SELF-FORGIVENESS, SERVANT-LEADERSHIP, AND RELIGIOUS VOLUNTEERS IN A JUVENILE INCARCERATION SETTING
—Terri Jane Stewart

As the leader of a small non-profit that primarily engages volunteers within juvenile detention settings, I am concerned with how our volunteers behave on campus. We have mentors and religious service providers. However, most come to the work through the lens of a religious calling. Because of the wide nature of religiosity and theology present in our youth, it is necessary to discern where volunteers stand regarding their religious expression, especially if they enter the secular mentoring program. Proselytizing, whether from a mentor or a religious service provider, is outside of the religious policy titled: JR Policy 4.11, Accessing religious and spiritual services (Department of Children, Youth, and Families, 2019). I was on the committee that wrote this policy and we implemented a positive consent model for youth with regard to religious conversations. Meaning, the youth have to request the conversation. They should not be put in the position of saying “no” to a person who has power over them. In addition to proselytizing, I am also concerned with the embeddedness of white supremacy cultural norms within evangelical America as 52.3% of youth incarcerated in Washington state are from the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) community (Gilman & Sanford, 2021, p. 11).
My concerns regarding religiosity and white supremacy cultural norms recently were borne out when I received a response to an internal organizational newsletter article I wrote regarding my first experience of Juneteenth. I shared with my donors and volunteers this information:

At that first celebration that I attended, it was a few talks from leaders of the Black community and a BBQ. The next year, it was held at King County Juvenile Detention, outside, on the grounds. Honor level youth were allowed to attend. Larry Gossett was a speaker. Of course there was food. And they brought kids from the community facilities to this event. In the gym, they had a display of items from the enslavement era in the US. It was horrifying to read the depths of the inhumanity that white America visited upon those who were enslaved. I am sure that my southern history class did not cover even half of what I learned that day. (Stewart, 2022, para. 6)

I received an email that included an expression of the gift of white people in the abolition movement (R. Harris, personal communication, 2022). She said, “…it seems to escape the vast majority that this [freedom from slavery] was achieved because WHITE Americans led by the spirit of God were willing to sacrifice everything to fight for the freedom for human beings” (emphasis hers). She had clearly been ruminating for several days and was led to respond. I do appreciate her point of view. Many white people had to intervene in order to bring an end to slavery. However, the response of raising up a white savior when a white devil is mentioned, points to internalized bias in favor of white culture.

White saviorism “refers to those who work from the assumption that they know best what BIPOC folk need” (Raypole, 2021, para. 4). White saviorism was confirmed by the rest of the content of her email which included scripture, a description of family norms, and the idea that welfare was the worst thing for families as it interrupted family norms.
These are the ideas that do not need to be presented to a dominant BIPOC youth population. As defensive as her writing was, I responded with curiosity rather than ire. We are now entering into a conversation that will hopefully lead to growth. This is the beginning of a personal discussion that should also be held at a systemic level. What follows is the beginning of a systemic discussion of religiosity, white supremacy, volunteerism, and servant-leadership as antidote through the practice of self-forgiveness.

RELIGIOSITY, WHITE SUPREMACY, AND VOLUNTEERISM

Religiosity, specifically, Christianity, is at the heart of most of my volunteer’s efforts. They feel called to do something, especially if they live near a juvenile detention center. Of my volunteers, 90% are Christian with most coming from an evangelical Christian background rather than a mainline or Catholic religious tradition. According to a Pew Research Center survey of prison chaplains (2012), 83% reported having an over-abundance of Christian volunteers (p. 25). Regarding prison chaplains, Pew reports that 84% of the chaplains are Christian, 85% are male, and 70% are white (p. 27). They tend to be protestant (71%) with 44% reporting to be evangelical Christians; 60% also report to be theologically conservative (p. 27). Over half of the chaplains also report being politically and socially conservative (p. 12). Summarizing, the religious volunteers that go to places of incarceration are theologically conservative and/or from an evangelical background.

