

‘They don’t build no schools anymore, all they build is prison, prison’¹

An Examination of the Reception of the Church of Pentecost’s Involvement in Prison Reformation in Ghana²

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Abstract

The church’s mission (*Missio Ecclesia*) is to positively impact lives by bringing transformation to man and their environment. The *Missio Ecclesia* seeks to bring man back to God, acknowledging that, irrespective of man’s situation, every human has a part of God (*Imago Dei*). The early European Missionary enterprise in Africa, therefore, in an attempt to attain the church’s mission, built social amenities like schools and hospitals as an evangelistic strategy. In modern times, the Church of Pentecost (CoP) has adopted prison reforms as one of its evangelistic strategies. Ministry to the marginalised, like prisoners, has a long Christian history as a targeted ministry of restoring the image of God in man. Adopting a historical lens, the paper traces the roots of prison ministry from early Christianity through the African missionary endeavours of the 15th century. Through a mixed method approach, this paper constructs the motivation of the CoP’s initiative to establish camp prisons as Inmate Skill Acquisition and Reformation Centres (ISARC) in Ghana. The paper identifies through interviews decongestion, biblical mandate, and reformation as the main push factors for the CoP in this initiative. The findings illuminate the positive impact of the CoP’s prison reform initiative while highlighting the need for sustained efforts, intentional support, and comprehensive reintegration programmes to ensure long-term success and societal benefits.

Keywords: Church of Pentecost; Decongestion; *Imago Dei*; *Missio Ecclesia*; Prison Ministry; Reformation

1. Introduction

When the news about the Church of Pentecost’s (CoP) involvement in prison reforms hit the public space, there were mixed reactions. While some saw it as in-

¹ Lucky, D., “Prisoner,” Gallo Record Company, 1989

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novative, others felt it was not in the place of churches to be involved in prison reforms. Someone even retorted, “Lucky Dube never dies *‘they don’t build no schools anymore, all they build is prison, prison... They don’t build no hospitals, all they build is prison, prison.’*”⁵ The South African reggae artist Lucky Dube’s song “Prisoner” criticises the societal and governmental structures that prioritise prisons over schools and hospitals. The lines, “*They don’t build no schools anymore, all they build is prison, prison...*”⁶ highlight a sad reality in which resources are prioritised for incarceration above education and healthcare. Dube’s message highlights neglect and systemic failure, emphasising the negative impact these agendas have on communities, particularly the vulnerable.

These comments on Lucky Dube’s song were about the CoP partnering with the Ghana Prison Service (GPS) to establish Camps Prisons. Although the CoP has built schools, including basic schools, Junior and Senior High schools, Technical and Vocational schools, a university, and hospitals across the nation, their involvement in these prison reforms has been heavily criticised by sometimes even members and a whole Assembly⁷ of the church who angrily demonstrated against the leadership of the church for misusing funds to build Camp Prisons.⁸ Meanwhile, the global landscape of religious practice is undergoing a significant transformation that challenges traditional approaches to promoting religious faith (Appiah-Thompson, 2020:161-185). Early European missionaries set up medical centres, schools, farms etc., at their mission posts as tools of evangelisation where aside from providing for the people’s social and economic needs, their spiritual needs were met too (Meier zu Selhausen, 2019; Labode, 2021:1137-1153; Alpers, 2023:169; Neely, 2020; Nwauwa, 2020; Kallaway, 2020).

The co-operation between the CoP and the GPS to establish camp prisons as Inmate Skill Acquisition and Reformation Center (ISARC) reflects a profound commitment to the theological principles of *Missio Ecclesia*. CoP’s involvement in prison reform demonstrates its dedication to social justice, which is a vital component of *Missio Dei*. The church’s goal includes campaigning for oppressed communities and reforming unjust systems such as prison. By focusing on prison reforms, CoP benefits one of society’s most vulnerable populations, potentially lowering recidivism and promoting societal reintegration, which is consistent with the *Missio Dei* emphasis on community and societal well-being. This effort symbolises a shift away from conventional missionary activity, such as school and hospital construction, and toward tackling contemporary social challenges like criminal justice and rehabilitation. The CoP’s collaboration with

⁵ Nsawam 3, Nsawam, Accra

⁶ Dube, “Prisoner,” 1989

⁷ The structure of the Church of Pentecost local church in a community is called Assembly.

⁸ Ejura 3, Ejura

the GPS to create camp prisons prioritises rehabilitation and reform, exhibiting a strategic and transformative mission approach.

