

SPIRITUAL SUPPORT BEHIND BARS: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF FAITH IN INMATE MENTAL HEALTH IN ZIMBABWE

Kudzai Fungai Moyo and Tendai Munashe Chikafu

Department of Applied Psychology, Midlands State University, Zimbabwe

Abstract:

This study investigates the role of spirituality and religious attendance in promoting mental health and psychosocial well-being among inmates at Harare Central Prison, Zimbabwe. Drawing on the initiatives of Compassion Ministries—an outreach arm of Celebration Church Ministries—the research seeks to understand how faith-based interventions contribute to psychological resilience and emotional support for incarcerated individuals. The study is situated within a context of socio-economic instability and chronic hardship, which has led to widespread mental distress not only among prisoners but also within the general Zimbabwean population. Despite the growing reliance on religion as a coping mechanism in Zimbabwe, limited empirical research exists on the link between spirituality and inmate mental health, particularly in low-income settings.

Using qualitative inquiry, the study explores how religious programs provide inmates with emotional support, a sense of hope, identity reconstruction, and spiritual meaning in an environment marked by deprivation and uncertainty. Findings suggest that regular engagement in spiritual practices and religious services fosters positive psychosocial outcomes, such as reduced anxiety, improved emotional regulation, and increased social connectedness among inmates. These outcomes are critical, given the scarcity of formal mental health resources in Zimbabwean correctional facilities. The research highlights the importance of incorporating culturally relevant, faith-based psychosocial support within prison rehabilitation frameworks. It also calls for more localized research that addresses mental health interventions in under-resourced settings, moving beyond dominant perspectives rooted in Western contexts.

Keywords: Spirituality, Religious Attendance, Mental Health, Psychosocial Wellbeing, Zimbabwean Prisons

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the intersection between spirituality and religious attendance on the one hand and the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of prisoners at Harare Central Prison, Zimbabwe, on the other hand. This is done through the efforts of Compassion Ministries, a charity wing of Celebration Church Ministries in Zimbabwe, to find out how the lives of prisoners and the community in general can be best improved in terms of mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. There is a dearth of research on the nexus between spirituality and religiosity on the one hand, and mental wellbeing on the other hand. The few studies that exist on this issue have been mainly conducted in the more developed regions of the world (Coelho-Junior et al., 2022; Hodapp & Swingman, 2019). The issue of mental health among Zimbabwean prisons is of particular significance, due to the over two decades of a down-spiraling economy which has caused immense suffering even among the general population. In this suffering, a lot of members of the general populace have turned to religion, amidst the sprouting of

prosperity gospels that promise a better living. Thus, it becomes paramount to take focus on a vulnerable

population like prisoners, and how spirituality and religious attendance may help them to alleviate or cope with various mental issues that may have arisen in the very arduous conditions in which they exist.

The Rights of Prisoners to Physical and Mental Health

It is important to note that there are international laws that uphold the right of all persons, including prisoners, to the enjoyment of the highest possible standards of physical and mental health. However, this is not the case in practice as prisoners the world over generally receive a much lower standard of healthcare, if at all, than their counterparts outside of prison, and tend to have lower average levels of health and living conditions (Revised UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, 2016).

Prisoners with pre-existing illness and medical conditions at the time of entering the prison, whether physical, psychological, or otherwise - may fail to have their conditions attended to whilst in prison, and many develop new healthcare conditions once they are incarcerated due to poor living conditions and lack of access to adequate health care (Reingle Gonzalez & Connell, 2014). It is therefore imperative that authorities in the correctional services sector take the health of inmates and prisoners seriously as these inmates will one day return to their respective communities after completing their sentences, and also as a matter of moral decency and upholding the human rights of inmates and the agreed international and regional conventions and agreements.

The Revised UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (2016) states that inmates suffering from severe mental health conditions should not be imprisoned but rather receive the requisite treatment and medical attention. Where it becomes necessary to incarcerate people with mental health conditions, appropriate attention must be specifically given to their health needs. The revised Standard Minimum Rules also upholds the principle of equivalence, which states that prisoners are required to receive the same standard of healthcare provision as the general populace outside of prison, whilst the provision of health care for prisoners should be the responsibility of the country's national health delivery service as opposed to the correctional services and/or the judiciary. Attending to mental health conditions in prison has the triple effects of improving the quality of life of the concerned inmate, as well as that of other prisoners he/she interacts or comes into contact with; in addition to lessening the strain and burden on prison staff who would otherwise have to deal with prisoners with poor and untreated mental health issues (Jacoby & Kozie-Peak, 1997; Olley, Nicholls & Brink, 2009).