It is important to know the religious streams of thoughts that influence people’s theology so that better choices can be made regarding who comes in to see youth who are vulnerable to theological exploitation as religious volunteers have extraordinary access to incarcerated youth from other micro-cultures as the majority of incarcerated youth are from the BIPOC community (Gilman & Sanford, 2021, p. 11), not white evangelical America.
Whitehead and Perry (2020) find that the four strongest predictors of identifying with white, Christian nationalism is: conservative political stance, a belief in literal interpretation of the Bible, religious practices, and religious affiliation (pp. 12-13). While not unilateral, evangelicalism is most closely associated with these theological positions. Whitehead, drawing on data from 2007, stated in an interview that “65% of those who say the ‘Religious Right’ describes their religious identity ‘very well’ are ambassadors of Christian nationalism” (as cited in Boston, 2021). Further, Whitehead & Perry (2020) link Christian nationalism with requirements of Christian identity for that population of evangelicals. This is supported by Miller (2021) who found that the “majority of Americans actively support or are sympathetic to Christian nationalism” (p. 67). In white evangelical America, PRRI (2022) reports that 93% believe things in the country are going the wrong direction and 71% believe that the culture has changed for the worse since the 1950’s. This expression of theologically and socially conservative evangelicalism creates a potential conflict of cultures between the multi-cultural environment of juvenile detention youth and the mono-cultural environment of white, Christian, nationalistic evangelical volunteers.

Butler (2021) wrote that the “evangelical quest to win the world for Christ…was to save souls and make believers of all races conform to white, Western, Christian ideals” (p. 34). Drawing on the communications of historical evangelical giants such as Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, and Jerry Falwell, Butler (2021) illustrates the racism that became entrenched in their movement. Billy Graham, who combined Christianity, patriotism, and politics leaned into what we might term respectability politics—those politics that would be based on white, Western, Christian ideals. Billy Graham said about integration and in response to Rev. Dr. King’s “I have a dream” speech: “Only when Christ comes again will little white children of Alabama walk hand in hand with
little Black children” (as cited in Blake, 2018). Graham actively obstructed civil rights work (Blake, 2018). By the end of the 20th century, evangelicals who were steeped in white, Western morality, “yolked” (Butler, 2021, p. 98) their religion to conservative politics. This created fertile ground for the work of Franklin Graham and Donald Trump to embrace whiteness and racism (Butler, 2021). This is a radical statement, but it is rooted in the history of Christian evangelical thought.

In the era of slavery, The Slave Bible was created. This eliminated all references to freedom and emphasized obedience (Taylor-Grover, 2022). During this time, Pastor Robert Dabney, became an avid author on pro-slavery Biblical interpretation (Stewart, 2019). Dabney expertly fused the “legend of the redeemer nation” (Stewart, 2019, p. 110) with Christianity creating Christian nationalism, although that is not what it was labeled then. Current Christian nationalism is generally understood as a set of Christian beliefs that informs political action (Gorski & Perry, 2022). Christian nationalism married with white racial identity creates the political, social, and theological vision that supports the quest for white hegemony (Gorski & Perry, 2022). Dabney, who had a Doctorate in Divinity from Union Theological Seminary, became a chaplain for the Confederate Army and then had a prolific pastoring and writing career “supporting the positions of the Old South” (Banner of Truth, n.d., para. 11)

Dabney’s writings influenced R. J. Rushdooney who was born in 1916 (Chalcedon, n.d.) about 20 years after Dabney’s death. Rushdooney built on Dabney’s writings, creating an “890-page disquisition on ‘the heresy of democracy’” (Stewart, 2019, p. 113), which makes the case that slavery improved the living conditions of Black America—both materially and spiritually. Recently, this view is witnessed in a worksheet students completed at a Texas Charter school in April of 2018 that asked students to list both the positive and negative aspects of slave life (Timsit
& Merelli, 2018). Stewart (2019) writes that “Christian nationalism exploits and intensifies inequality, and dominionism is its logical end” (p. 124). The white Christian nationalism movement seeks to replace inclusion with their own cultural values, which they deem as superior.