This theology, as engrained in the belief that the church is called to actively participate in God’s mission of redemption and transformation, demonstrates a holistic approach to ministry that engages both the spiritual and social needs of the people.⁹ The *Missio Ecclesia* of the church incorporates the theological reflection of the church’s purpose and mission in the world: to proclaim the Good News, make disciples, and participate in acts of service and witness. By establishing camp prisons in the ISARC, the CoP shows her obligation to engage with one of society’s most vulnerable members. This initiative not only provides vocational training for inmates, but also affects their spiritual growth and transformation. This initiative serves as a compelling example of the *Missio Ecclesia* in action. By embracing the theological principles of mission and engaging in actions of service and witness, the CoP demonstrates its strategic efforts to fulfil its calling to be a light in the world of pain and gloom, serving as a ray of hope and transformation within the prison system and beyond.

In line with their historic commitment to spiritual leadership and community engagement, CoP embarked on this initiative that signals a distinct shift in the approach of religious institutions to social development (Benyah, 2021:16-30). The decision to engage in prison reforms alongside their traditional educational, health, and media initiatives, among others, represents a notable departure from conventional activities associated with religious philanthropy (Ellis, 2021:175-199). This surprising effort prompts an examination of the motivation for the CoP and raises critical questions about the evolving roles of religious institutions in addressing social challenges. Understanding the motivations behind this new trajectory is essential to comprehending the broader implications of religious institutions venturing into what may be ‘unconventional’ means of saving souls and transforming society in the mission of the church. As a departure from the traditional missiological strategies, it reflects the changing landscape of religious institutions around the world. The CoP’s involvement, therefore, serves as a valuable case study that offers insight into the evolving strategies of religious institutions and their diverse roles in social development. It provides a new perspective on the dynamic interplay between religion and social transformation, with far-reaching implications for attaining the mission of the church and social development. The enterprise for the CoP, although

⁹ Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004; Barth, Karl. *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009; Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991; Bosch, David J. *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011; Walls, Andrew F. *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002; Walls, Andrew F. *The Missionary Movement in Christian History and Experience*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012.

unconventional to some, suggests the dynamic and evolving nature of contemporary religious practices (Sande & Samushonga, 2020:17-31).

The paper, therefore, attempts to attain its objectives, apart from analysing various documents, depends mainly on interviews to gather first-hand experience of responses to the ISARC by the CoP. Since the CoP has already commissioned two of these projects at Ejura and Nsawam, the communities within which these projects have been commissioned (Ejura and Nsawam) became the subject area for the study. The general public of the communities is divided into two groups: members of the CoP and non-members of the CoP. This was to gather responses from both insiders and outsiders of the church to obtain an objective picture of the reception of the public to the initiative. In selecting these respondents, the simple random sampling method is adopted to choose 10 members and 10 non-members of the CoP in each community.

Further to the public respondents, the project interacted with various people within the GPS; wardens and inmates alike referred by the Commanders of the prisons under study. These respondents are sampled by the Commanders of both prisons influenced by the objectives of the study upon scrutinising the proposal of the study. The chaplains of the various camp prisons who are also wardens are interviewed to explore their experiences of the facilities and how it is helping in the reformation of the inmates. This class of respondents offered an opportunity to evaluate the attainment of the motivations of the church and how the future of the institutions could be maintained. In all five prisons, wardens interacted within each of the facilities, as detailed by the Commanders of the prisons. The inmates who were interacted with included Christians, converts, and non-Christians. This helps the study to gain varied perspectives on the relevance of the facilities to their personal development and the salvation of their souls. All 15 inmates interacted with from each facility opened up about the facilities, and shared their experiences, sometimes compared with other prisons where they may have served. All the respondents in this study are given special codes to meet the ethical consideration of confidentiality, and since some of the responses have security concerns, their identities are concealed.

Notwithstanding, efforts were made to interact with the leaders of the CoP but were not successful. After several calls, emails, and contacts, nobody seemed ready for interactions. They were rather more concerned about emphasising that it was a collaboration with the GPS. Fortunately, the reportage on the inauguration of the two centres captured online by some private news portals proved useful in assessing the perspectives of the CoP. The two reportages (from citinewsroom¹⁰ and

¹⁰ <https://citinewsroom.com/2022/10/church-of-pentecost-builds-prison-reformation-centre-at-nsawam/>

modernghana.com¹¹) seem similar (in words and structure), suggesting that the contents may have been given to the sites by the church, which captures the history of the initiative, motivation, challenges, processes, and aspirations of the church. These online sources were invaluable to the study.

