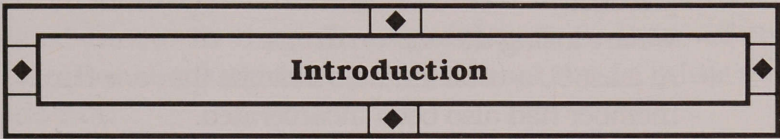


A Time for Solutions: Problems of Crime and Incarceration*



Introduction

The "plague on our house" caused by crime and punishment reflects our common concern. The emphasis, "Partnerships in Corrections," is appropriate. Inasmuch as we are all religious persons—Christian and Muslim—we must develop partnerships to combat this severity or run the risk of losing not only a generation but a race of people—the loss of ourselves. This imperative is based upon the following statistics:

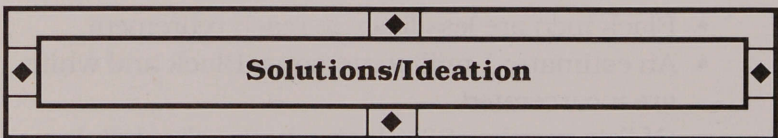
- Two of four Black children born in the 80s will live in a fatherless home.
- More Black young men are in the criminal justice system than in college—609,000 to 439,000.
- Homicide is the number one killer of young Black men.
- Black males have a jobless rate twice that of white males.
- Black children are more likely to die as infants.
- Black men are less likely to reach retirement.
- An estimate: 1 million persons, Black and white, are incarcerated.
- Of this number 80% lack a high school diploma and 75% lack basic reading and math skills.
- The U.S. now has the world's highest known rate of incarceration with 3,109 prisoners per 100,000.

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- The total cost of incarcerating the 1 million Americans in prisons and jails is \$16 billion a year, averaging between \$17,000-\$30,000 for each prisoner.
- We are losing the war on drugs.
- At least 50% of all inmates indicate that one family member had also been incarcerated.

We have rehearsed the statistics on crime so much in recent years that almost anyone can recite them. We wake at night in a cold sweat, wondering if the noise caused by the settling of our house is actually a burglar. We know the crimes created in drive-by shootings, largely the results of drug deals gone sour. We fear that preteen children serve as lookouts or delivery boys and girls for large caches of drugs. We have seen the beginning of incarceration by children who, but for one error in judgment, commit a crime. We are aware also of senseless crimes committed by young men and women throughout the country.

Yes, we know the problems, but what are the solutions? Our treatment of solutions is presented in three categories, i. e., Ideation (solutions in the germinal stage), Process (solutions activated), Accomplished (solutions completed).



Our national policy of separation of church and state, which I generally support, robs us of creative potential for addressing problems such as crime, drugs

and incarceration at the grassroots level. Some churches, blessed with knowledgeable leadership, have the prospect of addressing such problems without the need for external funding. Others, however, need such assistance. In the following discussion, three of the ideational solutions require external funds, while two do not.

Firstly, an increasing number of Black pastors are being trained clinically in counseling and pastoral care. Perhaps, some of the \$16 billion currently expended on incarceration could enable churches to initiate counseling centers where value formation would be a major emphasis. Here, job training and practical issues, such as interview procedures, appropriateness of dress and personal hygiene could be highlighted. Since aggressive behavior is so basic to criminality, perhaps one focus of such programs in local churches could help people control their emotions. We think that emotions do not need to be bridled. They do! We simply cannot give emotional expression to every feeling. The same emotional outbursts that cause us to shout uncontrollably on Sundays when something is said or done in church is the same passion that motivates us to strike back violently when we are threatened or want something belonging to another.

Secondly, creating a church-sponsored work camp is feasible if funds are available. During my childhood, I remember the old program sponsored by the Work Projects Administration. This federal agency supervised workers during the Great Depression in such matters as construction of public buildings, bridges, highways, and rural developments. What would prevent us from organizing groups of young men and women in our churches to participate in projects

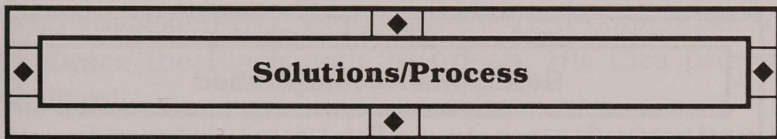
such as environmental control, helping patrol our highways and streets, freeing them of litter, controlling the kudzu plants that smother our trees? Churches could be assisted to take the leadership in the "Adopt a Highway Program." This could give meaningful and productive work to potential offenders.

