate the mentors around them (Bandura, 1994).

The offenders' perceptions of their own abilities may be altered at a critical stage in their mentoring relationship due to the environment and dynamics created. The new relationships and dynamics can positively transform their thoughts, emotions, behavior and self-efficacy, and thus break the cycle of recidivism. If genuine change does occur within an offender, the reason for the change will transcend the former, base desires, needs, or wants that previously motivated the offender to commit a crime. Consequently, even when no longer in direct association with mentors, the former offender will recognize the short-sightedness and emptiness of the former lifestyle and refrain from returning to it. Learning cannot be imposed from the outside. All persons must interact with their world (Hearron & Hildebrand, 2010).

Vicarious reinforcement is the process by which

new behaviors are acquired through watching a mentor or model practicing and reinforcing the new behavior. "A new cognitive structure generates new possibilities, which cause the person to try out new procedures on objects (Miller, 2011, p. 87). Cognitive development is a progressive reorganization of mental processes that are the result of biological maturation and environmental experience. People construct an understanding of the world, then experience discrepancies between what they already know and what they discover in their environment. Equilibrium, assimilation, and accommodation progress through stages.

Ultimately, beliefs influence thinking, and thinking results in behavior; consequently, if one wants to alter the behavior, one must first alter the beliefs and thinking that inevitably drive the behavior. "Offenders' readiness to engage in changes that will reduce their risk of reoffending is now recognized to be as important as the design and delivery of programs that support such change (Anstiss et al., 2011, p. 690). This readiness is usually achieved only through intensive mentoring and needs to directly address changes in dynamic risk factors to successfully reduce recidivism.

THEMES AND SUBCATEGORIES

The study illuminated three themes and ultimately eight associated subcategories:

Theme 1: Contributions to Offenders' Recidivism- Mentors perceived various factors as contributing to recidivism, including dysfunctional families and personal relationships, skewed perceptions, a lack of realizing their own value or the value of other people, and a lack of long-term and comprehensive after-care. The offenders had a very limited understanding of the "flaws behind their stories. If a person commented that the offender's story was interesting but asked the offender to explain the flaw behind their story, most often the offender would be unable to do so. This theme resulted to three subcategories:

- a. *They all had a story to tell.*
- b. *Importance of family.*
- c. *Connecting to society.*

Theme 2: Mastery of Self- The mentors perceived that offenders gained mastery over their thoughts and broke the cycle of recidivism through establishing new relationships and disassociating with negative relationships, interacting with role models and the positive example of others, and through Bible study that led to new values and perspectives. The following two subcategories were illuminated through this theme:

- d. *Christ as our Savior.*
- e. *Reason for change.*

Theme 3: Greater Faith Community - The mentors perceived that the churches were dynamic because

they had the answers from the Bible and in a personal relationship with Christ which could transform their lives and the lives of offenders, and because 15 churches demonstrated they could come together to work unselfishly and without tangible benefit to help offenders through the Jail Outreach program. The weakness of the churches, however, was that only a minority of members did what was required, revealing that the majority in the churches may have experienced cognitive dissonance and needed the same transformation that the offenders needed, so that they would see others as valuable and redeemable. The participants thought that more training in Scripture would help the indifferent church members feel the call of Christ in their lives and be willing to engage and care for others. Three subcategories were given light through this theme:

f. Engagement or rejection by the church

g. Connecting to Outreach- The participants perceived that those offenders who responded to the mentoring exhibited changed mindsets in which they began to see themselves and others as valuable, they developed a personal relationship with Christ which restored them to not only to God but facilitated restored relationships with others, they changed friends, they improved communication, and ultimately they demonstrated changed behavior.

h. Accountability.

The only unanimous finding from the study was that each of the 21 interviewed mentors from 15 churches and 8 different denominations concluded that their church had the answers to breaking the cycle of repeat offenses, but also that the majority of the members of each of their respective churches could not or would not interact with people in a way that could positively impact lives.

“Each participant articulated both strengths and weaknesses of area churches. The primary strength of the church was reported as both the awareness of the underlying problem and the possession of the solution. Participants reported that the main weakness in the area churches as that the majority of church members were unable or unwilling to extend themselves to help less fortunate or troubled people (Langteau, 2014, p. 90). The reasons for the failure of the majority of church members to engage outsiders was explained as either a lack of concern (apathy) or the sense of fear – neither of which are justified in Scripture. From the research we have done, they may also have experienced cognitive dissonance. The strength and weakness of the churches, it was noted, “are interrelated and represent the presence and absence of the same characteristic (Langteau, 2014, p. 91).