These interviews, coupled with other scholarly sources, helped to attain the objectives of the study in addressing the motivation of the CoP’s ISARC as the mission of the church while looking at ways of sustaining such initiatives. In doing this, the paper explores the historical and theological foundations of the Prison Ministry and further evaluates the CoP involvement in prison reforms. It identifies three motivations of the initiatives by the church, decongestion, biblical mandate, and reformation while assessing how these are being attained in the facilities.

2. Historical and theological foundations of prison ministry

The origins of prison ministry date back to the ancient world, where concepts of justice and salvation were intertwined (Bacote & Perrin, 2019:3-24; Bounds, 2022:298-316; Dubler & Vincent, 2019; Junker-Kenny, 2022; Ellis 2021:175-199). In ancient Rome, Christians visited prisoners, offered consolation, and advocated for their healing. Narratives in the Bible, especially the New Testament, depict scenes of Jesus interacting with prisoners, emphasising the transformative power of compassion and spiritual guidance (Oliver, 2023).

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the Catholic Church played a crucial role in prison operations. Monastic Orders, such as the Benedictines, engaged in voluntary work, including visiting prisoners, providing spiritual counsel, and advocating for better conditions (Clot-Garrell, 2022:114-130). Early Christians, including Augustine, Zeno of Verona, Ambrose of Milan, Caesarius of Arles, and John Chrysostom, called for care for prisoners at different times and places. The help the early Christians offered to prisoners included visitation, supplying food, paying for some of them to be freed, and sometimes becoming advocates for prisoners. It is worthy of mention that Tertullian encouraged Christians that care for prisoners should be limited to Christian prisoners alone. Although his call did not affect Christian approaches, it strongly suggests that there were Christians in prisons. This is reflected in the examples of many Christian martyrs like Perpetua and her Companions, Potaemiana and Basilides, and Pionius, among others, who were imprisoned.

It is further essential to note the work of a non-Christian author, Lucian of Samosata, who wrote about the Christian Peregrinos who were imprisoned and for whom Christians bribed the jailer to be able to stay with him through the day and

¹¹ <https://www.modernghana.com/news/971753/the-church-of-pentecost-chairman-explains-the-chur.html>

the night. It can, therefore, be argued that the motivation for Christian care for prisoners is essentially for solidarity, 'doing it unto the Lord' (Matthew 25:40-45) and for evangelistic purposes as the COP seeks to attain (Colossians 3:23-24).

Outram (2019) argues that the enlightenment changed society's attitude toward crime and punishment, giving rise to the modern era. There was an increasing emphasis on the rehabilitation and humane treatment of prisoners, and religious organisations continued to play a vital role in reshaping the criminal justice system. Influential figures like John Howard were motivated by elements of Christianity and advocated for prison reform, aiming to raise the moral standards of prisoners (Howard, 2023). According to Soltis and Grimes (2021:95-115), the century saw the rise of protestant prisons, especially in the United States. The Second Great Awakening, a religious revival, inspired people and organisations to address social problems, including the plight of prisoners (Vitetta, 2023:223-244). Evangelical Christians, such as Dorothea Dix, worked tirelessly to establish prison chaplains who emphasised prisoners' moral and spiritual rehabilitation.

Pinto, Viola, Onesti and Ciamp (2020:9651) hold that new challenges and opportunities emerged in prison operations in the 20th century. With increasing religious pluralism, various religious practices led to prison protests. A strengthened network of foundations provided comprehensive support to prisoners. Additionally, secular organisations and community initiatives, often rooted in social justice, emerged to address issues in criminal justice. From its inception, these historical antecedents show that the church has always been interested in the prison ministry, and the CoP is taking the church back to show that nobody is beyond redemption.

Understanding the church's Pentecostal purpose requires examining the connection between theology and prison ministry. The faith-based partnership with prisons has been a subject of scientific research over the years (Mears et al., 2006:351-367; Davids, 2007:341; Johnson, 2008; Dodson et al., 2011: 367-383; Robinson-Edwards & Stephanie, 2018:130; Khan, 2020:262-275). According to Dirksen (2020:78-90), Pentecostal churches often view community participation as an essential expression of their faith and a symbol of the meaning of salvation and healing.

