

# SPIRITUAL CARE OF WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICAN PRISONS: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND CURRENT SITUATION

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## *Abstract*

This article provides a short history of female imprisonment and the role that religion and spiritual care have played and may play in the lives of female prisoners in the South African context. This is illustrated by reflecting briefly on the role of religion in Sister Bernard Ncube's life during her detention as a political activist. The article also reflects on the current situation in female prisons and the transformation that is taking place, in that women are now being allowed to act as spiritual caregivers. Information provided by the Department of Correctional Services on spiritual care for women is analysed and further illustrated by means of facts gleaned from research undertaken in female prisons by the author. The role that spiritual care plays in the rehabilitation of female offenders is also discussed.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The official position of the South African Department of Correctional Services is that it recognises the constitutional right to freedom of religion, belief and opinion of all offenders, be they male or female, young or old. The right to spiritual care should receive more impetus inside prisons for it forms a key part of the rehabilitation programmes provided to prisoners. For both these reasons the Department of Correctional Services seeks to encourage female offenders to practise their religion and assists them in this regard wherever it is administratively possible to do so.

This article deals with women who have been deprived of their freedom but who still form part of a wider faith community of South Africa. It is the aim of religion to provide believers with guidelines to help them to find ways of living a “better life”. It can be said that religion is a way of life. By encouraging spiritual care in prisons, the authorities are helping female offenders to find direction and to live a life shaped by the positive norms of their religion.

In providing direction to female offenders, religion also gives these people hope. A female offender needs hope to remain optimistic in her situation and be positive about her future. When a woman is incarcerated she is forced to deal with her feelings. These feelings, which are often very intense, are usually feelings of personal failure, guilt, rejection and fear. According to Dammer (2002:41), religion can help a female offender to deal with the pains of her imprisonment and to accept what has happened to her. The core of most faiths is a belief in the acceptance and love of a higher power and this helps offenders to feel better about themselves. Spiritual care also better equips the offender to deal with the frustrations and pressures of being incarcerated. As women arguably experience imprisonment at a more overtly emotional level than men, they tend to turn to religion in times of distress.<sup>1</sup> That is an additional reason why it is so important for the authorities to provide spiritual care to imprisoned women.

A surprisingly limited amount of scientific research has been conducted in the area of spiritual care of female offenders. During the past few decades international researchers have speculated about the relationship between religion and prisoners in general (Clear & Sumter 2002:128). But despite their interest, little research has been done on the direct effect of having a religious faith on the institutional adjustment of prisoners. Similarly, limited research has been undertaken on female prisoners in South Africa. This article will attempt to begin to fill this gap.

## 2 WOMEN IN PRISON

### 2.1 Historical background

Religious observance or the practice of religion as an alternative form of treatment to harsh physical punishment can be traced back to the very first prisons. Criminals who were sentenced to be mutilated or killed were often saved by the early Christian church, which granted them asylum (Dammer 2002:35). Views on the role of religion had a strong influence on the historical development of the penal system. In fact, the word “penitentiary” is derived from the word “penitence”. The incarcerated criminal was expected to be penitent and to repent of his or her sins. In other words, the criminal had to show regret for wrongdoing or sinning (Clear & Sumter 2002:128).

Religion has long played a large part in the efforts of correctional officials to rehabilitate offenders. This also dates back to the time when the first prisons were built. According to Peters (1995:14), there are documents relating to the early historical connections between the penal system and the monasteries. For example, cells in monasteries served as places of punishment for many criminals in medieval times (Hoyles 1955:49).

Moreover, attempts to reform prison regimes at the end of the 18th century were influenced by Christian beliefs. One of the key persons in this initiative was John Howard, a Methodist lay preacher who was driven by his Christian beliefs to expose the abuses in the European prisons of the time (McGowen 1995:87).

