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The Church and Reintegration of Ex-Inmates in Nigeria: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This qualitative research investigates the role of the church in promoting civil reintegration for ex-inmates. Drawing from social justice and the Church's teachings on redemption and the dignity of each human person, this research investigates how church-led initiatives and advocacy work to overcome the range of barriers faced by returning citizens. The study focused on churches in urban areas with established reentry programs. This study used a purposive sampling strategy to select participants who had direct experience with reentry initiatives. The participants were 10 church leaders, 5 social workers, and 8 ex-inmates who had participated in church-led programs. It explores key themes in the experiences of returning citizens through interviews with church leaders, social workers, and the returning citizens themselves: community support, mentorship, employment opportunities, and policy advocacy. The findings indicated that churches played an instrumental role in providing not only practical support but also in advocating for systemic changes that promote the reintegration process. The study emphasizes faith-based efforts as a means of advancing a more caring and just community that provides returning citizens with an opportunity for redemption and reintegration.

Keywords: Ex-Inmates, Community support, Employment opportunities, Re-integration and Redemption.

Introduction

Incarceration and reintegration present significant social challenges worldwide, but these challenges are especially pronounced in Nigeria, where the criminal justice system is burdened by overcrowded prisons, limited rehabilitation programs, and inadequate post-release support (Adebayo, 2021). The city of Jos, Plateau State, exemplifies these difficulties as it grapples with

a growing population of returning citizens—individuals who have served prison sentences and are attempting to reintegrate into society. The transition from incarceration to community life is fraught with multiple barriers including social stigma, unemployment, and limited access to education and health services (Olaniyan & Akinola, 2020).

The Nigerian prison system is characterized by severe infrastructural challenges and systemic inefficiencies that undermine rehabilitation efforts (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). For example, overcrowding in Nigerian prisons frequently exceeds capacity by over 150%, resulting in poor living conditions that further marginalize inmates (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2023). Upon release, former inmates face the daunting task of rebuilding their lives in an environment that often views them with suspicion and prejudice. This societal stigma extends to family rejection and limited opportunities for gainful employment, creating a cycle that perpetuates recidivism (Ezeani & Okoli, 2019).

Despite these hurdles, government initiatives aimed at supporting reintegration remain limited and underfunded. The Nigerian Correctional Service provides minimal post-release programs, and comprehensive social reintegration policies are largely absent or ineffective (Amadi, 2022). This institutional gap has created a vacuum that faith-based organizations have increasingly sought to fill. In particular, churches in Jos have become crucial agents in providing social, economic, and spiritual support to returning citizens, recognizing the complex and multifaceted nature of reintegration challenges (Bello & Musa, 2021).

Faith-based organizations are uniquely positioned to address reintegration barriers due to their community reach, moral authority, and commitment to holistic care. Churches in Jos not only offer spiritual counseling but also engage in vocational training, educational programs, and psychosocial support aimed at restoring dignity and providing tangible pathways to economic independence (Okeke & John, 2023). Such interventions align with findings from broader African contexts, where faith communities have played vital roles in peacebuilding, social healing, and rehabilitation for marginalized populations (Miller, 2018).

The importance of churches' involvement in reintegration is underscored by the social capital they generate. Through fostering networks of acceptance and belonging, churches help mitigate the isolation and alienation experienced by many returning citizens (Nwaubani, 2020). These supportive environments contribute significantly to reducing recidivism and enhancing community cohesion. However, while the contribution of churches is widely acknowledged, there is a paucity of empirical research focused specifically on Jos, a city marked by both social diversity and conflict, which shapes the reintegration landscape in unique ways (Adewale & Olatunji, 2022).

This study is therefore designed to fill this gap by exploring the roles churches in Jos play in the reintegration of returning citizens, and by documenting the lived experiences of these individuals involved in church-led reentry programs. Understanding how faith-based initiatives operate within this local context can provide critical insights for policymakers, practitioners, and religious institutions aiming to enhance reintegration outcomes.

Specifically, the study addresses two main research questions: (1) What roles do churches in Nigeria play in the reintegration of ex-inmates? (2) What are the experiences of ex-inmate involved in church-based reentry programs? The answers to these questions will shed light on the social, economic, and spiritual dimensions of reintegration support provided by churches, revealing both successes and ongoing challenges.