Terry and Andrews (2021) argue that many characters mentioned in the Bible, including Old and New Testament characters, were imprisoned, including Joseph, Daniel, Jeremiah, Jesus, Peter, John, Paul, and James (Acts 16:23; Jeremiah 37:15; Matthew 27:2). The significance of encounters between prisoners and the outside world in Christian dogma is captured in the parable of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46), where Jesus, fully identifying himself as a prisoner, says, "I was a prisoner, and you visited me." According to Gatete (2022), the church supports restorative encounters because victims and offenders are bonded similarly, as Jesus embodied lawbreaker and victim. Atkins et al., (2019:169) assert that the direct connection between the divine and the incarcer-

ated underscores the theological imperative to extend compassion and support to those in prison. It reflects a broader Christian ethic of mercy, forgiveness, and redemption, emphasising the transformative power of love and grace.

Meanwhile, Hernandez (2021) argues that by ministering to prisoners, Christians seek to emulate the compassionate nature of Jesus, who identified with the marginalised and the downtrodden. According to Finch (2020:293), the foundation of prison ministry is deeply rooted in the belief that every person is created in the image of God (*Imago Dei*). This Christian doctrine emphasises the dignity and worth of all people, regardless of their circumstances or past faults. As discussed in the book, “God in Prison: The Rise of Faith-Based Prison Ministry in the Age of Mass Incarceration.” Erzen (2017) posits that the ministry operates on the understanding that recognises the divine image in the incarcerated fosters empathy, compassion, and a commitment to facilitating spiritual growth within the prison system.

Lanni (2021:635) further holds that the prison system follows the principles of restorative justice. Unlike retributive justice, which focuses on punishment, restorative justice aims to repair and transform victims and offenders. Prison ministry is inspired by Christian reconciliation and aims to heal relationships, promote forgiveness, and encourage spiritual healing for troubled individuals affected by crime (Bowe, 2020). Rosado (2019:2) argues that the commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself embodies this principle by extending love and compassion to those incarcerated. Through acts of kindness, mentorship, and spiritual guidance, prison ministry becomes a tangible expression of God’s love, transcending judgment and condemnation. Scholars such as Wright et al., (2021: 42-85) emphasise that the ministry creates inclusivity by recognising that prisoners often experience and suffer from isolation. Prison ministry seeks to break spiritual chains by building shared faith communities and supporting and encouraging those seeking fellowship with God (Garcia, 2020). Meanwhile, Schliehe et al., (2022:1595-1614) explain that in prison, people may struggle with guilt, shame, and the consequences of their actions, especially a sense of mental isolation. The GPS fills this gap by providing a support network where people can find comfort, support, and reassurance (Stearns & Yang, 2021:3288-3309).

3. The case of the Church of Pentecost’s prison reformation Centres

The GPS is the cornerstone of the institution that manages and administers prisons in the country (Boateng & Hsieh, 2019:172-193). Its mandate is to secure public safety by rehabilitating and reintegrating prisoners serving custodial sentences. The GPS operates under a comprehensive mandate that reflects a commitment to humane treatment and social reintegration (Aidoo, 2024). The primary duty is to

secure the custody of prisoners in conjunction with promoting their general welfare during detention. This dual commitment underscores the service's commitment to ethical practices within the prison system. Additionally, the GPS goes beyond incarceration but emphasises rehabilitation to prepare inmates for successful reintegration after serving their sentence. By addressing the root causes of criminal behaviour, the service aims to promote lasting positive change in the lives of offenders.

The classification of prisons in Ghana is an example of the strategic approach GPS uses to meet the diverse needs of different categories of prisoners (Boakye et al., 2022:201-218). Generally, GPS categorises these prisons into three groups, with various focuses and attention. The first is Central Prisons, exemplified by facilities such as Nsawam Medium Security Prison, which serve as central points for all categories of prisoners except convicts. These institutions prioritise trade training and equip long-term prisoners with employable skills for effective reintegration into society. The second category of prisons is the Local Prisons, primarily responsible for the secure custody and welfare of inmates. They also house short-sentence prisoners with no capacity for trade training. The final category is the Open Camp prisons engaged in agricultural activities that contribute to the preparation of prisoners for reintegration. In contrast, agricultural settlement camps focus on training in agricultural practices with relaxed security measures.

Despite laudable efforts, the GPS suffers from significant problems, including congestion. The current prison population has grown to 15,055, exceeding the capacity of the existing infrastructure.¹² Purpose-built facilities such as Nsawam, Ankafu, and Kete Krachi prisons differ significantly from improvised facilities created from warehouses, shops, and silos intended initially for goods. This highlights the urgent need for increased investment and development of prison infrastructure to respond to the growing number of prisoners effectively.