FINDINGS

The findings of the study regarding inmate offenders

was determined to equally hold true for the Christians within local churches. The same failures and associated cognitive dissonance observed in inmate offenders was also revealed in the majority of church members. The same medicine – hope, courage, and faith that transform lives, which is prescribed for jail offenders in faith-based programs is also required for church members whose lives betray their lack of faith. The mentors unanimously expressed the perception that it was essential for themselves and offenders to hold a belief where there was hope for change. Each offender had to want to change and believe they could change. The participants felt inmates may feel stuck, trapped in the false belief that they do not have a choice to break free. Rokeach demonstrated that self-conception is the most central idea impacting the belief system theory because self-conception defines the self (Grube et al., 1994). Yet some inmates could not relate to a life free from the cycle of repeat arrests because they did not think they needed to change or thought they could change. Participants reported that offenders frequently felt unable to change. Bandura’s self-efficacy theory affirms that it is not enough for individuals to have the necessary skills and ability to accomplish a goal unless they also perceive themselves able and capable of doing it (Miller, 2011). Other programs also report that perhaps the greatest hurdle is to help inmates realize they must change and that they could change (Greystone Educational, 2008). Participants conceded that inmates must want to change to have a better life, and that was supported by studies that revealed an offender’s readiness to change was as important as the program designed to support change (Anstiss et al. 2011). Oftentimes, this readiness for change is preceded by persons “hitting rock bottom and have no place else to go or no one else to turn to.

Study findings showed that inmates return to prison in part because churches do not have the parishioner involvement required to engage released offenders. The participants stated that this failure is often because of the lack of spiritual maturity on the part of many church members, exemplified by indifference or fear of offenders. Other research confirms that there are risks inherent in caring for offenders, but asserts the risk are worth the cost (Procter-Smith, 2008). The participants believed that the cause of this problem was that church members and even church leaders are themselves in the process of their own spiritual growth and might continue to struggle in their journey. That is also confirmed by other research which concluded the need for forgiveness and restoration is not just an inmate problem but is a human condition, and the church must remember that all people are equally in need of redemption (Kerley et al. 2010).

The focus group also recommended that a greater degree of community engagement be encouraged. This also included attendance in church activities. Broad-based community engagement both increases

the likelihood of success and is increasingly necessary as a cost-effective means of addressing recidivism (Persky, 2011). This comprehensive community interaction is needed to increase awareness about the problems and solutions concerning public safety and recidivism, and could improve the network of support needed to reduce recidivism.

SOLUTION

The research evidence and findings reveal that many church organizations today are focused inward, with little demonstrative transformation of their own lives and even less devotion to authentically engaging those who are hurting, whether in the church or the community. The Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28:18-20 is often spoken of while rarely observed in their own communities much less with power around the world. Consequently, as this and other research confirms, there is often little difference between the church organizations and society at large.

By contrast, the New Testament records the dynamic interaction of the early Church as it engaged the culture and witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit to transform lives. Lives were changed! The early Believers were Christ-centered rather than self-centered, and they did not shrink back from the bondage they witnessed in the world but engaged it with power.

It is one thing to claim that you, your spouse, and children made a public profession and now attend church weekly; it is quite another to witness the power of the Holy Spirit transforming the lives of your family members in an unselfish and fully devoted manner. The solution is not simply to try harder, but to surrender to Christ so hearts may be given life and transformed. Then mere acts of kindness will not be arduous effort and a clanging cymbal but overflowing love that isn't a sacrifice but a joy (1 Corinthians 13). Church members sometimes do not need to learn more but need to submit to the authority of Scripture and apply what they have already learned. At times, it is clear far more has already been learned than is practiced. Scripture admonishes not to be ever learning but never able to come to the truth, thus having a form of godliness that denies the transforming power available to genuine believers (2 Timothy 3:5,7).

Pollsters confirm what we regularly observed; often the plagues in society are similar to what confronts the churches, and for the same reasons. Inmate beliefs and church member beliefs inevitably lead to thoughts, and thoughts give birth to actions. Sometimes what is claimed as a belief is not what is actually believed, as individuals are capable of self-deception. For example, an individual may publicly declare they believe in monogamy while secretly convinced that multiple sex partners would bring them fulfillment. In the case of both inmates and professing Christians, the problem is found in flawed beliefs and likewise the

solution is found in an alignment of genuine beliefs which transform thoughts and inevitably actions. For example, the American Worldview Inventory assessment survey conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona University found from a sample of 1,000 Christian pastors that only slightly more than one out of every three pastors (37%) possessed a biblical worldview ("i.e., adoption of the basic scriptural principles and teachings that form the filter through which we experience, interpret, and respond to the world). Further, of those adults who are theologically-defined as born-again Christians, only 19% identified with a biblical worldview (Barna, 2022, p. 1). Research conducted by Christian Pollster, George Barna also concluded that among adults who considered themselves to be Christian, only 9% held a biblical worldview (Shepherd, 2021). These results are astonishing yet support the findings of our research and explain why many within the churches today need the same faith-based biblical antidote that offenders require. This is further observed through another poll which revealed that over 50% of American adult men in general admit to viewing pornography at least monthly, sadly similar statistically to adult men within churches (ProvenMen, 2014).