Returning to Rushdooney, he sought to reestablish the connection between law, economics, and the authority of the Bible as an instrument of law (Terrell, 2005). Moving forward to the present time, Buddy Pilgrim, founder of Integrity Leadership, a business leader mentoring organization, wrote:

- “We will always exercise and teach dominion in business and politics,” (as cited in Stewart, 2019, p. 155)
- “Business is God’s system of wealth creation. If you turn it over to people who don’t know God you’ll only get ungodly results,” (as cited in Stewart, 2019, p. 155) and
- The only way to make freedom work is to have Godly men and women assuming positions of power and authority in business (and politics). (as cited in Stewart, 2019)

This aligns with Rushdooney’s teachings.

From this ground of being, Capitol Ministries was born. Capitol Ministries, founded and led by Pastor Ralph Drollinger, came into being as a Bible study that was actively evangelized to legislators in world politics (Schwartz, 2019). They found their greatest moment of power under the Presidency of Trump who allowed Drollinger to lead a weekly Bible study with his cabinet (Schwartz, 2019). Drollinger has “set up Bible studies in the capital of 32 states and 24 foreign countries” (Schwartz, 2019, para. 2). Drollinger’s punitive view of Christianity legitimizes punishment and family separation for immigrants, homosexuals, and encourages the subjugation of women (Schwartz, 2019). Drollinger (2013) writes notes citing scripture and interprets government policies through the lens of scriptural inerrancy, such as
“free market capitalism is God’s blueprint for growing a nation’s economy” (p. 6) and that government programs such as The Affordable Care Act or the United States Postal Service should be eliminated. Drollinger (n.d.) also makes a clear case in a policy statement presented to the United States Cabinet, Senate, and House that people are to be “submissive to governing authorities” (para. 1). Rick Perry, then part of the Trump administration, said of Drollinger’s teachings, “These are the values that the country is based on” (Schwartz, 2019, para. 8). As quoted from Butler (2021) earlier, the values are “to make believers of all races conform to white, Western, Christian ideals” (p. 34).

Leaders and teachers such as Drollinger, Rushdooney, and Dabney, believe that the world will be celebrated through Christian nationalism which was Clarkson and others labeled as dominionism to describe the political ideation of those who believe that Christianity should be the national identity (Clarkson, 2016a). The three values of dominionism are (Clarkson, 2016b):

1. They are Christian nationalists and deny that the enlightenment influenced the founders.
2. They promote religious supremacy over other religions and other forms of Christianity.
3. They have a theocratic vision for the world and believe that the Bible should be the foundation of American law.

In current politics, Senator Ted Cruz has embraced “Seven Mountains dominionism which calls for believers to take control over seven leading aspects of culture: family, religion, education, media, entertainment, business and government” (Clarkson, 2016b, para. 15). These are precisely the values that need to be addressed in evangelical volunteers as the marriage of white Christian nationalism and political policy has then been expertly woven into the fabric of the United States. With this weaving of Dabney, Rushdooney, and even Ted Cruz into
evangelical America’s theology coupled with the large population of white evangelicals volunteering in incarceration settings, it is vital that white Christian nationalist thought be tempered. Servant-leadership and self-forgiveness may be the antidote.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AS AN ANTIDOTE TO WHITE CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

Servant-leadership can be an antidote as applied to balancing world inequalities (Cabezas, 2012/2013). Ferch (2012) states that “true leadership heals the heart of the world” (p. 194). There is no doubt that the oppression created by white Christian nationalism affects the macro cultures in the world, such as destroying Indigenous relational and economic practices (Cabezas, 2012/2013). Gellner describes this process as homogeneous nations and cultures that view themselves as superior and then impose their practices on other nations and cultures that were different (as cited in Jiménez-Luque, 2015). This is similar to the theology and practices of white Christian nationalists as it relates to those who are not white and who are not Christian within the micro-cultures of the United States.