Considering this, a memorandum of understanding between the CoP and GPS emphasises a shared commitment between the two parties to decongest and equip prisoners with practical skills, which the church calls ISARC. The Chairman of the CoP, Apostle Eric Nyamekye, emphasises the church's commitment to supporting the GPS in its mandate to reform convicted individuals (Tsekpoe, 2021).¹³ Two of these ISARCs have been built at Nsawam and Ejura, and three are at various levels of completion at Damango, Enchi, and Obuasi.¹⁴ The facility incorporates an admin-

¹² <https://citinewsroom.com/2022/10/church-of-pentecost-builds-prison-reformation-centre-at-nsawam/> 22/02/2024 4:31pm.

¹³ <https://citinewsroom.com/2022/10/church-of-pentecost-builds-prison-reformation-centre-at-nsawam/> 22/02/2024 4:31pm.

¹⁴ Prison Officer 2, Chapel warden at Nsawam Prisons, Accra; <https://citinewsroom.com/2022/10/church-of-pentecost-builds-prison-reformation-centre-at-nsawam/> 22/02/2024 4:31pm.

istration block, a chapel that doubles as a classroom, a football field, a baptistry, modern restrooms, automated boreholes, offices, an infirmary, workshops, and other auxiliary amenities are all part of the 300 inmate facility for the Eura Camp Prison.¹⁵ Alternatively, the 320-bed Nsawam Camp Prison facility has four dormitories, an infirmary, a shop, a visitors' lounge, an administration block fully equipped with auxiliary offices, an ICT lab complete with computers and accessories, a carpentry and tailoring workshop, a chapel fully equipped with musical instruments, a baptistry, a kitchen with a dining hall, a soccer and volleyball pitch, CCTV installations, and other amenities.¹⁶ It is argued that modern prison facilities that provide inmates with access to skills training, technical and vocational education, and a supportive environment have been found to have a positive impact on inmates' rehabilitation and reintegration into society (Mbatha et al., 2020:353-359).

At the inaugurations of the ISARC, the CoP at Nsawam and Ejura shared their motivation for this initiative. The Chairman, Apostle Eric Nyamekye, noted that the ISARC seeks to provide tangible skills and technical and vocational education, as well as a supportive environment that contributes to a transformative experience for prisoners, preparing them for successful reintegration into society. During the inauguration of the Nsawam Camp Prison, he remarked:

As Christians, we believe we must not only lead and usher people to Heaven but also show interest in their livelihoods here on earth by making them useful to society. It is for this reason that together with the Ghana Prisons Service, this facility has been christened, "Inmates Skills Acquisition and Reformation Centre."¹⁷

Apart from paying for several of the inmates to be freed, three key thematic areas are identified as motivation for the CoP in addressing the mission of the church. These include decongesting the prisons, responding to a biblical/evangelistic mandate, and reforming inmates for proper integration. The article, therefore, through a qualitative approach, assesses how these motivations are achieved by interviewing selected participants directly involved with or affected by the CoP's prison reform initiative. Some of the respondents' comments are presented based on the experiences of some of the people; for ethical and security reasons, the names of the respondents are withheld, and codes are used to refer to the respondents.

¹⁵ Prison Officer 5, Chapel Warden at Ejura Camp Prison, Ejura, <https://citinewsroom.com/2022/10/church-of-pentecost-builds-prison-reformation-centre-at-nsawam/> 22/02/2024 4:31pm.

¹⁶ Prison Officer 1, Warden, Nsawam Prisons, Accra, <https://citinewsroom.com/2022/10/church-of-pentecost-builds-prison-reformation-centre-at-nsawam/> 22/02/2024 4:31pm.

¹⁷ <https://citinewsroom.com/2022/10/church-of-pentecost-builds-prison-reformation-centre-at-nsawam/> 22/02/2024 4:31pm.

4. Decongestion of the prisons

Apostle Eric Nyamekye, during the inauguration of ISARC, identified acute overcrowding in Ghana's prisons as the primary motivation for the initiative.¹⁸ He cited the 50.43% overcrowding in 2018 as the push factor for the ISARC. At the Nsawam Medium Security Prison alone, he pointed out that although it is intended to house 850 inmates, it currently holds 3,187 inmates, exceeding its capacity by over 275%. The CoP, therefore, found itself responsible as a church on a mission to respond to their existence by mitigating the situation while meeting inmates' spiritual and social needs in providing camp prisons as a service to God and humanity.