Presuppositional beliefs inevitably lead to thoughts, and eventually dictate behavior. The Bible declares, "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he (Proverbs 23:7a). The primary ministry of the church is to conduct biblical discipleship of new and immature Christians into genuine followers of Christ who in turn then disciple others. "The entire missionary endeavor is built upon this God ordained strategy, and there will be no success apart from this plan. The current reality, however, is that we are expecting those who have never been fully disciplined to a place of maturity to go and produce in the lives of others what they themselves have never experienced. So, this is a call to the Church to get back to the fundamental task of making disciples (Langteau, Blankenship, Dunham, & Jun, 2021, p. 6).

The Lord Jesus Christ admonishes the current church era, and His words eerily describe the current condition yet also gratefully offer a solution: "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent (Jesus, Revelation 3:15-19).

The Lord Jesus Christ gave us the answer and solution here. The Lord Jesus commanded the church to be zealous and repent. Revival is needed and it must first begin in the House of God with a call to be

zealous and repent.

CONCLUSIONS

The conceptual frameworks of Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory (1957), Rokeach's Belief System Theory (1960), and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1977) each compliment the biblical record of authentic change. This demonstrates that the scholarly and the biblical resonate in this matter. Festinger identified the fact that contrasting and conflicting ideas are a real factor which must be resolved for dynamic and functional relationships. Rokeach pointed out how ideas and thoughts can and do affect behavior, and that beliefs and thoughts not only proceed behavior but unavoidably dictate behavior. Bandura argued that people learn and are changed by modeling behavior in others to the degree that they become convinced of it within themselves. The three theories address the complicated yet wonderful process that leads to transformation.

All 21 participants indicated that the 15 churches and eight denominations they represented had committed members like themselves who practice the faith and were willing to engage and care for offenders. The participants considered this significant and a strength because they believed the church had the answer to breaking recidivism, that the Bible held the truth that sets people free and that the church was, in fact, able to see lives changed. Yet each of the participants, to varying degrees, identified a common problem; that the majority within the churches were unwilling or unable to care for offenders, either because of indifference or fear or as we have found, cognitive dissonance setting in. In this matter, ironically, the churches were much like the offenders, in need of seeing the truth and embracing what is proclaimed from Scripture. The complacent majority within the churches needed the very thing they recognize the offenders needed. The church can and should maintain without compromise the truth established in the Bible, yet must do so without rejecting offenders and refusing to engage them. This admonition was shared by the participants, not to condemn the church of which they were integral and committed members, but to emphasize the need for many within the church to come into agreement with the sound biblical teachings that some in the church have strayed from.

Professionals have long argued that a person needs to "hit rock bottom" or come to a significant awareness of their desperate need before they are receptive to a change in behavior or a change in their lifestyle. A faith-based approach offers personal power for each of the offenders because Christ is an integral part of the message. Their "higher power refers to our Almighty God and our Lord and Savior who redeems us. Meditation may also be one of the more important steps needed to practice and to achieve self-efficacy, which is confirmed by the Bible in Philippians 4:8

which states, Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things. Offenders and the church both need to make new friendships and have support systems so they can trust others and feel like they are part of a community, yet that is only possible when the church obeys Christ and the Great Commission by engaging those in the community.

In the model on the last page, we have created a picture based on the ideas of a negative feedback system (Gossett, 1989) to display the dynamic nature of feedback loops in a complex adaptive system network associated with recidivism in human service programs. From the top-down, the model depicts the presence of outside (external forces) that can affect a person's life and can affect the programs these offenders may be offered. The forces create demands for appropriate needs, services, and wants that each of the offenders have as human beings. To meet these demands and needs, the costs for these programs and services will continue to increase in this country at both the federal and state levels for the 5 million persons on probation or parole. The need for evidence-based practices and strategies that have been found to work for achieving positive results in lowering and reducing recidivism continues to be an important subject for both faith-based programs and traditional programs.

The most important revelation in this model is to realize that if the dependent variables in the middle involving themes and strategies go up, the results on both sides of the equation will change in a desired direction. The individual improvements are more likely to happen and the negative experiences are more likely to go down which will improve the treatment effectiveness regardless of whether the program is faith-based or not. To reduce the 67% of offenders who return to jail or prison after 3 years to a lowered percentage, we must work on both sides of this equation with strategies based on evidence-based practices that have been found to be effective.