Religion teaches a person to live a better life and to avoid the paths of sin. It also teaches a person to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” and not to seek vengeance. In 1602, the *Spinhuis*, an institution that housed female offenders in Amsterdam, had the following motto (Van Zyl Smit 1992:2):

*Schrick niet! Ick wreck geen quaet, maar dwing tot goedt.  
Straf is myn handt maar lieflijck myn gemoedt.*<sup>2</sup>

This motto reflects on the effect of religion on the harsh, but supposedly fair, prison regime to which these women were subjected.

When Jan van Riebeeck set foot at the Cape in 1652, he brought with him the Christian faith as a key feature of the administration that he was to set up. The religious convictions of the first colonists led to their concern about the spiritual wellbeing of prisoners and their religious needs (Coetzee, Loubser & Krüger 1995:142). The authorities allowed the religious leaders of the different Christian groups to preach to their supporters in prison.

## **2.2 Sister Bernard Ncube**

As pointed out above, many observers of the prison system are sensitive to the importance of spiritual care in various prison rehabilitation campaigns (Beckford & Gilliat 1998:1). Prison historians also emphasise the centrality of religion in coping with solitary confinement and the continuous supervision that goes with it. The story of the anti-apartheid activist, Sister Bernard Ncube, serves as an example of a woman whose spiritual strength enabled her to survive detention and suffering in prison.

Women in South Africa played an important role in the mass struggle against apartheid during the 1980s. A key participant among them was Sister Bernard Ncube. Sister Ncube was born in 1935 into a religious Catholic family. She became a nun in 1955 and served at St. Mary's Convent in Kagiso, Krugersdorp, where she was known as a very spiritual person with a commitment to the community in which she lived, especially to the women (Detainees' Parents Support Committee & Descom 1988:12).

Sister Ncube is the only nun in South Africa to have been charged with political offences. In 1985, South Africa declared a state of emergency which remained in force until 1989. During this period, Sister Ncube and thirteen other residents of Kagiso and Munsieville were brought to trial on the accusations of assault, treason and troublemaking. The case was, however, dismissed in early 1988 although Sister Ncube was kept in detention for a total of 16 months.

She was held in solitary confinement under the notorious section 29 of the Internal Security Act for over twelve months of this period. This meant that she spent 23 hours a day in complete isolation without any contact with her fellow detainees or the outside world.

Sister Ncube survived her experiences in prison because of her strong faith although, because of a medical condition, her physical health was jeopardised. This is how she described her experience in prison:

Our prisons are man-made “hells on earth”, places of torture and suffering. What do you think of an animal in a cage, with all of its instincts to be out there free to move, longing to live its life, as was meant by the Creator? (Detainees’ Parents Support Committee & Descom 1988:12).

During her confinement she had no one to speak to and nothing to read except her Bible. She reportedly said the following:

I have a deeper strength than ever and a deeper commitment. The Bible meant a lot to me, it was an answer to my situation in a very realistic way. The Bible spoke for itself in detention; I had never had so much time to study it. The Bible is the foundation of “politics”, it addresses itself to the structural sins of society. The sins of society are a major rebellion against God and the fundamental causes of war and bloodshed. Our society does not address itself against humanity (Detainees’ Parents Support Committee & Descom 1988:13).

It is clear from this account that it was the strength of her faith that allowed Sister Ncube to survive prison and even to grow spiritually. It would be ideal if this form of spiritual experience could be projected into today’s prisons as a source of inspiration to assist prisoners in surviving the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes 1958).

### 2.3 Imprisoned women today

According to the Department of Correctional Services (Department of Correctional Services 2007), providing access to spiritual care currently forms a central part of the programmes offered in prison to female offenders. Until recently, the Chaplaincy in the Department of Correctional Services was dominated by the Christian faith and it was mainly male orientated. Unfortunately, this marginalised prisoners who belonged to other faiths. Since 1994, the Department of Correctional Services has been in a process of transformation and an attempt has been made to address many of the imbalances of the past (Department of Correctional Services 2007). Currently the Department of Correctional Services embraces the fifty-five religious denominations, both Christian and other, found in female prisons alone. Another step in the transformation process has been the appointment of women as spiritual caregivers at female prisons. With the introduction of the practice of allowing women to offer spiritual care to female offenders, history is in the making. The Department of Correctional Services has also formed partnerships with different churches and faith-based organisations. Ministers of religion and spiritual workers conduct regular visits to the different female prisons to provide integrated and holistic services to the imprisoned women.