The church then built these camp prisons, which had improved living conditions and offered inmates beds and access to basic amenities. One of the inmates who had been in other prisons and was recently transferred to the Ejura Camp Prison compared his experiences at both prisons:

You have to pay to sleep on the floor, or you stand through the night, and even when you sleep, you are arranged like sardines where you sleep with your ribs across each other. However, here we have. You have seen an inmate having his bed, bathing, showering, etc. This place is like abroad.¹⁹

Another inmate, who is a Muslim, was full of praise for the CoP and confirmed the sleeping conditions the other inmate talked about. "We sleep well, and even my skin looks nice now compared to how it was while I was in the other prison."²⁰ All inmates interacted with were proud of the CoP for the beds and suggested that what the CoP had developed was more of a dormitory than a cell. An inmate also confirmed that they get a regular supply of detergent, blankets, etc., although they were unsure where the supplies came from.

Prison wardens who were interacted with praised the CoP for taking the initiative in building modern prisons and emphasised its positive impact on changing the narrative about prisoners. They appreciated the significant help and relief the CoP provided to the inmates. To them, it is an example for other Christian and religious denominations to follow. They recognised that the government alone cannot solve all the prison system's problems. The wardens expressed gratitude for the church's efforts and hoped for similar benevolence in other prisons. One remarked, "The CoP has given life back to these inmates by the training to give livelihood to them in such a first-class facility."²¹ Another

¹⁸ The Church of Pentecost Chairman Explains The Church's Prisons Project (modernghana.com). <https://www.modernghana.com/news/971753/the-church-of-pentecost-chairman-explains-the-chur.html> 22/02/2024 2:13pm.

¹⁹ Inmate 3, Ejura Camp Prison, Ejura

²⁰ Inmate 5, Camp Prison, Ejura

²¹ Officer 3, Camp Prison, Ejura

added, “The CoP has set an example which other churches and organisations should emulate, showing love and concern for these inmates goes a long way towards the transformation of society in giving hope to the dejected, the church has done very well and must be applauded.”²² These comments affirm the joy of the wardens for the positive impacts of the initiative not only for the inmates, but also for society at large.

5. Biblical mandate

As revealed in the scriptures, the Church of God exists to attain God’s mission, essentially to save souls and transform society. Since the Bible is the manual of the Christians, every action of the Christians must directly or indirectly find a basis in the Bible as a frame of reference for doing the will of God. During the inauguration of both Camp Prisons, Apostle Nyamekye cited Hebrews 13:3, “*Continue to remember those in prison, as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated, as if you yourselves were suffering,*” as the biblical basis for the initiative. The CoP, therefore, sought to build a place that would be befitting for their stay, thereby enhancing comfort as a tool to win over jailers. This forms part of the church’s non-traditional and evangelistic strategy. It is also influenced by the *Missio Dei* theology, given that irrespective of people’s predicaments, they can be saved since the image of God is still with them. In keeping with its evangelistic mandate, the CoP views prison reform as an opportunity for spiritual outreach followed by sharing the gospel through practical support and spiritual guidance. The well-equipped facility provides ample space for religious activities and attracts individuals from various religious backgrounds to join the Christian facility. One of the chaplains at Nsawam noted positive impacts on religious participation and emphasised the absence of pressure regarding religion. Inmates, regardless of their faith, are encouraged to attend meetings. The well-equipped facilities and inclusive religious activities create an environment where inmates willingly participate in religious services.²³

The inmates stated that it was more comfortable to accept Christ in the CoP’s ISARC because it is equipped with worship instruments, and the environment helps to commune with God. One expressed that he would not dare to enter the chapel in the other prison.²⁴ To him, the pressure was too much to enter the chapel, but here, the comfort makes serving God easier, for which reason he has accepted Christ now. Another inmate confessed, “Me, I was a thief outside, but by coming here, I have been helped greatly through the work of the COP, not just through the word of God but by gaining employable skills.”²⁵

²² Officer 8, Nsawam Prison, Accra

²³ Chapline Officer, Nsawam Prison, Accra

²⁴ Inmate 7, Ejura Camp Prison, Ejura

²⁵ Inmate 3, Ejura Camp Prison, Ejura

An inmate expressed that the available comfort helps with his mental health.²⁶ The inmates credited the CoP for creating an environment that fosters religious conversion. The spacious halls in the new facility facilitate easy participation. Further to this, another inmate highlighted the ease of joining religious activities and expressed a personal transformation from being a Muslim to becoming a devout Christian baptised by the CoP.²⁷ One of them, who was from a Christian home but had converted to Islam for over 15 years, had found the need to come back to Christ through the Ejura and Nsawam Camp Prisons.²⁸

The biblical basis of the course of action of the CoP in the ISARC has shown a clear picture of “doing it as unto the Lord” (Colossians 3:23-24). This basis of concern for the vulnerable and empathy towards inmates’ services is an open door of their hearts to the Good News, thereby attaining the church’s mission as established by God. The interactions show that the inmates and the wardens feel positively inclined towards receiving the message because it is clear to them that the Church empathises with their pain and, hence, a need to listen to them, too, leading to conversion.