The Link Between Religious Practice, Spirituality and Mental Health

For many years, the link between religious practice and spirituality with mental health and psychosocial well-being has been noted and has become of keen interest to both scientists and religious leaders.

One specific benefit of spirituality and religiosity is the ability to cope with the everyday challenges and difficulties that arise in life. Religious coping activities refer to the specific use of religious practices to help cope with stressful and distressing events. Positive religious coping activities could include actions such as prayer, seeking comfort from one's religious beliefs otherwise known as cognitive appraisal, as well as seeking social support from one's religious network and fellow church members (Newton & McIntosh, 2010). The salience and importance of religious coping were demonstrated after the September 9/11 attacks that occurred in the United States of America. Up to 90% of those interviewed in the aftermath of the attacks said they turned to religion to cope with the trauma and other associated ill effects (Schuster et al., 2001).

There has also been interest in the relationship between religious prayers, faith healing and illness recovery. Faith healers are people who use non-evidence-based, nonscientific, but religious means such as prayer and other religious rituals and practices to treat disease and medical problems. Among Americans, it was found that up to 79% of people turn to faith healers in times of sickness and disease (Levin, 2016). By inference, it can be assumed that a similar proportion do so in other parts of the world, more or less, depending on the particular levels of

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religiosity in the specific countries in question. Currently, there is no conclusive scientific evidence as to the beneficial effects on psychological well-being for those who visit faith healers or otherwise, despite anecdotal accounts of benefits reported by individuals here and there.

In many countries, praying for people with various sicknesses has become a common practice. This practice, often called intercessory prayer, is no longer limited to friends and relatives of the sick persons, but now extends to members of allied medical professions such as nurses, social workers and even doctors themselves who are now known to pray for their patients regularly in several countries (Sheridan, 2010). Medical practice however must be evidence-based, therefore, in several countries, the attention has turned towards assessing and investigating the possible benefits of this practice as an intervention for medical problems (Chamsi-Pasha & Chamsi-Pasha, 2021; Jantos & Kiat, 2007).

Across the world, there has also been keen interest in the relationship between spirituality and religion on the one hand, and a host of psychological/behavioural problems and deviance issues on the other hand. Their psychological/behavioural problems and deviance issues include sexually risky behaviours, suicide, depression, and schizophrenia, among others. On the average, it has been noted that religious practice and/or spirituality tend to be associated with the amelioration of such problems (Koenig, 2012; Stack & Kposowa, 2011; Pescosolido & Georgianna, 1989).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main aim of this study is to investigate the effects of spirituality and religious attendance on the mental health and psychosocial well-being of prisoners at Harare Central Prison. The objectives include:

- (i) To determine the mental and psycho-social problems being faced by inmates at Harare Central Prison.
- (ii) To ascertain the beneficial effects of spirituality and religious activities on the mental health and psychosocial well-being of prisoners at Harare Central Prison.
- (iii) To determine ways of improving the delivery and efficacy of the aspects of religious and spiritual activities that have beneficial effects on the mental health and psycho-social wellbeing of prisoners at Harare Central Prison.

Research Design

The research design used was a case study research design. This research design involved focusing on a particular institution, case, or event and focusing on it in depth. In this case, the focus of this study was Harare Central Prison.

Target Population, Sampling, and Sampling Technique

The target population for this study was prisoners at Harare Central Prison, of any age with a history of mental illness particularly, as well as those without. The target population also included prison officials' religious leaders, and workers involved in the prison. The researchers used purposeful sampling, meaning that they chose participants who possessed suitable criteria to participate in the study. The inmate sample consisted of five prisoners with a history of mental illness who considered themselves spiritual and/or were engaged in religious activities and three without a history of mental illness. This sampling criterion enabled comparisons to be made between the mental states and conditions of both groups as a function of their spirituality and/or involvement in religious activities. All these inmates were between the ages of 30 and 50 years of age and had all served a minimum of one year in prison already at the time of the study, and were all serving long-term sentences of over five years. The sample also included three selected wardens and two religious leaders at the prison, who acted as key informants.