By focusing on Jos, this study contributes to the broader discourse on reintegration in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the importance of community-led and faith-driven approaches in contexts where state support is often inadequate. The findings aim to inform the development of more holistic, inclusive, and sustainable reintegration strategies that leverage existing community strengths and resource

Literature Review

Empirical studies from the U.S. and Latin America suggest that faith-based programs can reduce recidivism by fostering identity transformation, instilling discipline, and offering emotional

support (Clear, 2009; Johnson, 2008). Locally adapted versions that respect cultural and religious diversity in Nigeria may be equally effective.

Nigerian Correctional System and Reentry Challenges

The Nigerian correctional system faces multiple structural and operational challenges, including overcrowding, inadequate rehabilitation programs, poor funding, and prolonged pretrial detentions (Ajomo & Okagbue, 1991; Chukwuma, 2020). These systemic issues hinder the rehabilitative function of the prison system and contribute to high rates of recidivism.

Upon release, former inmates face a precarious reintegration process. The lack of institutional support and community acceptance severely limits their ability to transition smoothly into society. Studies show that ex-offenders often struggle with finding housing, accessing healthcare, and restoring social ties (Alemika, 2019). These barriers are exacerbated by societal stigma, limited employment prospects, and minimal government-sponsored reintegration programs.

Stigma, Employment Barriers, and Social Isolation

Stigmatization remains a critical barrier to reintegration in Nigeria. Formerly incarcerated individuals are often perceived as morally corrupt or dangerous, a perception reinforced by media portrayals and cultural beliefs about crime and punishment (Igbo, 2007). This stigma extends to families and communities, leading to social rejection and psychological trauma.

Employment is another major obstacle. Due to the lack of skills training within prisons and employers' reluctance to hire ex-offenders, many returnees find themselves excluded from the formal labor market (Oluwatoyin & Adebayo, 2018). The resulting unemployment often leads to reoffending and cyclical incarceration.

Social isolation compounds these challenges. The rupture of familial and social bonds during incarceration can be permanent, particularly when the community does not facilitate reacceptance. Without supportive networks, former inmates face increased risk of homelessness, mental health issues, and reoffending (Alemika, 2019).

Churches as Social Institutions in Nigeria

Churches play a central role in Nigerian society—not just as places of worship but as powerful social institutions. They are often deeply embedded in community life, wielding moral authority and commanding large followings across denominations. Their influence extends into education, healthcare, and socio-political advocacy (Ibrahim, 2012).

The church has historically been involved in community development through welfare programs, youth mentorship, and educational initiatives. It also provides spiritual healing and emotional support, particularly during periods of personal or communal crisis. Given its trusted position, the church is well-positioned to mediate reintegration processes by fostering acceptance, promoting forgiveness, and reducing societal stigma against ex-offenders.

Role of Churches in Community Development, Healing, and Advocacy

Churches in Nigeria have contributed to peacebuilding, post-conflict reconciliation, and poverty alleviation. They organize community outreach initiatives, run shelters and food programs, and offer counseling services. Many are involved in advocating for social justice, prison reform, and rehabilitation (Adogame, 2010).

By promoting restorative justice principles, churches can encourage communities to see former inmates not as threats but as individuals in need of healing and support. This can be accomplished through sermons, church-based outreach, and partnerships with NGOs and correctional institutions. Churches can also help change public narratives around incarceration and reentry, creating more inclusive communities.

Faith-Based Reintegration Programs (Global and Local Examples)

Faith-based reintegration programs have shown promise globally, particularly in countries like the United States, South Africa, and Brazil. These programs often combine spiritual counseling, vocational training, mentorship, and community reintegration support. For instance, the Prison

Fellowship International operates in several countries, including Nigeria, offering support to inmates and their families both during and after incarceration.

In the Nigerian context, organizations like the Prison Fellowship Nigeria and the Catholic Prison Chaplaincy provide religious services, post-release mentorship, and reintegration programs. While these efforts remain under-resourced and localized, they highlight the potential for scaling up faith-based initiatives.

Theoretical Framework

The reintegration of returning citizens is a complex process influenced by various social, spiritual, and economic factors. In the Nigerian context, particularly in Jos, faith-based organizations such as churches play a crucial role in facilitating reintegration through multifaceted support. This section explores three interrelated frameworks underpinning the role of churches in reintegration: Faith-Based Social Support Theory, Christian Theology on Redemption and Human Dignity, and Social Justice and Reintegration Models within African contexts.