Thirdly, federal and state governments have a generous scholarship program for young men and women who are attending medical and dental schools and who covenant to establish their practice in rural areas upon completion of their degrees. Could these same government agencies approach our colleges and universities, providing scholarships for the best male students in Departments of Education? What I am suggesting is the creation of a "Male Teacher Corps." To repay the scholarship loan, the student would commit to teach school, mentor students, for example, in the role of a "Big Brother," providing a model for this generation of students. Expensive? Yes it is, but not as expensive as incarcerating a person for \$25,000 or more each year. We have to find pre-incarceration methods.

Fourthly, suppose for a moment we could develop study groups in our churches to explore ways by which we could impact positively the hundreds of thousands of Black men and women who have grown up in single parent homes, primarily raised by mothers. Statistics indicate that 72% of those incarcerated come from such homes. This seems to suggest that many such men do not have strong models by which to pattern their lives. Statistics also inform us that fewer than two percent of elementary school teachers are men. Thus, there is a void of male presence in the home and in the school.

Fifthly, one such activity needed in the Black Church is sensitivity to the feelings of ex-offenders. Many tell me that they are made to feel rejected as they seek to engage in the life of local churches. Many churches take on the trappings of an uncaring society, repudiating those who are not of a particular social strata or act in a certain manner. They forget that the church and mosque are communities of forgiveness, reconciliation and grace. Too often they forget their reason for being; namely, that they are the institutions in society sharing Allah's or God's love for all humanity.

This is why programs such as that of Constance Baugh in New York is vital! Gethsemane Presbyterian Church, of which she is pastor, is largely composed of ex-offenders. Here, these persons are welcomed into the church and community, given a position of leadership, assisted with coping skills and placed in a position to experience a successful transformation from prison cell to church pew.



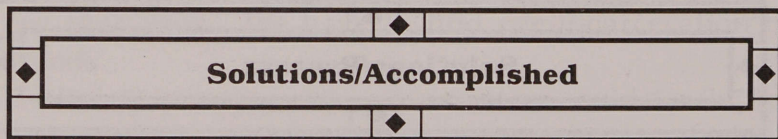
Firstly, this "plague on our house" is addressed at ITC in the way we prepare students for ministry. A part of this preparation involved a series of conferences on the church's response to Black males in prison. A more detailed analyses of this experience is presented later in this paper.

Secondly, since the problem of substance abuse is so closely identified with criminal behavior and subsequent incarceration, ITC has arranged a program

with the U.S. Office of Treatment Information that will be instrumental in combatting abusive behavior. ITC will be assisted by Howard University School of Divinity, Washington, DC, and the School of Theology, Virginia Union University, Richmond, Virginia.

Thirdly, an attempt is being made by the Institution to involve thirty students in paid internships, many of which are closely related to agencies responsible either with incarceration or its prevention. We have received a generous grant from the Ford Foundation to support this effort.

Fourthly, ITC seeks to ensure the sensitivity of its faculty to the problems inherent in crime and punishment. In teaching, whether in Bible, history, theology or pastoral care, the psychological, sociological, political and cultural aspects of incarceration are systematically addressed. We aim to educate students who possess the knowledge and desire to participate in alleviation of this correctional situation.



About five years ago ITC received a sizable grant from the Lilly Endowment to conduct conferences on "Research and the Black Church." The design was to bring together Black theological scholars and Black church people, young and old, to discuss matters of theological scholarship. It was felt that a costly informational- and conversational-gap existed between religious scholars and those persons on the front line—the Black Church.

The first two years of this program, although scholastically meaningful, allowed Black theologians to "dust off" a chapter in their theses. The papers, which included Bible studies, were diverse, but there was nothing that tied them together, or, for that matter, connected the conferees in a meaningful event. We met, acted scholarly, shared a few insights with friends, then went home. That is, the Black Church and the Black scholar were like "ships passing in the night," still talking at each other rather than to each other.