Research Instrument(s)

The researchers used one-on-one structured interviews to elicit information from the participants. They consisted of a set number of structured open-ended questions which the respondents were required to respond to in a set amount of time on site. To pretest the interview guide, the researchers went to the site of the research a few weeks prior to the actual data collection phase to do preliminary testing of one inmate and one prison officer. After completion of this process, the researchers then incorporated the findings of this stage into the actual data collection stage and process to enable a smoother and complication-free data collection procedure.

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to conducting the research, ethical approval was sought from the Department of Applied Psychology of the Midlands State University. Thereafter, the researchers approached the Head of Compassion Ministries, a Christian Organization to get approval, assistance and information on the religious-based activities they conduct at Harare Central Prison. Next, the researchers approached the responsible authorities and gatekeepers at Harare Central Prison for their consent, approval, assistance, and cooperation in the conducting of this research. These explanations can be summarized in one or two sentences, if actually they are necessary. Deleted the explanations, agreed with the reviewer that they were rather unnecessary.

Ethical Considerations***Respect***

The researchers ensured the autonomy of participants, protecting participants from exploitation and upholding the dignity of participants. Thus, all information was treated with confidentiality, and the identity of the participants was protected by using pseudonyms. The researchers were polite, non-intrusive, respectful, and allowed the subjects to decline response where they felt uncomfortable with any questions.

Beneficence

There was a commitment to minimize the risk and maximize the benefits of the research. The emotional state of the subjects was observed and noted prior to the interviews to determine if they were emotionally stable enough to participate without incurring any emotional, mental or psychological harm. Interviews were also done under the supervision and in the presence of trained health professionals to ensure that everything was conducted in an environment that was safe and healthy for both the participants and the researcher.

Fidelity and responsibility

This entails the establishment of a relationship of trust and commitment to upholding professional standards of conduct. Thus, informed consent and voluntary participation were sought. The researchers were polite respectful, non-invasive, friendly, and non-forceful.

Integrity

There was a commitment to promote accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness in research and practice of psychology. The researchers did not deceive, lie, exaggerate or fabricate any information.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Braun (2006) notes that thematic analysis is the most common form of analysis in qualitative research. It is a suitable analysis procedure for visual and verbal data. Thematic analysis is performed through the process of coding in about six to eight phases to create conventional, meaningful patterns. The phases include getting used to data, generating preliminary codes, as well as probing for themes among codes by going through themes, describing and naming themes and then producing the final report. Themes are arrangements across data sets that are essential to the explanation of a phenomenon and are linked to a specific research question. The themes turn out to be the classifications for analysis.

The Main Themes

The five themes that were developed are as follows: (1) prevalence of mental illness among the inmates and common mental and psychological challenges faced; (2) levels of spirituality and religiosity, as well as trends in religious affiliation and religious programs attended by the inmates; (3) common rituals and personal religious practices performed by the inmates; (4) benefits derived by the inmates from religiosity and spirituality and the religious programs and services offered at the prison as well as effects on the prisoners' mental health and psychosocial well-being; (5) perceived shortcomings in the religious programs and activities offered at the prison and the disadvantages of spirituality and religiosity.

Theme 1: Prevalence of mental illness among the inmates and common mental and psychological challenges faced

The responses showed that the common mental and psychological conditions prevalent among the prisoners included psychosis, bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia, substance abuse, delirium and suicidal thoughts and tendencies, although the majority of the victims were not formally diagnosed and were not on treatment. Apart from these major conditions, the inmates also reported experiencing a number of less severe emotional and mental challenges such as anxiety, minor cases of depression, acute stress, fear, trauma, adjustment problems, perennial worry, loss of focus, hopelessness, and homesickness. Some of the responses that we received for this theme include:

Inmate 1: *"I was in constant fear, stress, anxiety and worry when I was on death row and was in fear for my life."*

Inmate 2: *"Ever since I entered the prison, I have been in a state of constant confusion about the meaning of life and about the direction my life is taking and I am always depressed and sad as I miss my wife, children and family"*.