The Department of Correctional Services not only promotes spiritual care among female offenders but it also tries to assist wherever possible to support the religious practices and customs of the different denominations. For example, at the Pollsmoor Female Prison in Cape Town, 281 normal and 37 special diet meals are served daily for medical, *religious* and traditional purposes (Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons 2004:33). Bibles worth R275 000 were donated by the Bible Society of South Africa to the Department of Correctional Services for the use of offenders, male and female. In the latter example, a non-governmental organisation was seen to be contributing to the spiritual health of offenders (Department of Correctional Services 2005:47).

By 30 June 2007, the Department of Correctional Services was managing 238 “correctional centres”, as prisons are now known in official parlance, countrywide. Eight of these correctional centres

accommodated only women. In a further 86 correctional centres, women were accommodated in a particular section of the correctional centre (Department of Correctional Services 2007 [online]).

**Table 1**  
*Gender incarceration levels as on 30 June 2007*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
Awaiting trial detainees	46 762	855	47 617
Sentenced	109 652	2 444	112 096
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>156 414</b>	<b>3 299</b>	<b>159 713</b>

(Department of Correctional Services, 2007 [online])

Table 1 illustrates the numbers of incarcerated prisoners according to the Department of Correctional Services as on 30 June 2007. Out of the total of 159 713 inmates, only 3 299 were women. The women represent a very low percentage of the total prison population – 2,1 percent – which very definitely makes them a minority. It is not altogether bad to be in a minority group but in a prison system where resources are limited and they have to be shared with a dominant male group, minority status can be detrimental if more attention is paid to the needs of the male majority.

### **3 SPIRITUAL CARE OF IMPRISONED WOMEN**

South African writers have emphasised the following two points about the spiritual care of female offenders (Coetzee, Loubser & Krüger 1995:144):

- spiritual care is a basic right to which all offenders, including the female offender, are entitled; and
- it is an important aspect in the overall care of offenders provided by the Department of Correctional Service.

In terms of this approach, spiritual care is one of the means by which prison authorities can contribute to changing the female offender's

behaviour for the better, based on her acceptance of a lifestyle governed by the doctrines or rules of her religion.

Prison authorities should encourage the women to practise the religion of their choice. This is in line with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, which enshrines the rights of all persons, including prisoners, to freedom of conscience, *religion*, belief and opinion. The Department of Correctional Services should allow and encourage female offenders to satisfy their religious needs by offering spiritual care programmes. This should be done without interference by the prison authorities in respect of the beliefs, principles or practices of the different faith groups. Respect for the religious convictions and practices of each female offender, as well as of correctional officials, should be promoted. Spiritual care is the means by which a female offender can protect and reinforce her personality, her sense of right and wrong and her inner spiritual being. It is also the basis for a healthy self-esteem and it encourages the development of greater self-control. All these aspects will subsequently assist the female offender with her rehabilitation and reintegration into society. In particular, prison authorities should, as far as possible, try to respect the religious prescriptions with regard to food, fasting, administration of sacraments and the celebration of certain religious days in their practice of spiritual care.

These ideals have been accepted as departmental policy. According to the White Paper on Corrections (Department of Correctional Services 2005:71), spiritual care should form part of the holistic sentence planning for female offenders. Every human being is able to change and transform. Prison authorities should offer imprisoned women the chance to change.

The following are scheduled spiritual care programmes offered by the Department of Correctional Services to female offenders (Department of Correctional Services 2007 [online]):

- The holding of divine service and religious meetings.
- Bible study/faith study during which the offender's book of faith is studied systematically.