6. Transformation of inmates

Church involvement in prison ministry is expected to be supportive rather than disruptive, underscoring the importance of collaboration between religious institutions and correctional facilities. The establishment of ISARC at Nsawam and Ejura Camp Prisons, with plans for more centres in the pipeline, by the CoP demonstrates a commitment to reforming prisoners and integrating them as valuable contributors to society. In this case, the CoP’s initiative appears to provide prisoners with a holistic approach to rehabilitation, addressing their spiritual and mental health needs as well as providing them with modern facilities and a supportive environment.²⁹

Inmates reported improved mental health, voluntary involvement in religious activities, and an increased sense of happiness attributed to the supportive environment provided by the modern prison facilities by the CoP.³⁰ This transformation is unique as it addresses the spiritual and practical needs of inmates. Wardens expressed favourable views of the current prison facilities and emphasised their positive impact on inmates.³¹ They acknowledged the laudable efforts of the church in providing modern facilities, improving the conditions of prisoners, and aligning with the goals of the prison ministry.

²⁶ Inmate 1, Nsawam Prisons, Accra

²⁷ Inmate 3, Nsawam Prisons Accra

²⁸ Inmate 6, Ejura Camp Prison, Ejura

²⁹ <https://citinewsroom.com/2022/10/church-of-pentecost-builds-prison-reformation-centre-at-nsawam/> 22/02/2024 4:31pm.

³⁰ Inmates 3, 8, 7, 9, 13, Nsawam Prisons, Accra; Inmates 2, 14, 7, 1, Ejura Prison Camp, Ejura.

³¹ Prison Officers 1,3,4 Ejura Camp Prison, Ejura; Prison Officers, 1, 2,4, Nsawam Prisons, Accra.

The inmates could not hide their excitement with the ISARC because the gadgets they needed to learn, like industrial sewing machines, computers, etc., were provided, and the facilitators had enough time and patience for each of them to learn various trades. One of them said:

Me myself I was a teacher, teaching in the village. But here it’s not just a theory, because, in school, where I was, I would be teaching the students what I had read, but now it’s like am getting an upgrade so when I go back, I can teach them better. I was teaching in a village where there were no computers, but here we have our own accounts, emails etc. With what they (CoP) have done, it is worth praising. Can you imagine a jail man watching plasma TV not ‘aticopor’ (old type TV/ Cathode-Ray Tube - CRT TV), jail man having a toilet roll, jail man having a blanket, jail man having a bed, jail man having fun, oh the Church of Pentecost has made prison-like like abroad (Europe).³²

Another recounted his experience from the prison he was transferred from. According to the inmate, there were no opportunities to learn a trade unless you had at least a 15-year sentence.³³ He, for instance, has five years, but he has learnt tailoring and is now learning leather works since most were allowed to learn two trades simultaneously. He then added that he would use the acquired skills to make a living when he was released. Furthermore, he confessed that before he came to the prison, he thought sewing was difficult, but now he can sew African wear, thanks to the CoP and the facilitators who made it simple and a dream come true.

The testimonies of these inmates and wardens emphasise the impact of the ISARC and efforts by the GPS in transforming lives and giving hope to the inmates. The mission of God is thus attained when the church is seen as an agent of holistic transformation that affects the total well-being of the individuals, which the ISARC demonstrates. The testaments of their transformation attained by this initiative of the CoP are invaluable to the inmates, making them feel indebted to the church for giving them back their livelihood and connecting them to their God.

7. Community members’ perspectives

Insights from community members shed light on their perceptions of the CoP’s initiative in a modern prison facility, which offers overwhelming support and praise by many, but a few believe it is a waste of resources to build such Camp Prisons. The local community in Ejura and Accra recognised the importance of such facilities and appreciated the church’s focus on training prisoners in practical skills. It was during these interactions

³² Inmate 3, Nsawam Prisons, Accra

³³ Inmate 5, Ejura Camp Prison, Ejura

that a respondent retorted, “Lucky Dube never dies,”³⁴ expecting the church to invest in employable ventures rather than places of confinement. Another person who disagrees with the CoP argued that through history, the church has been a force in fighting for the liberties of the people with the liberation theology in the reformation, slavery, etc., but why should the CoP be taking the people back to imprisonment?³⁵ The CoP, he proposed, could have invested in factories, dialysis centres, football fields, or even theatres to help develop talents. Additionally, they have made the place so attractive that the politicians would rather choose those places so that they will be comfortable when they are to serve custody sentences for crimes they have committed.