Theme 2: Levels of Spirituality and Religiosity, Trends in Religious Affiliation, Religious Programs and Services Attended by the Inmates

The levels of religiosity, spirituality and religious attendance in prison were high across the board, with the majority attending various religious programs and services within the prison and practising various personal religious practices and rituals on their own, both corporately and individually. A number of reasons were cited for this such as that inmates tend to turn to religion because of the difficulties they encounter as a result of incarceration; as a means of escape from their harsh realities, comfort or as a means of seeking redemption, performing penance and restitution, finding forgiveness and meaning in life and as a means of dealing with their guilt or as a solution to their problems. Other possible reasons suggested by the key informants are that the prisoners may be using religion as a form of psychological crutch in order to help deal with the emotional, psychological and other problems that they are facing, whilst another view is that inmates use religion as a form of con game in order to gain favours or give parole officers, correctional services officers and judges the impression that they have reformed and therefore get lighter or reduced sentences.

From the responses obtained from this study, it was found that the overwhelming majority of the inmates interviewed as well as within the whole prison identified themselves as Christians, with a significant majority attending regular religious programs and services conducted by various church organisations which visit the prison regularly, if not many times a week. One thing to observe however that was noted from interactions with the prison officials and the chaplain is that, though a significant majority of the inmates identified themselves as Christian, a slightly smaller percentage of those who did so actually attend the religious programs and services offered at the prison or actually obeyed or lived according to the prescribed tenants and dictates of their faith. One possible reason for this that was cited was that in many instances, inmates felt that it was a shameful act not

to be identified as Christian, as Zimbabwe is predominantly a Christian nation. Many also felt it was fashionable to be identified as a Christian, or was a sign of good character, which was something that most inmates viewed as important to them, especially given the negative perception that society already tends to have about prisoners. The most common religious denominations that inmates tended to be affiliated with were the ones reflected by the general trends in the general population. These included Methodist, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM), Seventh Day Adventist (SDA), Zaoga (Forward in Faith), and various other smaller Pentecostal, evangelical, prophetic and apostolic denominations. This study also found out that the majority of these major religious groups have a significant presence within the prison, and a good working relationship with the prison officials, chaplaincy, authorities and prisoners as well, with a large number of inmates attending the weekly services and midweek Bible studies held within the prison premises and chapel. A number of inmates also made use of the chaplaincy and various religious leaders and ministers who visit the prison on a regular basis to access counseling and psychosocial services, which many found very helpful and vitally important. Some of the responses that this study received for this theme included the following:

Inmate 3: *“Yeah, I am very spiritual, I have been a Christian all my life and religion is the foundation of my life and gives me meaning and direction in life, especially at such difficult times as this”.*

Inmate 5: *“As a convicted person serving a lot of years, I find solace in knowing that although my own relatives and society at large may never stop judging me, God has forgiven me, and that’s all that really matters to me.”*

Theme 3: Common rituals and personal religious practices performed by the inmates

The majority of those who professed to be religious or belonging to a religious group confessed to practising and engaging in various religious practices and rituals, both corporately and collectively with fellow believers. The interviews revealed two distinct ways of categorizing the rituals and religious practices that inmates performed within the prison. The first means of categorization was to group them into formal and informal rituals and religious practices, whilst the second means of grouping them was within the categories of private/personal rituals and religious practices and cooperate/ collective rituals and religious practices.

Regarding informal and private rituals and religious practices, it was found that the inmates at Harare Central Prison engage in rituals such as private prayer, Bible reading, devotionals, meditation, singing hymns and choruses, memorizing verses, reading other religious literature as well as playing musical instruments and fellowshiping. When it comes to the more formal rituals and religious practices and those that are normally practiced collectively, it was found that the inmates engaged in rituals such as attending weekly services and Bible studies, engaging in praise and worship, playing instruments, or participating in choral music and dance. Other cooperate rituals that were also performed include serving in various capacities within the various religious services and gatherings, such as preaching and ushering, as well as performing various sacraments, such as the Eucharist, catechism, ordination, baptism and anointing the sick with oil.