Faith-Based Social Support Theory

Faith-Based Social Support Theory provides a comprehensive understanding of how religious organizations and communities serve as pivotal social support systems for marginalized individuals, including returning citizens. This theoretical perspective argues that faith communities not only offer spiritual sustenance but also provide practical resources, emotional support, and social capital essential for successful reintegration (Ellison & George, 1994; Krause, 2006).

According to this theory, faith-based organizations extend support through four primary domains: emotional support, informational support, instrumental support, and appraisal support (House, 1981; Wuthnow, 1994). Emotional support involves expressions of empathy, love, and care, which help individuals cope with psychological distress common among formerly incarcerated persons. Informational support includes guidance and advice, such as mentoring and educational

programs provided by churches. Instrumental support refers to tangible assistance, including job training, financial aid, and housing. Lastly, appraisal support involves affirmation and feedback that reinforce positive identity reconstruction and self-esteem (Krause, 2006).

In the context of Jos, churches act as critical providers of these support types. For example, programs within churches offer vocational training and entrepreneurship opportunities that address economic barriers faced by returning citizens (Bello & Musa, 2021). Spiritual counseling services address emotional and psychological needs, fostering resilience and hope (Okeke & John, 2023). Importantly, these churches also serve as social networks that mitigate stigma by reintegrating former inmates into welcoming community groups (Nwaubani, 2020). This holistic approach aligns with Faith-Based Social Support Theory's emphasis on multidimensional support as essential to successful social reintegration.

Moreover, faith-based social support is often delivered in environments that emphasize unconditional acceptance and forgiveness, which are critical for the rehabilitation of stigmatized groups (Lim & Putnam, 2010). The church's role in promoting a non-judgmental atmosphere facilitates the rebuilding of social identity among returning citizens, enabling them to transcend the labels of 'criminal' and reclaim their dignity (Ellison & George, 1994).

Christian Theology on Redemption and Human Dignity

The theological foundation of church-led reintegration programs in Jos is deeply rooted in Christian doctrines of redemption, forgiveness, and the inherent dignity of every human being. Central to Christian theology is the belief that all individuals are created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) and thus possess intrinsic worth regardless of past actions (Grenz, 1994). This principle forms the ethical basis for the church's mission to support returning citizens as they rebuild their lives.

Redemption in Christian theology signifies the process by which individuals are restored from sin and brokenness to wholeness through God's grace (McGrath, 2013). This concept is particularly relevant to the reintegration of former inmates, who often carry the burden of guilt,

shame, and social alienation. Churches in Jos embrace this theological framework by offering spiritual renewal and a pathway to moral transformation, fostering hope and a sense of purpose among returning citizens (Bello & Musa, 2021).

Forgiveness, another cornerstone of Christian belief, is viewed as a liberating act that frees individuals from the bondage of past mistakes and social condemnation (Enright, 2001). Within church-led programs, forgiveness is not only offered by clergy but is also extended among community members to returning citizens, helping to dismantle stigmatizing attitudes and promote reconciliation (Okeke & John, 2023). This theological stance provides a foundation for social acceptance and community reintegration, addressing both spiritual and social dimensions of rehabilitation.

The church's emphasis on human dignity also informs its approach to social justice and care. Christian social ethics advocate for the protection of the vulnerable and the restoration of marginalized individuals to their rightful place within society (Cone, 2010). In practical terms, this translates into church-led initiatives that seek to empower returning citizens economically and socially, affirming their value beyond their criminal past (Miller, 2018). By grounding reintegration efforts in the respect for human dignity, churches foster environments that uphold the worth of every individual and challenge societal discrimination.

This theological framework complements the social support theory by highlighting the spiritual motivation and moral imperative driving faith-based reintegration programs. It situates the church's work within a broader narrative of hope, transformation, and justice, which resonates deeply with both returning citizens and their communities.

Social Justice and Reintegration Models in African Contexts

In African societies, reintegration models are often shaped by cultural values emphasizing community cohesion, restorative justice, and collective responsibility (Alemika, 2016). Social justice frameworks within these contexts highlight the need to address systemic inequalities,

promote human rights, and ensure inclusive development, all of which are essential for sustainable reintegration (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

Restorative justice is particularly relevant in African reintegration discourse. Unlike punitive justice systems focused solely on punishment, restorative justice seeks to repair the harm caused by crime through reconciliation between offenders, victims, and the community (Zehr, 2002). In Nigeria, traditional practices such as community dialogue, apology, and restitution have long been employed to restore social harmony (Ugwudike, 2014). Churches in Jos often incorporate restorative justice principles in their reintegration programs, facilitating processes that enable returning citizens to make amends and regain community trust (Adewale & Olatunji, 2022).