- Instruction in the catechism/faith with a view to membership of the church/faith.
- Offenders who are members of a specific church/faith are regularly informed about events in their church/faith.
- Choirs and vocal groups often perform during divine service.
- A variety of Bible courses/faith studies and correspondence courses offered by different churches/faiths are available to members.
- The spiritual worker regularly holds small group meetings. Themes and subjects are geared to the needs of the offender.
- The chaplain/spiritual workers conduct interviews with the offender regarding personal problems.
- Distribution of literature. The offender regularly receives religious literature, books of faith (*inter alia* the Bible/Koran etc) from her church/faith.

#### **4 DENOMINATIONAL GUIDANCE**

South Africa is making a rapid transition from being a country with many Christian denominations to becoming a country supporting many different kinds of religious groups. This is also reflected in the female prison population. On admission to prison, the religious denomination of each female offender must be determined. All female offenders are thereafter acknowledged as members of that specific denomination. Table 2 shows the top 15 denominations to which females prisoners belong.

**Table 2***Females (per denomination) in custody as at 31 July 2007*

<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Total</b>
Apostolic Churches	272
Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa	45
Church of the Province of South Africa (Anglican)	65
Dutch Reformed Church	88
Dutch Reformed Mission	70
Islamic Faith (Muslim)	68
Methodist Churches	162
New Apostolic Church	56
No Church/Faith	420
Old Apostolic Church	105
Other Churches/Faiths	652
Roman Catholic Church	338
Shembe (NBC)	50
Zion Christian Church (ZCC)	183
Zionist/Indigenous Churches	306

(Department of Correctional Services, 2007 [online])

The growth of religious diversity challenges the ability of the Department of Correctional Services to provide adequate support to female offenders according to their individual denominations, as required by law. According to section 14 of the Correctional Services Act 1998, offenders have the following religious rights:

- (1) The right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion.
- (2) The right to attend religious services and meetings held in the prison freely and voluntarily and the right to have religious literature in her possession.
- (3) Where practicable, the right to be offered places of worship at every prison for prisoners of all religious denominations.
- (4) The right not to be compelled to attend religious services or meetings or to take part in religious practices.

The provisions of the Correctional Services Act are complemented by the Standard Minimum Rules on the Treatment of Prisoners, which were adopted by a congress of the United Nations in 1955. South Africa was represented at that meeting and endorsed these rules. Subsequently they were one of the influences that shaped the 1998 Correctional Services Act. A number of individual rules in the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules make provision for various aspects of the spiritual care for prisoners (United Nations 1955). Thus, Rule 6, for example, provides that no discrimination against any prisoner may take place as result of, *inter alia*, her religion. Rule 41 emphasises that a sufficient number of religious workers must be appointed, regular religious services must be held, and prisoners must have free access to religious workers but must also have the right to object to being visited by a worker of a particular religious group. Rule 42 lays down in general terms that every prisoner's religious needs should be satisfied. This can be achieved by allowing prisoners to attend religious services and have religious books in their possession. Rule 66 notes that religion can be used as a method of treatment. Finally, Rule 77 explicitly includes religious instruction in the further education programmes that should be offered to prisoners.

The Correctional Services Act, together with the Standard Minimum Rules, clearly creates an opportunity for the offenders to practice their individual religions according to their specific prescriptions. However, it does not force offenders to take part in any religious activity if they do not wish to do so. The ideal would be for prison authorities to encourage offenders to participate in religious groups of their choice. Therefore, the Department of Correctional Services should encourage and support all the different denominations to which members of the female prison population belong.

Spiritual caregivers should also take cognisance of the difference between spiritual care in the community and spiritual care in a prison situation. The following illustrate the special needs of imprisoned women (Coetzee, Loubser & Krüger 1995:144):

- Because of their imprisonment, women often experience a religious crisis. Their spiritual caregivers should keep this in mind and remember that

the conflict the women prisoners are experiencing may not be identical to a religious crisis experienced on the outside. The guidance that they provide to prisoners should reflect this reality.