The following statements and quotations were obtained on this theme from some of the inmates:

Inmate 2: *“I pray every day before going to bed and try to read my Bible as often as I can whenever I get the chance”.* Inmate 4: *“ I enjoy going for church services and Bible studies every week and particularly enjoy the times that we spend fellowshiping, discussing scriptures and encouraging each other before, during and after services”.*

Theme 4: Benefits derived by the inmates from religiosity and spirituality and the religious programs and services offered at the prisons as well as the effects on the prisoners' mental health and psychosocial well being

It was found that inmates receive a lot of benefits from their participation in religious programs, services and activities held and conducted at the prison. Firstly, it gives them the opportunity to be strengthened and

encouraged in their religious beliefs and pursuits, which in turn has benefits in terms of increased peace of mind, attainment of a sense of meaning and purpose and the giving of hope. There are also social benefits in terms of gaining an opportunity to interact and form meaningful friendships and relationships with like-minded fellow inmates, which in turn has benefits in terms of molding of better character, promotion of pro-social behaviours as well as character reformation. Religious participation can also be a form of recreation and a cure for boredom for some inmates, which can be a serious issue in correctional facilities. It can also be an opportunity for inmates to interact with religious leaders and volunteers from the outside, particularly of the opposite sex, which is something that was observed to be very desirable for inmates who normally reside in single-sex facilities and rarely have that opportunity. There are also material benefits that inmates derive from religious programs, services and activities at the prison, such as the opportunity to receive educational and reading materials, gifts and foodstuffs, as well as special favours and benefits from the religious leaders and volunteers, such as special permission to make extra calls to family and loved ones on the outside.

It was also found that there were many positive effects of spirituality and religious practice on the prisoners' mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. Religion was found to serve and act as a protective factor against the development of many psychological conditions as well as the preventing and keeping problematic symptoms at bay or under control. This is because religion and spirituality were commonly said to provide a sense of meaning, purpose and belonging to many inmates as well as calmness and peace of mind, hence meeting many of their emotional, existential and social needs as well. Religion also acts to bring a sense of stability and equilibrium into the otherwise chaotic psyche of inmates who many times feel burdened by the guilt of their crimes, condemnation from society and disillusionment about what their future holds. The rituals and practices that accompany religion in most denominations were also noted and observed to provide a therapeutic and cathartic effect on those inmates, again resulting in more beneficial effects on the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of inmates.

Some of the responses that were obtained from some of the inmates for this theme include the following:

Inmate 2: *"When I am in church, or praying I feel a sense of peace and well-being and temporarily forget all my problems."*

Inmate 3: *"My faith is the centre of my life; as long as I know that my relationship with God is ok, then all my other problems disappear."*

Theme 5: Perceived shortcomings in the religious programs and activities offered at the prison and disadvantages of spirituality and religiosity.

The main shortcoming in the religious programs and activities at the prison that was noted by one of the inmates was that there were too many different denominations and religious sub-groupings, all doing different and separate programs, resulting in divisions, divisiveness, disunity, lack of cohesion and oneness, as well as the possibility of unconstructive religious feuding, bickering, disagreements, arguments and fighting. Another shortcoming that was observed was the lack of resources, such as reading materials and literature, musical instruments, religious paraphernalia, and funding for religious programs and staff. When it comes to the disadvantages of religiosity and spirituality in general, the inmates were unable to identify any disadvantages; they could only observe and identify the positive and beneficial effects of their religiosity and spirituality. Some of the responses obtained for this theme include the following:

Inmate 1: *"There are too many different churches here all doing their own thing so we are not unified as Christians"*.

Inmate 2: *“We wish more money could be given to churches by the government or authorities so that they can do more work here and spend more time here as we value the work that they are doing here”*

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The major findings for the theme “prevalence of mental illness among the inmates and common mental and psychological challenges faced” were that the common mental illnesses and mental and psychological challenges faced by inmates at Harare Central Prison were conditions such as depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, anxiety and panic attacks, delirium and post-traumatic stress, as well as psychological challenges such as chronic fear, homesickness, loneliness, boredom despair, as well as a disoriented state of mind. These findings are consistent with the findings of past research, across all regions and demographics.

One such corroboratory past finding is from a World Health Organization Report (2023), which showed that the prevalence of mental illnesses among inmates in Europe is about 30%, with many others having other less severe mental challenges like mild depression and anxiety. Another study is a systematic review conducted by Jarret (2012). In this study, in which over 30 thousand inmates were interviewed from all over the world across 24 different countries, it was found that up to 12% of inmates had a current diagnosis of depression and around 4% had a diagnosis of psychosis at the time of the study and at any given time.

