



A steadying hand

Congregations help former prisoners reintegrate into society

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WASHINGTON -- Antonio Pinder used to be scared of returning home from prison, fearing he would fall back into a self-destructive life. He hadn't had a steady job before he was sent away 13 years ago, and he worried that he never would.

A year out of prison, he is still searching for work, but he says he's found something that is perhaps more important: resilience.

Since his release from federal prison in West Virginia, Pinder has worked through the setbacks that bedevil many ex-offenders. He credits the efforts of mentors who have been working with him as part of a program that gives churches, mosques and other religious organizations an instrumental role in shepherding dozens of returning inmates back into the community.

Launched in 2002, the Faith Community Partnership is run by the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency, the federal office that serves as Washington, D.C.'s probation and parole administrator.

Jobs prove elusive

Marked by a criminal record, Pinder is one of the many ex-offenders who find it difficult to land good work. For too many of them, that's the first step on a path back to prison.

Pinder, 35, could well have been one of those who tripped up. So far, he has found only occasional work through a temp agency. He'd like to work as a city bus driver.

For now, what he has is hope. And that, he said, is thanks to the efforts of the new faith partnership.

In its second full year, the program costs about \$300,000 annually, most of which pays for administrative staff.

From Pilgrim Baptist Church to the Founding Church of Scientology, 42 institutions have signed on as participants. About 200 mentors are working with about 100 convicts such as Pinder.

'You feel someone cares'

"It just gives you that spiritual stability," he said. "You feel someone cares about you other than

yourself." For Pinder, one of those people was Wanda Jackson, who works with a group called Reintegrating Alternatives Personal Program, or RAPP. The organization is housed at Faith Tabernacle Church of Prayer in southeast Washington and draws many of its volunteers from the church.

Pinder and Jackson linked up even before Pinder was released from prison, where he was serving time for cocaine distribution. Those final days before his release were anxious.

"I didn't know what to expect. I was paranoid, paranoid of going back in the same situation because I couldn't get a job," he said. "I went into prison when I was 22 years old. I grew up in prison."

As his release date neared, Pinder started telephoning Jackson, one of three mentors he'd eventually find through the partnership.

"Every Sunday morning, I was calling," he said.

And Jackson was already embracing Pinder, if only over the phone. "I would drop everything and talk to him. I think it helped prepare him. ... I felt his apprehension."

Another beneficiary was Joseph Johnson, 48, who was released from prison Jan. 22 after serving about 15 years, originally on drug distribution charges but more recently for violating his parole by using drugs.

Like Pinder, Johnson has no regular job. He nearly landed a \$17-an-hour carpenter's job on a construction site, but that fell through after only a couple days.

"When he said, 'We can't use you,' I wasn't discouraged," Johnson said.

But Johnson was, at the very least, disappointed -- so much so that he didn't call his mentor, the Rev. Sharon Best of New Commandment Baptist Church in northwest Washington, who learned of his setback as he recounted it while speaking with a reporter.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Best, I didn't call to tell you," he told her.

"That's when you're supposed to call," she said.

"It didn't make me do anything bad," he replied in his own defense, alluding to the many days in his life when such a turn of events would have sent him looking for drugs.

Instead, he went back to a list of prospective jobs and kept plugging away. Within a couple of days, he had another possibility lined up. "I got blessed," he said, "by keeping my composure."

Flocking to the fold

The mentoring program, spawned amid the Bush administration's enthusiasm for faith-based programs of all sorts, has drawn an increasing number of institutions into its fold, said Paul A. Quander Jr., director of the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency.

As word of the program and the opportunities it presents has spread among inmates, interest from those who are soon to be leaving prison has spread as well, program coordinators say.

To be eligible, a returning inmate cannot be a convicted sex offender, cannot have a severe substance-

abuse problem and cannot have multiple convictions for violent crimes.

Many inmates are challenging their status as violent offenders in an effort to become eligible for the program, said Abubakr Muhammad Karim, re-entry director for the East of the River Clergy-Police-Community Partnership.

"What's happening is the guys that are in prison are starting to recognize the success of the guys who were in the program," Karim said.

Video link forges bonds

A new video link between Washington and a federal prison in North Carolina, which houses more inmates from Washington, D.C., than any other, has helped offenders and mentors forge bonds months before inmates are released.

Helping inmates find equilibrium amid the tumult and anxiety of release is part of what the mentoring is supposed to do. The mentors, all volunteers, are additional sets of ears and eyes that can assist the officers paid to keep track of parolees.

Modest results

Quander, a former prosecutor, knows that the program will be judged not on individual stories but by broader measures. "I can't rely merely on anecdotal tales of success," he said. "I have to rely on hard numbers." By those hard numbers, the program's success so far would appear to be modest.

The overall re-arrest rate for released prisoners from the Washington, D.C. area -- those who aren't in the program as well as those who are -- has been falling, down to 17 percent in 2003 from 27 percent in 1999. Meanwhile, about 15 percent of participants in the faith-based program are being re-arrested -- only a couple of percentage points below the overall rate, and several points above what Quander would like to see.

"If we can get into the single digits," he said, "I'll be very happy."

The Rev. Herbert Bruce, of Pilgrim Baptist Church in northeast Washington, said that although people were enthusiastic early on about helping, they also were unsure how it all would turn out.

"I think if you have a church saying they didn't go into this with trepidation, they're lying," Bruce said. "We didn't know what to expect."

What they have come to expect are successes such as Shirley Hall, also jobless but nonetheless hopeful and enthusiastic about how God has come into her life with the help of mentors at Upper Room Baptist Church, in northeast Washington.

First sent to prison in 1986 on a heroin distribution charge, Hall served four years of a four-to-12-year sentence. But she couldn't steer clear of trouble once free, and twice landed back in prison.

Now back out -- for good, she hopes -- Hall, 40, is looking for a job. She actually had what she thought would be a good one. She was delivering packages for a courier service and the pay -- \$600 a week -- seemed good, until she discovered that half of that would be deducted for use of the van.

Already, she was enduring an arduous commute that forced her to leave around 4:30 a.m. and ride a bus

across town to board a train to suburban Rockville, Md. And in Rockville, she would catch a taxi for \$6.50.

It just didn't make sense. So she quit. But she is confident.

It took her a while to find her mentors, too.

After three tries, she finally found people who are keeping her strong, among them Deborah Ford and the Rev. Catherine Bego of Upper Room Baptist.

"I don't worry about it," Hall said. "God got me. I'm going to get a job."

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