- A prison is a unique setting and this should be taken into consideration when spiritual guidance is offered to female offenders. For example, the religious needs of female offenders have to be taken care of by the prison authorities through the intervention of spiritual caregivers as imprisoned women cannot participate in religious activities that take place in the community. Although the religious care and practices offered may be modelled as closely as possible those religious practices in the community, they are not identical. In the outside world, women take part in religious activities with their families; inside the prison they participate in these activities alongside strangers. The care offered should allow for such differences.
- Imprisoned women may have problems with their self-image. These women may experience feelings of guilt and remorse, which constitute the core of their self-image problem. The person who is their spiritual caregiver should always keep this possibility in mind when providing spiritual guidance to imprisoned women.

## 5 THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL CARE IN REHABILITATION

From a Christian perspective, justice cannot be attained by building more and more prisons, but rather by “rebuilding” more and more prisoners. That is why so many Christians wish to be involved in faith-based organisations which offer prisoners the opportunity to rehabilitate themselves (Burnside, Loucks, Adler & Rose 2005:xxiii). Rehabilitation can be achieved through interventions to change the attitudes and behaviour of female offenders and to promote social values and responsibilities (Department of Correctional Services 2005:72).

According to the Department of Correctional Services, spiritual care is a vital part of the rehabilitation of female offenders and therefore it forms an important component of the regime in female prisons. In addition to regular services provided by official prison chaplains or spiritual workers, the Department allows volunteers from the community to present programmes that are designed to meet the spiritual needs of imprisoned women. The Department, in partnership with the community, uses need-based programmes to present effective spiritual care services to female offenders. The objective of these spiritual services is to help the women rehabilitate and reintegrate into the community (Department of Correctional Services 2003:67). Non-governmental organisations, faith-based organisations and community-based organisations such as the New Life Behaviour Ministries, Evangelism Expansion III and the Kairos Project are some of the organisations that Department of Correctional Services permits to provide spiritual care services (Department of Correctional Services 2002:84). These organisations render an important service to female offenders. They offer support groups which come into prisons and give spiritual care to imprisoned women.

## **6 RESEARCH DONE IN FEMALE PRISONS**

In doing comparative empirical research on women imprisoned in South Africa (Du Preez 2006:26), the author used a questionnaire which provided some useful information on the spiritual care of women in prison, and which complemented some of the general literature discussed in this article.<sup>3</sup>

The research was undertaken in eight prisons, four of which had male and female sections, namely Heidelberg, Middelburg, Potchefstroom and Bethal. The remaining four prisons, namely Johannesburg, Pretoria, Pollsmoor and Kroonstad, housed only women. The questionnaire was completed by female offenders during interviews with the researcher. Some of the female offenders could not speak or understand Afrikaans or English, as they spoke only an indigenous African language. In these cases, the researcher used a translator with the permission of the female offender. The total number of female offenders who were interviewed and who completed the questionnaire was 469.

Six questions in the questionnaire are relevant to this article. The questions provided for close-ended responses, although the interview did allow the female offender to make further responses to questions of her choice. When replying to the question "To which religious group/denomination do you belong?" the respondents were given a choice of 15 different denominations. These are the same 15 denominations cited in table 2. The responses reflected that fifty percent of the women belonged to the Zionist/Indigenous Church, fifteen percent belonged to the Methodist Church, ten percent belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church, eight percent belonged to the Muslim faith, two percent belonged to the Roman Catholic Church, ten percent belonged to no church or were non-believers and five percent belonged to other churches or faiths.

The next question was whether the female offender was able to practise her religion in the prison where she was incarcerated. Two of the possible answers were closed-ended but the last possible answer allowed the respondent to give reasons for her answer. The responses were as follows:

- Ten percent of the respondents said that they were not religious.
- Eighty-one percent said that it was possible for them to practice their religion in prison.
- Nine percent said that they had experienced difficulties in practising their religion in the prison where they were incarcerated. There were various reasons for this response. Respondents from minority religious groups complained of the lack of visits from people from their church or faith. For example, the Christian Timber Church, which has its origin in Nigeria, has only two churches in Gauteng. Similarly the number of female offenders belonging to that church is very small, and therefore no one from their church had visited them in prison. There were also complaints about a lack of spiritual literature related to specific religious groups. In addition, some of the respondents who attended specific religious activities were annoyed by rude remarks from other female inmates who were known non-believers.