The social justice approach also recognizes that reintegration cannot succeed without addressing structural barriers such as poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion (UNDP, 2019). African churches have historically played a dual role as spiritual leaders and social advocates, campaigning against injustice and providing social services in areas where government presence is limited (Hendriks, 2014). In Jos, church-led initiatives frequently include advocacy for policy reforms and collaboration with civil society organizations to improve reintegration frameworks (Bello & Musa, 2021).

Moreover, the African concept of Ubuntu—often summarized as ‘I am because we are’—underscores the importance of interconnectedness and mutual support within communities (Mbiti, 1969; Tutu, 1999). This philosophy aligns with faith-based reintegration efforts that emphasize communal acceptance and collective responsibility for supporting returning citizens. Churches mobilize community resources and social networks, fostering an environment where former inmates can regain their place within the social fabric (Nwaubani, 2020).

The choice of choosing, social justice and reintegration models in African contexts highlight the intersection of cultural values, human rights, and community-based approaches. These frameworks provide critical insights into how churches in Jos navigate complex social realities to offer holistic reintegration support that goes beyond spiritual care to encompass economic empowerment and social inclusion.

The reintegration of returning citizens in Jos, Nigeria, is underpinned by theoretical and conceptual frameworks that emphasize multidimensional support, spiritual redemption, and social justice. Faith-Based Social Support Theory illuminates how churches provide emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support necessary for successful reintegration. Christian theology offers a moral and spiritual foundation centered on redemption, forgiveness, and human dignity, motivating church-led initiatives. Finally, social justice and African reintegration models contextualize these efforts within broader cultural values of restorative justice, community cohesion, and advocacy for systemic change.

Together, these frameworks elucidate the vital and multifaceted role churches play in the reintegration process, providing a comprehensive lens through which to analyze and enhance faith-based programs supporting ex-inmates in Jos.

Method of Data Collection

This study adopted a qualitative research design, employing in-depth interviews to examine the role of urban churches in the reintegration of returning citizens in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria. The research focused on gathering rich, contextual insights from individuals directly involved in church-based reentry efforts.

A total of 23 participants were purposively selected to ensure relevance and depth of information. These included 10 church leaders from the Catholics and COCIN which churches actively engaged in reintegration outreach, 5 social workers affiliated with faith-based organizations, and 8 ex-inmates who had participated in church-led reintegration programs. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with first-hand knowledge and experience in the reintegration process. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the practices, challenges, and successes associated with faith-based reintegration efforts.

A thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. This involved identifying recurring patterns and key themes within the interview transcripts, providing a structured yet flexible method for

analyzing qualitative data. The findings aim to offer insights into how urban churches contribute to the successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals within their communities.

Findings

Holistic Community Support

Participants emphasized the vital role church communities play in providing holistic support that encompasses emotional, spiritual, and material dimensions. Faith-based organizations often create environments of belonging and care through small groups, mentorship programs, and prayer networks. These relational structures foster resilience, facilitate spiritual growth, and provide informal counseling and peer support. Material assistance—such as food distribution, housing aid, and crisis intervention—further demonstrates the church’s commitment to meeting immediate needs alongside spiritual ones.

Economic Empowerment through Churches

Churches and faith-based organizations were found to be instrumental in promoting economic self-sufficiency, particularly for individuals facing social reintegration or poverty. Many offer skills training programs, microenterprise development initiatives, and job placement assistance. Participants also noted the strategic role of partnerships between churches, faith-based NGOs, and business entities in expanding access to economic opportunities. These collaborations often serve to bridge gaps in employment and provide sustainable pathways toward financial stability.

Moral and Civic Advocacy

Churches frequently act as moral and civic advocates in addressing systemic issues such as stigma, discrimination, and mass incarceration. Respondents cited church-led public campaigns aimed at reducing social stigma, particularly surrounding former prisoners. Furthermore, churches were actively involved in local policy dialogues, contributing a moral and ethical voice to discussions on prison reform and criminal justice. This advocacy reflects a broader

commitment to restorative justice and social transformation grounded in theological and ethical principles.

Discussion

This study explored how churches in Jos, Nigeria, contribute to the reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals. The findings are best understood through the combined lenses of Faith-Based Social Support Theory, Christian Theology on Redemption and Human Dignity, and African models of social justice and reintegration.