The next finding is about the theme of levels of spirituality and religiosity, trends in religious affiliation, and religious programs attended by the inmates. It was observed and noted that the inmates at Harare Central Prison were highly religious and spiritual, with the majority of them being predominantly Christian and affiliated with the major mainstream Christian denominations in the Zimbabwean population and society at large. It was also observed that the majority of the inmates were engaged in regular religious programs and activities at the prison, such as Sunday teaching, worship services, midweek services and Bible studies. When compared with the findings from the literature review of past studies, the findings of this study showed some similarities at some points and some dissimilarities in some points. The findings of this study were in agreement with past studies on this theme done in other regions and nations in that inmates in other countries were equally highly religious and spiritual as those at Harare Central Prison, and also engaged in regular religious activities during their stays in prisons and correctional facilities. The area of dissimilarity and disparity was in the specific religions that the inmates in other prisons were affiliated with. In this study, it was observed that most inmates were predominantly Christian and affiliated with the major religious denominations predominant in this country, whilst in other regions and countries, religious affiliation was more evenly distributed amongst the major religions, with Christianity itself in the first place, followed by Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and the many other smaller religions that exist and are practised strongly in other regions (Lapinski, Maciejewski, & Markuszewski, 2014).

In both this study and previous researches, it was observed that the reasons for the high levels of spirituality and religiosity among inmates included a need for forgiveness and redemption for past crimes, sins and mistakes, a place of escape and refuge, and a means to find hope and meaning in life. Other reasons that were found for the high rates of these high levels of spirituality and religiosity among inmates, both in this study and in past studies include the view that inmates appeared to use religion as a form of psychological crutch to help them with their emotional and psychological difficulties and challenges, as well as another heavily supported view that inmates use religion as a form of con game to get favours and favourable court settlements from prison and judicial authorities respectively (Dammer, 2013).

In relation to the theme of “common rituals and personal religious practices performed by the inmates”, the major finding of this study was that the common rituals and personal religious practices performed by inmates at Harare Central Prison can be divided into formal and informal religious practices as well as private and cooperate rituals

and religious practices. The informal and private rituals and religious practices that were noted and observed included prayer, bible reading, meditation, singing, having personal devotions, memorizing scripture or religious texts, and anointing oneself with oil and engaging in various religious postures like kneeling and bowing. The rituals and religious practices that were categorized as formal or collective included practices such as attending religious services, participating in religious and denominational liturgies, engaging in praise and worship, dancing, playing instruments and choral music, as well as various sacraments such as the Eucharist, baptisms, ordinations and anointing with oil. The findings of the literature review were largely consistent and in agreement with the findings of this study, although there were minor differences in the rituals and religious practices performed in different regions that were specific and indicative of the specific religions and cultures in question (Lapinski, Maciejewski, & Markuszewski, 2014).

Concerning the theme and question of "benefits derived by the inmates from religiosity and spirituality and the religious services and programs offered at the prison as well as the effects on the prisoners' mental health and psychosocial well-being of both", the main findings were that religion tends to act as a means of escape or a way to deal with the problems and challenges of life that the prisoners would be facing. Other benefits include providing them with a sense of internal balance, grounding, peace of mind and a sense of meaning and purpose in life. In terms of benefits derived from the religious services and programs offered at the prison, the major finding was that the inmates benefited socially, through the interactions and relationships that they made and built at the religious programs, services and gatherings. Another benefit was in terms of the provision of an emotional outlet, as the religious services and programs provided the inmates with a means to express themselves emotionally, vent, and let out their pent-up frustrations and emotions in a cathartic manner, as well as channel their emotions constructively. In terms of their mental health and psychological well being, there were also benefits as being religious and spiritual was seen to act as a strong buffer against the emergence of mental and psychological challenges and problems as well as a control and restraining factor against the full expression of psychological ill health and the accompanying symptoms. When compared with the findings of past research as shown in the literature review section, there was a consensus with the findings from this research, although there were minor differences in the exact levels and degrees of benefits derived depending on the region, religious composition of the prison and cultural factors (Dammer, 2013).

