

## Study and Reflection Questions for Healing Communities Prayer Circles

### Questions for prayerful reflection

1. Am I, as a Christian, ashamed of my own family member who is incarcerated? If so, what am I ashamed of?
2. Why are we so ashamed of those who commit crimes in our communities?
3. What are we afraid of and why?
4. How do we, as a community, move beyond denial?
5. What does John 20:23 say about our behavior?  
*Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained. (KJV)*  
*If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them? (The Message)*
6. Are you visiting your family member in prison? What does Matthew 25:43-45 say about visiting him/her?  
*I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, **and in prison, and ye visited me not.** Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee anhungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. (KJV)*  
  
*I was a stranger and you did not welcome Me and entertain Me, I was naked and you did not clothe Me, I was sick **and in prison and you did not visit Me** with help and ministering care. Then they also [in their turn] will answer, Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You? And He will reply to them, Solemnly I declare to you, in so far as you failed to do it for the least [in the estimation of men] of these, you failed to do it for Me. (AMP)*
7. What shall we then do?

### Introduction

- What does the term "returning citizen" mean to you? To your ministry?
- What does the term "healing community" mean to you? To your ministry?
- What does the term "station of hope" mean to you? To your ministry?

How, if at all, has your church been addressing crime and incarceration and their impact on members of the congregation?

At this early stage, do you anticipate any obstacles in engaging your congregation in this work? If so, what are the obstacles that concern you?

- People might be ashamed to admit to their or their family member being involved in the criminal justice system?
- Members of the congregation are angry about crime in the community and pretty unforgiving toward those who commit it?
- Our church has been a victim of crime?
- Members of the congregation have been victims of crime?
- Other issues/ problems? What are they?

How would you suggest overcoming the obstacles?

## **Chapter One**

### **Faith and Forgiveness: A True Story**

- What does this story tell us about how communities shut out those who really want to see Jesus?
- Mrs. Washington's heart already belonged to the Lord, but it was trapped in a cage of regret, resentment and revenge. What did she regret? What did she resent? Against whom did she seek vengeance? What does it take to release regret, resentment and revenge? What would have helped move her and the congregation toward release and forgiveness?
- Rev. Williams said the congregation shared Mrs. Washington's anger. What was the church's role in keeping Mrs. Washington's anger alive? What was she wrestling with? Were the other members of the congregations wrestling *with* her?
- What is the turning point in the story? What caused the turn?
- What were the factors that led Mrs. Washington to open her heart and forgive Ron Flowers?
- When did Mrs. Washington's church begin to become a Station of Hope or a City of Refuge?
- How must the church imitate Jesus in showing compassion and offer forgiveness to the alienated?
- How does forgiveness bless the whole family of believers and nonbelievers? How does Zacchaeus' desire to see Jesus lead to the highest blessing in his life?

- What happens when the sinner wants to be saved and forgiven but needs your help?
- With which of the actors in the story do you identify?
- What about your own incarcerated relative?
- What voices joined DeDe's when she heard DeDe speak? Can you identify the voice of the Spirit in the urgent and pleading voice of DeDe? In the voice of Ron? What voice is whispering to you? Isn't it time to forgive?
- Just like a blood clot needs to be cleaned-out so the heart can be healthy, Mrs. Washington needed to clean-out the anger and blame so she could be healthy and live again. What had been blocking Mrs. Washington from forgiving Ron for so many years? Search the Bible to learn what it says about harboring anger and blame.
- What gospel stories parallel this story of Mrs. Washington and Ron and in what way?

Do you think the story is a good way to engage readers in the idea of a Healing Community?

- Could be weaved into a sermon?
- Could be used to engage members of the congregations in the circle to become engaged in this work?
- Would be helpful in a disciples discussion group about the issues and themes presented by the story?
- Could have broader purposes, such as public education?

## **Chapter Two**

### **Why Do We Care?**

What was your initial reaction to the data showing the impact of criminal justice policies?

How do these national numbers appear to align with what is happening in your community?

What is the human cost of these policies in your community? On families, on individuals who are caught up in crime, on crime victims, on your church?

Were you aware of the disproportionate impact of incarceration on the African American community? Beyond the crack / powder sentencing disparities, what do you think are the key factors driving these numbers?

Do you think creating Healing Communities can help turn the curve on the impact of mass incarceration? How?

What is the unique contribution a congregation can make in addressing this crisis?

### **Chapter Three** **Creating a Healing Community: The Role of Pastors**

Are you ready to assume leadership in creating a Healing Community?

- What does a Healing Community beginning to look like? What does the process of creating one look like?
- Can we recognize the shift from hurting to healing? Who are the wounded-healers; who are the wounded-wounders?
- Are forgiveness, reconciliation and redemption the beginning of the process of healing or the result?
- Who is affected when a community is not healing or whole? How is a community affected? Who, beyond Mrs. Washington, was affected by Deirdra's death?
- How is a community a victim of a crime and what is its need for healing?
- How would you introduce Healing Communities to your congregation?
  - Asking: Is there anyone, like me, who has a friend or relative in prison? (show of hands)
  - Give an altar call for families of the incarcerated and offer a pastoral prayer?
  - Identify someone willing to give testimony regarding an incarcerated family member or their own successful reentry?
  - Be creative: What are your suggestions? What will work for your Station of Hope?