The original grant was for three years, and we still had one year remaining. The Steering Committee for this event was powerful: David T. Shannon, chairperson; C. Eric Lincoln; John Hurst Adams; Larry Mamiya and this writer. Later, H. Herbert Lemmons of the Congress of Black Churchmen was added. In preparing for the final year of these meetings, I voiced my anxiety concerning our previous gatherings, noting their lack of cohesiveness. It was Dr. Lincoln, celebrated professor of Sociology of Religion at Duke University, who suggested that we design the next conference to embrace the Black male in prison. His idea proved brilliant.

Lincoln's suggestion of a unifying theme connected every aspect of American life, especially that of Black America. Probably one in four Black families in the United States have members involved at some point in the correctional systems. The church is no exception. Whether officers, choir boys, ministers or sextons, many churches have members who are ex-offenders.

We decided to design our next gathering on the subject, "The Black Man in Prison: The Church's

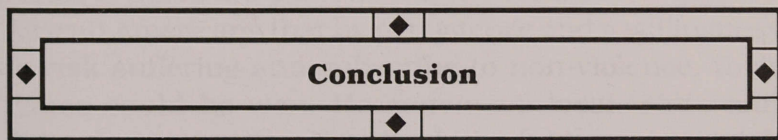
Response." One person gave a general overview of the subject, another discussed a biblical statement, another addressed incarceration theologically. Still others provided models of programs in response to what had been shared in Bible studies and reflection groups. The conference was effectively accomplished, resulting in a book edited by Professor Gayraud S. Wilmore of the ITC faculty. This resource, *Black Men in Prison: The Response of the African American Church*, published by the ITC Press, has had a wide distribution. It met a need, addressing a subject of common concern and severity by every segment of the church. Many are using it as a study document.

In May 1991 a second meeting with the same theme was held. This time, however, our planning was more serious, designing the sessions to include Christians and Muslims, scholars and church practitioners, male and female. We left the halls of academe, boarded buses, went to the Jackson Correction Center, Jackson, Georgia. Here we had prolonged conversations with prison officials, chaplains and prisoners. We walked through seemingly endless corridors, visited cellblocks, heard the noise of steel doors closing behind us and inspected for the first time the Georgia electric chair. As we heard officials discuss the process of death by electrocution, all of our academic formulations were rendered null and void.

The remainder of the meeting was informed by the realism of seeing the problems. We saw prison officials truly concerned with developing a more humane program of rehabilitation. We saw others, who from all outward appearances, were only marking time. For this was merely a job and their attitude was callous.

We observed these same extremes in the chaplains. Meeting with prisoners in small groups, we discussed their alleged crimes. Few admitted guilt or expressed remorse. We learned that some committed crimes while under the influence of alcohol or drugs. The prisoners' churches, especially the Black Churches, distanced themselves and contributed to their alienation, making possible rehabilitation more difficult.

We come to our third meeting on the subject of the "Black Man in Prison." The theme for this ITC conference (June 1995) is "From Prison Cell to Church Pew." In spite of the fact that many persons in the Black Community have been incarcerated, churches are reluctant to accept them. What we have done this time is to identify models of ministry for the ex-offender that are being conducted by churches in the United States and Canada. The response to our questionnaire has been absolutely astonishing! We have learned of hundreds of such models and will publish a bibliography of these programs. Also, we will have major presenters share with us *ministries* of churches to prisoners, *ministries* to those about to be released, *ministries* to those who have returned to the community, church or mosque and *ministries* designed to prevent recidivism.



In this paper we have discussed the "plague on our house" of crime and punishment. We have supported this with appropriate statistics, recognized

the need for building coalitions, explored the need for resolutions in three categories; namely, Solutions/Ideation, Solutions/Process and Solutions/Accomplished.

As we close this presentation, I re-emphasize the need to forge partnerships in corrections since I am painfully aware that our problems are massive. Even so, our ministries must be dedicated to eradicating these societal blights.