Another major theme that emerged in this study related to "perceived shortcomings in the religious programs and activities offered at the prison and the disadvantages of spirituality and religiosity". The major finding of this research for this theme was that the majority of the inmates interviewed did not see many shortcomings in the religious programs and activities offered at the prison or any disadvantages in being religious or spiritual. Only a few mentioned that they felt that there were too many different Christian denominations represented and active within the prison, all with their respective followings, meaning there was a lack of unity and some divisiveness among the Christian inmates.

When it comes to the findings of the literature review in regards to this theme, it was found that in other regions of the world, there were considerably more complaints by inmates in terms of a lack of equal representation of the other smaller religions and faiths in correctional facilities as well as preferential treatment given to the major faiths such as Christianity. When it comes to the disadvantages of spirituality and religiosity, the literature review revealed that some negative side effects or unintended consequences of being religious and spiritual included the emergence of negative phenomena such as fundamentalism, religious extremism, religious infighting and intolerance as well as inter-religious fighting. These tendencies were found to be more common when there was a greater mixture and distribution of religious affiliation in certain prisons from certain regions of the world, Copyright: © 2025 Continental Publication

unlike in the Zimbabwean context where Christianity is predominately the most widely represented religion (Hoyles, 1955).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The first recommendation that can be given from this study relates to the inmates themselves. Firstly, from the results obtained in this study, it was found that there are many psychological, social, material and health benefits that inmates can potentially derive from engaging in religious programs during their stay in prison, as well as from being spiritual. It is therefore recommended that inmates participate fully, attend and become engaged in the religious and spiritual activities available at the prison to make use of all the potential benefits in all these different areas. Added to this, it was also noted that many religious organisations offer short courses which inmates can make use of to give them a much-needed qualification that they can use when they leave prison. It is also recommended that inmates make use of religious programs and activities in order to help in character formation and reformation, to learn pro-social, adaptive, and resilience-building behaviours and traits as well as help in their self-rehabilitation. On the flip and negative side of the discussion, it is also recommended that inmates avoid religious infighting, fanaticism, extremism and being recruited or co-opted into religious gangs or religious terrorism, but focus on the positive aspects of religion.

Furthermore, we recommend that families of inmates provide the necessary and much-needed support to their relatives who are behind bars and not abandon, shun or reject them because of the situation that they find themselves in or because of their newfound faith or religious awakening behind bars. This is because it has been found that religion serves a vital purpose in providing inmates with a refuge and something to turn to during their times in prison. Therefore, it is important that families and communities support the decision of their relatives in prison to pursue religion, and not judge them or accuse them of playing the aforementioned "religious con game" or of using religion for manipulative purposes. Ways that families and communities can support their relatives behind bars include visiting them regularly, telephoning them and writing to them, praying for them (if they share the same faith), providing them with required or requested religious literature, as well as encouraging and uplifting them by any means possible. This helps in ensuring that they are able to survive their ordeal of being incarcerated, which hopefully provides a much-needed cushion to their mental state.

In addition, it is recommended that prison officers undergo religious training or at least have a good appreciation of the religious practices and affiliations of inmates in general. That way, they would be better equipped to understand the inmates, and facilitate the ways in which religion helps in the rehabilitation process. It is recommended that correctional services officers and prison staff conduct religious profiling and screening of inmates in order to know the religious backgrounds and beliefs of their inmates to be able to better understand each inmate and cater to their needs better, whether they be religious, psychological, spiritual, material, emotional or physical.

Lastly, it is recommended that government and prison authorities allocate more funding and attention to the religious needs of inmates and the respective programs that cater for those needs. This is in the light of the findings of this study, that religion, religious programs and activities and spirituality have a number of wide-ranging benefits, which have been expounded on throughout this study. It is recommended that government and prison authorities continue to work closely with religious groups and the church community in order to find the best programs and services that cater for the needs of the inmates and prison community, as well as adopt best practices from other regions of the world and other prisons, both locally, regionally and internationally.

Compliance with Ethical Standards and Declarations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Department of Applied Psychology, Midlands State University (MSU) and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. -The study was formally approved by the Department of Applied Psychology, Midlands State University.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual adult participants included in the study; no children were involved in the participation of the study.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Both authors contributed to the study's conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Tinashe John Munezvenyu, during his studies at the Midlands State University. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Tadios Chisango, and both authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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