The Church as a Healing and Restorative Agent

The concept of the church as a holistic healing agent is supported by Faith-Based Social Support Theory, which posits that religious communities provide distinct emotional, spiritual, and tangible resources that strengthen individual well-being, particularly in times of social transition (Ellison & George, 1994). Participants in this study reported accessing not only prayer and spiritual counseling but also mentorship, food support, and shelter through their church networks. This reflects the church's ability to function as an informal but deeply trusted social safety net.

Furthermore, Christian Theology on Redemption and Human Dignity reinforces the idea that every individual, regardless of past wrongdoing, retains inherent worth as *imago Dei*—created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Churches in Jos often frame reintegration as an act of divine restoration, where former prisoners are not only forgiven but seen as capable of moral and social transformation. This redemptive framework allows individuals to reimagine their identity not as criminals, but as testimonies of God's grace, thus fostering resilience, hope, and motivation for reintegration.

Comparison with Global Faith-Based Reintegration Practices

Globally, faith-based approaches to reintegration tend to emphasize structured rehabilitation programs, often in collaboration with state systems or NGOs. In the United States, for example, church-led initiatives include transitional housing, employment services, and prison chaplaincy

(Clear et al., 2000). These models often adopt a restorative justice lens, emphasizing restitution, accountability, and reconciliation.

In contrast, Nigerian churches operate within a more grassroots and spiritually driven framework. While lacking systemic support or formal partnerships with correctional institutions, they rely on indigenous forms of support rooted in relational networks, spiritual mentoring, and communal intercession. Economic empowerment programs—such as small business training or microloans—are often implemented independently by churches or in partnership with faith-based NGOs. This model reflects a shift from state dependence to communal resilience, where local churches become centers of both spiritual healing and economic agency.

Cultural and Religious Influences Unique to Jos

The socioreligious context of Jos significantly shapes how reintegration is practiced and perceived. Jos is marked by religious plurality, ethno-religious conflict, and high Pentecostal influence. These factors contribute to a unique theological and cultural approach to reintegration that is both spiritually intensive and communally grounded.

Churches in Jos often engage in practices such as deliverance, prophetic counseling, and testimony-sharing, which serve as public rituals of transformation. These practices provide moral legitimation and spiritual validation, helping to restore the social identity of ex-prisoners within their communities. The emphasis on public forgiveness and reconciliation is consistent with African models of justice, which prioritize communal healing over punitive isolation (Tutu, 1999). Within such frameworks, reintegration is not merely a legal transition but a moral reinsertion into a relational community.

Additionally, the collective nature of African societies means that incarceration affects not only the individual but their family and extended community. Churches in Jos respond to this dynamic by engaging not only the former inmate but also their household—offering pastoral care, financial support, and social mediation. This approach aligns with African restorative justice

models, where healing is achieved through relational repair and communal acknowledgment of wrongs and forgiveness.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Church-led reentry programs play a crucial role in supporting formerly incarcerated individuals by offering spiritual guidance, social support, mentorship, and practical resources such as housing and job training. These efforts often fill critical gaps left by state or federal systems, especially in underserved communities. Churches provide not only emotional and moral support but also a stable community that fosters accountability and transformation.

Given the high rates of recidivism and the complex challenges facing returning citizens, expanding church-based reentry initiatives is both a moral imperative and a practical strategy. Faith communities are uniquely positioned to offer holistic care—addressing spiritual, emotional, and material needs—that is essential for successful reintegration. Scaling up such programs can contribute significantly to public safety, community stability, and long-term rehabilitation.

Recommendations for Collaboration:

1. **Formal Partnerships:** Governments should develop frameworks to formally partner with churches, offering funding, training, and shared resources for reentry services.
2. **Policy Integration:** Faith-based initiatives should be included in local and national reentry strategies, ensuring coordination with probation officers, housing authorities, and workforce agencies.
3. **Civil Society Engagement:** Nonprofits and advocacy groups can support churches through training, research, and cross-sector collaboration, enhancing the professionalism and reach of faith-based efforts.

Suggestions for Future Research:

To deepen understanding and improve effectiveness, future research should explore:

1. Larger-scale studies that assess long-term outcomes of church-led reentry efforts across regions.
2. Comparative analyses between different faith-based models (e.g., Christian and Muslim,) to identify best practices and shared strengths.
3. Participant-centered evaluations that capture the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals within these programs.
4. Quantitative assessments measuring impacts on recidivism, employment, housing stability, and community integration.

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