In fact, as white Christian nationalist values have been imposed on BIPOC America, there has been an accompanying destruction of the communal and self-protective nature of their communities (Peralta, 2008). During the civil rights movement, as Black groups began to protect themselves from the police, they were quickly labeled as criminal. Notably, this is the genesis of the development of historical Black gangs in America (Peralta, 2008). Alexander (2010/2012) reveals the racial imbalance of the justice system. Rovner (2021), investigating youth incarceration, reinforces Alexander by revealing the imbalance of incarcerated BIPOC youth in the United States. If systems shift towards servant-leadership whose purpose includes bringing healing, perhaps the imbalance would recede.
Servant-leadership becomes a purpose that would see people heal, thrive, and become servant-leaders themselves (Greenleaf, 1977/2002). This is what volunteers (evangelical) and incarcerated youth need. The primary diagnosis that leads people to incarceration is trauma as 98% of the prison population has at least one experience of serious childhood trauma (Compassion Prison Project, n.d., chart 2). Therefore, approaching incarcerated youth from a standpoint of healing aligns with understanding their experiences of the world and meeting them where they are rather than forcing an outside, white Christian nationalist, culture onto them. This meets Greenleaf’s (1977/2002) best test of servant-leadership:

Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? (p. 27)

Shamar Slaughter was in King County juvenile detention about 14 years ago and he was a gang member. His name is being used here as he has shared his story widely on the internet, in newspapers, and on the radio. His father was a gang member; his uncle was a gang member; his mother was a gang member. He started carrying a gun to school in fourth grade because he would have to cross through a rival’s gang territory (S. Slaughter, personal communication, 2008). Death was ever present in his family. He had six friends in his life murdered in one year (Slaughter, 2018). Between trauma and gang embeddedness, he was on a predictable path towards incarceration.

Slaughter’s uncle, Maurice Clemmons, is infamous in Washington state as the murderer of four Lakewood police in Parkland, Washington (Slaughter, 2018). The police raided his home looking for Clemmons. In the process, they tossed his mother’s home, and as Slaughter (2018) puts
it, “did some real disrespectful stuff” (para. 12). His response was to become more loyal to his extended gang family and increase his distrust of policing. The white Christian nationalist values that define family and economics were not his reality and were actively not trusted. Additionally, he comes from a traditionally red-lined neighborhood in south Seattle (University of Washington, n.d.) which accompanies neighborhoods being under-resourced, economically strapped schools, and lack of alternatives for youth.

As Slaughter (2018) says, juvenile detention was not useful and when he was free, nobody stepped in to help him or his family, “never once” (para. 31). What healed Slaughter from continued gang involvement was his own health complications and the medical staff at a juvenile detention center that finally believed him. He was not believed when he described his health problems to staff in juvenile detention before he had seven life-threatening seizures (Slaughter, 2018). However, because of a culture that says that Black bodies can absorb more pain (Sabin, 2020) and that incarcerated people simply lie to manipulate staff and volunteers, Slaughter was left untreated until it became life-threatening. Staff simply did not believe him. He could not be healed because those around him did not participate in truth.

Cabezas (2012/2013) describes truth as an antecedent to forgiveness and restoration. Through a model of servant-leadership, staff, volunteers, and youth can begin to know and seek truth. Staff and volunteers, by developing beyond the white Christian nationalist social values that are embedded within our culture and youth, by being with volunteers that can accept them for who they are, completely and unreservedly.