The women were also asked in the questionnaire whether they had special religious dietary requirements. Forty-six of the respondents responded that they did have special dietary requirements and 54 said they did not. Those who had special dietary requirements were asked if these needs were taken into consideration when food was prepared in prison. Eighty-two percent answered in the affirmative and eighteen percent answered in the negative. During the interviews, the women who answered “no” to the last question were asked why their dietary requirements were not taken into consideration. Most of the women replied that they had forgotten to mention them to the correctional officials during admission to prison.

The last two questions in the questionnaire focused on the role played by non-governmental organisations, faith-based organisations and community-based organisations in female prisons. The first question asked respondents whether they knew of people or organisations that supported the spiritual care of imprisoned women during their sentence. Seventy-five percent of the respondents affirmed that they did. Fifteen percent of the respondents did not know about such organisations because, they explained, they were not interested in religion. Ten percent of the respondents did not answer the question. In the last question the respondents were asked whether representatives of these organisations had visited them at the prison. The responses corresponded to those to the previous question, with seventy-five percent of the respondents having been visited by these organisations and fifteen percent of the respondents not having been visited because they were not interested in religion. Ten percent of the respondents did not answer the last question at all.

The responses to the questions on spiritual care for imprisoned women clearly showed that efforts were being made by prison authorities to ensure that the spiritual needs of these women were met. The imprisoned women knew about the visits of different churches, faith based organisations and non-governmental organisations and, according to their responses to the questionnaire, most of them did attend sessions held by these organisations. The overall sense gained during the interviews when the topic of religion was addressed was that they were positive about this aspect of their treatment.

## 7 CONCLUSION

Christianity claims that it has an inherent empathy with prisoners (Burnside, Loucks, Adler & Rose 2005:xx). The obligation of Christians is to see the *imago Dei* in other people, and this includes prisoners. This can explain why Christians might wish to be involved in the spiritual care taking of inmates. Many other religions make similar claims to serve the best interests of all their adherents. The question is whether they succeed in doing so for prisoners. Prisons, including female prisons, are extremely cruel and unsympathetic environments. The most important challenge for imprisoned women is to cope with their loss of freedom and the guilt that they feel about their children. For most of these women, religion is a way to cope with their feelings as it offers them a variety of ways to endure the stresses that are often associated with the female prison environment.

The role of religion is an enduring question, and the “reform” of prisoners and even prison systems by religiously inspired interventions has deep historical roots. Sister Bernard Ncube is an inspirational example of what can be done in this regard in the South African context. This article suggests that, notwithstanding the many other weaknesses of the South African prison system, it has made religious care available to most women who want it.

Religion can be viewed as an important means of maintaining social order and of developing a common set of values and beliefs. Some researchers have therefore concluded that the more religious a person is, the less likely it is that he or she will deviate from her religious values and beliefs (Petterson 1991:279). The aim of an effective prison sentence is for the imprisoned women to be able to reintegrate into the community as law-abiding citizens. The formation of values and norms is a very important aspect of spiritual care and is essential in the successful reintegration of these women into society.

As was mentioned in the introduction, despite the historical importance and important role played by religion in female prisons, the topic has been sadly neglected. Hopefully, this article has helped to fill at least a part of the gap in the current knowledge on the role

that spiritual care plays in the female correctional environment. There is clearly scope, however, for further empirical research focused specifically on the place of religion in the lives of women imprisoned in South Africa.

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## ENDNOTES

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- 1 For a general account of spiritual care and its impact on women in South African prisons, see Landman, Luyt & Du Preez, 2006.
  - 2 "Fear not! I wreak no vengeance but compel to good. Hard is my hand but loving my nature." (Translated by Van Zyl Smit 1992:2).
  - 3 The original made use of qualitative and explorative research methods. The sample for the research consisted of sentenced female offenders and conclusions reached in the article are based on the researched sample selected for this study. All participants who took part in the study understood that their participation was voluntary and that their anonymity would be protected: for further methodological details, see Du Preez, 2006.