On the other hand, some community members who were primarily not members of the CoP applauded the CoP for the positive gesture.³⁶ For most of these respondents, it is a laudable initiative and emphasises the importance of addressing the issues faced by prisoners as people, not beyond redemption and a target of the mission of the church. A modern prison facility provides hope for successful reintegration into society, which the CoP is gladly working to achieve. The members encouraged continued support for the noble work of the church. They further suggested that other churches should take inspiration and prioritise ministering to the marginalised in society over their luxurious spending.

Most of the public opinion supports the CoP’s efforts to collaborate with the GPS on the mission of the church and recognises the positive impact on skills training for prisoners. The public praised the church and encouraged the extension of this benevolent gesture to other places.³⁷ The finding that community members have a positive perception of the CoP’s initiative in a modern prison facility is consistent with previous research on the role of community support in successful inmate reintegration (Hagos et al., 2022:124-137). According to Miklósi (2020:125-138), community support is critical in promoting successful reintegration of inmates into society and reducing recidivism rates. What the CoP has done is indeed a genius step worthy of emulation by other institutions, be it religious, social, economic, or political, towards the plight of the neglected members of the society for the well-being of society as a whole.

8. Conclusion

The positive assessment of the church’s involvement in prison reforms, as identified in this study, underscores the importance of partnership between religious bodies and state machinery toward the mission of the church and the well-being of society in general. The CoP’s initiative of the ISARC in Nsawam and Ejura Camp Prisons is a promis-

³⁴ Nsawam 3, Nsawam, Accra

³⁵ Nsawam 1, Nsawam, Accra

³⁶ Nsawam 2, 5, Nsawam, Accra; Ejura 2, Ejura

³⁷ Ejura 2, Ejura

ing model for winning a critically vulnerable group of people as a means of a targeted mission. This form of mission is holistic, affecting the spiritual, economic, emotional, and social facets of the individuals in prisons, giving them the hope of tomorrow. Vocational training provided by the centres equips inmates with skills that increase their employability while offering spiritual guidance even after serving their sentences. The findings of this study have implications for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. This missiological approach is essential because it uses social transformation as a tool towards the Great Commission, which is effective and results-orientated.

Notwithstanding, there is no doubt that the church as an institution must show intentionality to the vulnerable in society, including inmates at the prison. Considerable attention should also be paid to their reintegration into the community. The church can consider programmes intended to fight the stigmatisation of inmates who come into society. Family and community acceptance of these former convicts will help them to reintegrate, which helps sustain the transformation they have experienced. Considering this, it is recommended that an independent committee could be set up to serve as a bridge between inmates and their families. Such a committee could work towards fostering acceptance and understanding within the community, thereby mitigating the stigma often faced by such individuals who have undergone the rehabilitation process.

Additionally, a significant fear in this initiative is sustainability. The question is, will the CoP be able to provide the needed maintenance of the facilities as captured in the MOU over the years after the current leadership headed by Apostle Nyamekye? This fear is born out of the fact that a ‘new pharaoh, who did not know Joseph’ or leader of the church, may emerge after 10 years or more who may not be interested in such a capital-intensive project of maintaining such facilities which does not seem to yield direct physical benefits. When this happens, the initiative will die since the government cannot maintain the structures and may congest the place again, bringing the whole thing back to square one. It will, therefore, be a good idea for the church to establish a profit-making venture whose dividends will be used for the recurrent maintenance of the facility to stand the test of time.

Given the response from wardens, inmates, and the general public, including both CoP members and non-members, it is clear that the innovation of the CoP in the ISARC is timely and purposeful. The church must consider means of meeting the needs of society while gaining an avenue to impact lives and save souls for the kingdom of God. The call for the salvation of the souls of men and the soil is squarely met in the CoP shining example of targeting a marginalised group of persons like inmates, knowing that the image of God still resides in them, irrespective of their circumstances. Therefore, the church must not discriminate in its missionary agenda, but must be seen as interested in all persons and map out transformational strategies to both the soul and soil.

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