Servant-leadership is situated to bring healing to the oppressed and the oppressor, restoring right relationship (Ferch, 2012). Summarizing Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s work as a servant-leader, Ferch (2012) describes King’s transformational vision of the world as grounded in
love, saying, “when we love the oppressor, we bring about not only our own salvation, but the salvation of the oppressor” (p. 13). Greenleaf (1977/2002) stated:

All that is needed to rebuild community as a viable life form for large numbers of people is for enough servant-leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant-leader demonstrating his or her unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group. (p. 53)

Greenleaf (1977/2002) uses the term unlimited liability to describe his concept of love for the other. Unlimited liability is akin to unconditional love but with the implication that your liabilities are my liabilities. It is complementary to the philosophy of ubuntu present in the nations of Africa. Desmond Tutu (2009) describes ubuntu this way: “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours” (p. 31). Sister Jane Francis from Uganda describes it this way, “I am because we are. We are because I am” (J. Francis, personal communication, 2011). This is the inextricable bond of community with individuality where liabilities and assets are shared. It is far from the values of white Christian nationalism. It is servant-leadership bound up in love for the community that is served.

Patterson (as cited in Van Dierendonck, 2011) describes this love as agapao love and insists that it is an antecedent to servant-leadership, humility, and altruism. Van Dierendonck (2011) describes agapao love as moral love, “which means doing the right thing at the right time and for the right reason” (p. 1244). In Christian tradition, agapao love (often named agape love) is describes as sacrificial, servant love: love in service to the world. This is where religious volunteers who unknowingly are settled into white Christian nationalist values, can begin to deconstruct their biases so that they can better serve incarcerated youth. If the ground of being is agapao love, truth and then forgiveness can arise: Truth about
self and others, forgiveness of self and other.

Doing the right thing in service to the world is how most volunteers to the incarcerated would self-describe. A volunteer in a juvenile incarceration setting, Christian Cary (2022), describes it this way:

Here is what I did not expect. When I visit Echo [Glen], I feel alive. I experience an overflowing unconditional love for these boys. This is not normal for me. I am simply not that good. I think the Holy Spirit changes me when I’m there, and I become a pipeline God uses to pour HIS love out on these kids. There is no other explanation that makes sense. (Volunteer Spotlight, para. 8)

Agapao love, as an antecedent to servant-leadership, positions the possibility that evangelical volunteers can heal the white Christian nationalist values that they are unaware of and develop, as Christian Cary did, into serving the specific community before them, taking on love with unlimited liability which should lead towards becoming aware of their own biases or faults within.

Ferch (2012) describes servant-leaders as aware of faults within themselves and as leaders who promote reconciliation beyond their families, “across races, cultures, and creeds” (p. 160). Volunteers whose understanding of community is caught up in the rhetoric of white Christian nationalism can be brought into an awareness of their own attitudes towards cultural norms that may be counterproductive to the growth and development of incarcerated youth. The reality is that youth will be returning to their homes, their neighborhoods, and their schools. They will face the same temptations and the same poverty, trauma, gang-involvement, and bias. Greenleaf (1977/2002) states that those who have privilege and power over others, through servant-leadership, could step aside and then “serve by helping when asked and as instructed” (p. 48). Volunteers could grow into agapao love and an understanding that old ideas of cultural norms may not serve the youth before them.
In a conversation with a mentor to incarcerated youth, the mentor lamented the fact that the youth he was working with was so gang involved. He could not see a way forward for the youth because gang involvement is an entrenched norm. To move away from gang involvement means leaving community, home, family, and friends. That is difficult, especially for a teenager who does not have full autonomy to break away from gang members that may be their father, mother, uncle or friends. The mentor overcame his own entrenchment in leading the youth away from the gang and was able to fully enter into the world of his mentee and was filled with joy at the prospect of a creative third way being made for his mentee. He was able to surrender his own cultural norms in order to imagine the youth staying in his own culture but moving towards lawful (or less risky) behavior. This mentor listened well.

Greenleaf (1977/2002) describes listening as an attitude of openness. This attitude of listening based in agapao love is the fundamental component that volunteers share, regardless of theological stance. Through listening, love grows and healing through self-forgiveness can be created for all, the oppressed and the oppressor.