Can you make incarceration and the community's redemption of Returning Citizens a theme for the spring or fall revival or a theme for a Sunday morning service?

Can you directly address the congregation's fears?

What do you think of the following topics that could be addressed during the course of a year?

- The story of Mrs. Washington and Ron and the triumph of the soul, forgiveness and reconciliation.
- Posing and answering the Seven Questions.

- Serving the least of these.
- Redemption and Liberation.
- Forgiveness.
- Setting the captives free.
- Welcoming the prodigals.
- The Holy Spirit's anointing for preaching, teaching and healing.
- Power and joy of transformation.
- Triumph of the soul and reconciliation.
- Exploring and engaging nonviolence as a source of healing.

#### **Chapter Four**

#### **Creating a Healing Community -- A Guide for Disciples**

##### **General reflections on building a Healing Community**

- Are you now clear that this ministry is directed to members of your own congregation and their family members?
- Are you clear now that this ministry is directed to those accused of crimes, those incarcerated, those coming home from prison, those who have been victims of crimes and the family members of each?
- Are you now clear that this ministry can start at any point in the criminal justice process (arrest through reintegration)?

##### **Providing comfort**

**The disciples' role is that of comforting their fellow members of the congregation and their families that are hurting, afraid, or ashamed.**

*Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. 2 Corinthians 1:2-4.*

- Is your congregation ready to assume this role?
- What can you do to help them get there?
- In what other contexts has the congregation come together to support an individual or family?

- In what ways, if any, would it be different to comfort congregants affected by crime, incarceration and reentry?
- What are your ideas for first steps in engaging disciples?
  - A study group?
  - A prayer circle made up of members of your church?
  - What resources would you draw upon?

**Disciples' awareness of the criminal justice process**

The first step the guide suggests is:

Familiarize yourself with the criminal justice process and the issues related to crime, incarceration and reentry and its impact on families and communities.

- Appendix D has a flow chart of the process. Is this a tool you can use in helping the disciples understand the process?
- What other resources can you draw upon to deepen your congregation's understanding of the process?

**Part One of Chapter Four suggests 26 ways to guide and help those arrested, incarcerated and coming home from prison.**

Take a look at the list:

1. Pay attention and respond to the first contact.
2. Offer to help *early* – at the time of arrest.
3. Find out about the correspondence, telephoning and visiting rules.
4. Introduce yourself and work with the prison or jail chaplain.
5. Write letters and offer to accept phone calls.
6. Visit the person in jail or prison without affecting family visitation time.
7. Expect some tension during the first few visits.
8. Be present. And listen.
9. Offer to be present at the defendant's court appearances.
10. Help the defendant in preparing for his legal defense or sentencing.
11. Hold the prisoner accountable for what he has done.

12. Forgive him. And encourage his forgiveness of himself.
13. Identify supportive resources (e.g., education, training, treatment) in the prison and in the communities neighboring the prison.
14. Help in preparing for release from prison.
15. Help in the preparation of a release / discharge plan (a transition accountability plan).
16. Help establish realistic expectations.
17. Help prepare for community supervision (e.g. parole).
18. Address the issue of residency prior to release.
19. Address the issue of post-release employment.
20. Identify who will join a circle of peer support.
21. Identify people who can respond 24/7 to crises.
22. Work with prison officials to be clear on date and time of discharge so you can meet the individual at the gate (or bus station) and take him home.
23. Welcome the individual back into the community and church.
24. Provide close support, especially for the first 72 hours after release.
25. Continue the work of reconciliation and help develop a restitution plan.
26. Identify and help people in the congregation with recent as well as long-past criminal records.

- Are these things you can see your congregation doing?
- Are there things you think they might not feel comfortable doing? Why?
- Do you see obstacles in their assuming these responsibilities? If so, what can be done to overcome such obstacles?
- What would you add to this list?
- Would you and your congregation need help in doing any of these things? How might you go about finding such help? What about your own prayer circle?

**Part Two of this Chapter provides 8 suggestions on disciples guiding and helping the *families of defendants, prisoners, and returning citizens.***

Take a look at these suggestions:

1. Help the family of the defendant. Embrace each of them.

2. Address the families' material needs.
3. Build a mentoring relationship with the family.
4. Provide mentoring support to the children of the person in jail or prison.
5. Help the family build or sustain a relationship with the prisoner.
6. Assist with transportation when needed, which might include an offer to drive the family to see the prisoner.
7. Help the children of the parent who is incarcerated stay in touch with him or her.
8. Involve the family in preparing for the return home.

- Are these things you can see your congregation doing?
- Are there things you think they might not feel comfortable doing? Why?
- Do you see obstacles in their assuming these responsibilities? If so, what can be done to overcome such obstacles?
- What would you add to this list?
- Would you and your congregation need help in doing any of these things? How might you go about finding such help? What about your own prayer circle?