Church members and ministers of congregations need to remember that study findings showed many inmates return to prison because churches do not have the parishioner involvement required to engage released offenders specifically or community members in general. The study participants stated that failure was often because of the lack of spiritual maturity on the part of many church members, exemplified by indifference for or fear of offenders. Other research confirms that there are risks inherent in caring for offenders, but asserts the risks are worth the cost (Procter-Smith, 2008). The participants believed that the cause of this problem was that church members and even church leaders are themselves in the process of their own spiritual growth and might continue to struggle in their journey. This finding has also been confirmed by other research which concluded

the need for forgiveness, submission to Christ, and restoration is not just an inmate problem but is a human condition. The church must remember that all people are equally in need of redemption (Kerley et al. 2010, p. 507). When lives betray the lack of faith, broken relationships result, and false hope ultimately leads to disappointment. When lives are changed in Christ, however, the result is a thankful and wondrous transformation.

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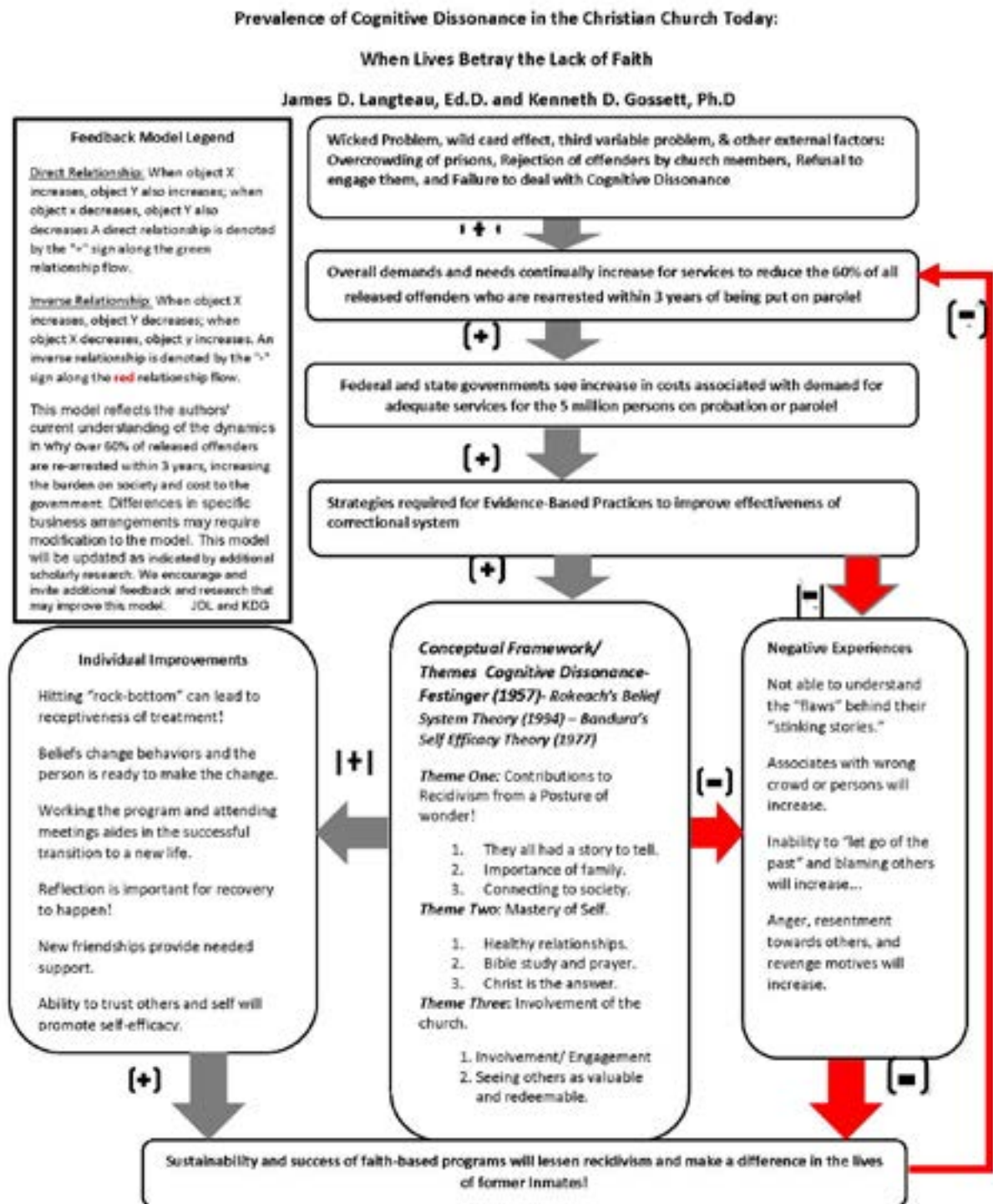


Figure 1: Feedback loops in a complex adaptive system network associated with recidivism in correctional programs.

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