SELF-FORGIVENESS: HEALING FOR ALL

In Desmond Tutu’s (2009) discussion of forgiveness, he states that both the oppressed and the oppressor are dehumanized. Tutu calls for forgiving one another in a restorative justice journey. However, what is needed for both volunteers and youth in juvenile detention, is self-forgiveness. Volunteers need experiences to come to terms with white Christian nationalist biases that they put on youth and volunteers need to hold themselves gently, forgiving themselves for having these implicit biases. Additionally, youth need to experience self-forgiveness so that they can transcend their crime and begin to know themselves as good and cherished people. Shame is common in nearly all people who leave an
incarceration setting (Abrams et al., 2023). Incarcerated youth can transform the internal stories of shame to stories of joy which increases the likelihood of success on the outside (Abrams et al., 2023). One way of doing this is through deep conversations with trusted volunteers who have love’s unlimited liability for the youth before them. Suzuki & Jenkins (2022) found that forgiveness from directly involved victims is not necessary. It is possible for find forgiveness by other means. It is important, though, that behavior with negative consequences be understood as forgivable. This is a role that volunteers can fill: helping youth understand their crime and attendant shame as forgivable.

Suzuki and Jenkins (2022) describe self-forgiveness as a process that leads towards desistance. Snow (as cited in Suzuki & Jenkins, 2022) describes self-forgiveness as the “second best alternative to interpersonal forgiveness” (p. 204). This is especially apt for religious volunteers who have been immersed in a culture that upholds the values that are rooted in white Christian nationalism. With weighty issues of racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, and more, there are rarely specific people available to ask forgiveness from. Seeking forgiveness from their understanding of the Divine while simultaneously forgiving themselves can lead to changed behavior and side-step the shame they may feel when revealing these biases to others.

It is difficult to develop into a place where forgiveness of self is sufficient. Ramsey’s description of Brian Mitchell’s story as described by Ferch (2012) is of a person who could not forgive himself until forgiven by the people who were harmed by his actions. Mitchell says, “For me…self-forgiveness wasn’t a reality” (p. 41). This is one of the most difficult issues when addressing implicit bias and internalized white Christian nationalism. The terms themselves seem accusatory which turns people away and there is seemingly no one to seek forgiveness, leaving the shame internalized.
Assuming that volunteers could be filled with agapao love and unqualified liability for the youth before them, volunteers could be left with the stigma of shame that is described by Torres-Mackle (2020) as white shame. White shame is what is produced when self-evaluation concludes that there is racism present in a white person’s actions and then the person concludes with, “What is wrong with me?” (Torres-Mackle, 2020, para. 4) rather than “How could I do that?” (para. 4). Shame is an untransformed pain. Rohr (2016) writes that pain not transformed is pain transferred, often to the vulnerable people around us. This is why self-forgiveness of white shame and living from transformation rather than the empty feeling of shame is vital among evangelical volunteers who experience such an awakening to the white Christian nationalist biases within.

CONCLUSION

Ferch (2012) states that the “servant leader attends to, heals, and transcends the burden of his or her own emptiness and evokes similar transcendence in the lives of others” (p. 82). By attending to self-forgiveness within a servant-leadership construct, volunteers can move beyond their own internalized biases and become agents of agapao love, forgiveness, and transcendence in juvenile detention centers. Self-forgiveness is a possibility for both the volunteer and the youth before them. Suzuki & Jenkins (2022) report that self-forgiveness among the incarcerated leads towards desistance of undesired behavior. Self-forgiveness for internal biases could also lead towards desistance of undesired white Christian nationalist behaviors.

White Christian nationalism is difficult to pinpoint and yet its cultural influences permeate the religiosity and values of evangelical Christians. As this is the bulk of those who volunteer with incarcerated people, it is incumbent upon leaders of these volunteer organizations to steep the volunteer intake and development process with servant-
leadership that is undergirded by agapao love. By modeling and teaching through a servant-leadership lens, the beginning of a healing process of self-forgiveness for both the volunteer and the youth that they serve can begin.

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