Take a look at the materials in the appendix, especially E through K.

- Will these materials help you and the disciples prepare to do this ministry?

**Part Three addresses the ministry to the victims of crime.**

Reflect upon the role Mrs. Washington's forgiveness of Ron played in transforming her and her church.

- How does your church currently help people who have been victims of crime?
- How would the creation of a healing community possibly go further in helping them?
- What are the steps your church can take that could promote healing the victims?
- What kind of help can you provide a victim who is frightened
  - Of the perpetrator who has not been caught?
  - Of the perpetrator's friends and family?
  - Of reporting the crime?
  - Of testifying?
- What is the role of forgiveness? Is it necessary? What has to happen prior to forgiveness?
- What happens when both the victim and the perpetrator are members of the same church?

- Can you see the opportunity for healing that could result from that? For teaching?
- Has your church itself been a victim of a crime? How did you and the congregation respond?

## **Chapter Five: Expanding the Healing to the Community through Advocacy**

The guide says:

*Crime creates victims beyond the individual people injured. Crime can create feelings of unease, fear, frustration and anger. The church can reach out and help to heal the community's wounds.*

- Has your church been doing this?
  - In what ways?
  - What kind of impact has this had?

The guide says:

*The criminal justice system focuses on the perpetrator; it arrests him, tries him, and imprisons him. But the church has a wider lens. The church puts its attention on the community; it strives for reconciliation, which always involves more than the person who committed the crime. It involves the victims and it belongs to the community.*

*In a broader fashion, reconciliation addresses root causes of the injury and suggests practical and policy solutions. Churches move toward reconciliation in a variety of ways -- by supporting families and by extending the reach of their ministry to the larger social justice concerns reflected by the crime.*

- Do you think that these forms of reconciliation are consistent with the mission of your church?
- Do you see policy advocacy as a likely outgrowth of building a Healing Community?
- What is the connection between building a Healing Community and doing advocacy?

The Healing Communities model is being adopted by congregations across the nation and by a variety of denominations and faith traditions. The authors of the guide have been learning from these communities that advocacy on criminal justice issues often organically arises from the specific challenges that are encountered within prayer circles and within congregations.

For example:

**Advocacy on employment restriction based on criminal records:  
The case of the pastor who lost his barber's license**

A small church's pastor was convicted of a felony for failing to pay child support. That conviction caused the forfeiture of his barber's license, which is necessary for him to earn a living as a barber. Now his prayer circle and his congregation are doing advocacy on the issue of people losing occupation licenses due to criminal convictions.

**Advocacy on sex offender geographic restrictions:  
The case of the sex offender turned preacher**

A Healing Community church ministered to the son of a member of the congregation while he was in prison for a sex offense. He was transformed by this ministry and was ordained as a pastor. He also learned a trade – roofing. When he returned home, the church embraced him and he even preached in the church and he was hired to repair the church's roof and the roofs of members of the congregation.

But when his parole officer was substituted for a different one, the new officer measured off the distance from the church to a neighboring school. The church was within 1,000 feet of the school and under state law, he was forbidden to be on church property because of its proximity to the school. That meant he could not attend services with his family and mentors, preach or repair the roof. He was also barred from repairing the roofs of members of the congregation because their homes were 1,000 feet from schools.

Now the prayer circle that the pastor of this church belongs to is working to change the law that forbids people convicted of sex offenses from being within 1,000 feet of schools so that they may work and pray among their loved ones and neighbors.

**The pastor says that had this church not had this experience with this young man, it would have never chosen sex offender geographic restrictions to do advocacy on. But this relationship led their hearts to address this issue.**

- Do you see how creating a Healing Community can *organically* lead to advocacy?

- How is this different than picking an issue members of the congregation think should be addressed or are generally interested in pursuing?
- Do you think your advocacy on an issue might be more powerful if it directly concerned members of your congregation?
- What are the advocacy advantages of knowing intimately how an issue affects people?
- Is your church or members of your prayer circle already involved in some form of advocacy related to criminal justice issues?
  - If so, what issues?
  - How was the issue selected? Does it affect members of your congregation?
- Chapter Two on Why Do We Care introduces a number of issues and Chapter Five suggests advocacy. Do you see a link between these two chapters?

Chapter Five outlines a number of policy issues that some churches are addressing, for instance:

- ❖ Disparate sentencing: Crack vs. powder cocaine
- ❖ Stemming prison growth
- ❖ Addressing conditions of confinement
- ❖ Undoing over-classification of inmates
- ❖ Stopping gun violence
- ❖ Securing treatment for mentally ill people who are arrested
- ❖ Developing, expanding and improving rehabilitation and reentry programming
- ❖ Addressing the lifetime consequences of criminal records

This is a tiny sample of the issues that people who want safer communities and a fairer criminal justice system are addressing.

- Which of these issues do you think are affecting members of your congregation?
- What other policy issues have an impact on members of your congregation?
- What is the special or unique voice that churches can bring to these issues?