Visit the Imprisoned: A Heuristic Inquiry into the Experiences of Catholic Detention Ministry Volunteers

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Visit the Imprisoned: A Heuristic Inquiry into the Experiences of Catholic Detention Ministry Volunteers

A Dissertation by

Christopher Bao An Tran

Chapman University
Orange, CA
Attallah College of Educational Studies
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Education

May 2024

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Scot Danforth, Ph.D., Chair

Lilia Monzó, Ph.D.

James Kirylo, Ph.D.

Fred La Puzza

April 2024
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to God, my all in all.

To all the youths I have had the blessing of visiting, serving, and knowing over the years as a detention ministry volunteer, I thank you for sharing your life with me. May you take care of yourselves and may better days come your way.
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I especially thank my parish community, Blessed Sacrament Church, as well as my youth group, Đoàn Thăng Thiên. I thank my close friends, students, retreatants, and godchildren alike. I would not be who I am without your joy and friendship.

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dissertation: Dr. Scot Danforth–Your willingness to guide and lead me especially during these final steps will always be cherished, Dr. Lilia Monzó–I would not have opened my eyes to criticality without your love and pedagogy throughout my doctoral coursework, and Dr. James Kirylo–Your prayers and affirmations kept me grounded, with a reminder to enjoy this journey.

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Lastly, I want to thank all the volunteers who participated in this dissertation. Thank you for sharing your stories, insights, and love with me. May you continue to be instruments for the glory of God, and may He bless you and keep you.
ABSTRACT

Visit the Imprisoned: A Heuristic Inquiry into the Experiences of Catholic Detention Ministry Volunteers

by Christopher Bao An Tran

There exists a wide breadth of literature in regards to the harmful and dehumanizing impact of incarceration on human development and dignity. Through my years as a volunteer in detention ministry, I have witnessed firsthand these effects particularly on youths who have been incarcerated. My experiences have led me to wonder then, “Why does the prison system still exist to harm people despite the array of research condemning its practices?” Through this pondering, I critiqued the larger systems at play: the prison-industrial complex, the sociopolitical rhetoric of “tough on crime,” and the overall demonization of this population. As a response to this dominant narrative, this study sought to explore the experiences of Catholic detention ministry volunteers. Through a heuristic methodology and with the theoretical underpinnings of Critical Pedagogy, Catholic Social Teaching, Liberation Theology, and Restorative Justice, I gathered data—the reflections, testimonies, and stories—from other volunteers who served as collaborators within this study. I identified four major themes that emerged from the data: (1) God within this context, (2) detention ministry as a classroom, (3) critiques of justice, and (4) solidarity to transformation. The conversations with my collaborators suggested that the experiences of volunteers ultimately shed insight into the lives of those impacted by incarceration as well as put a spotlight on their humanity. This study highlighted the need for rehumanization: transformation within the prison system calls for a shift in perspectives, an altering of attitudes, and a change of heart around the demonization of this vulnerable population.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>VII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 1—ENCOUNTERING</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background: Setting the Context</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Brief History of Incarceration and U.S. Politics</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Costs of Incarceration</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Prison-Industrial Complex</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Jim Crow</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Psychosocial Effects of Incarceration</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incarceration on Mental Health</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties with Reintegration and Post-Release Stigma</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Impact on Families and Communities</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond Incarceration: The School-to-Prison Pipeline</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Call for Rehumanization</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale and Significance</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positionality: My Own Socio-Historical Context</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Need for More Humanizing Lenses</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing a Common Language</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 2—GROUNDING</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophical Foundations and Critical Inquiry</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Inquiry</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Pedagogy</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stemming Within Education</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banking and Problem-Posing Education</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing Conscientization (Conscientização)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cycle of Praxis</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Relationality of Dialogue</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom: The Work Towards Liberation</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criticisms of Critical Pedagogy</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary Pedagogies</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic Social Teaching</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Brief History of Catholic Social Teaching</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life and Dignity of the Human Person</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call to Family, Community, and Participation</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights and Responsibilities</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Option for the Poor and Vulnerable</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care for God’s Creation</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberation Theology</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Brief Historical Context of Liberation Theology</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Praxis</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theology as Critical Reflection</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dimensions of Liberation</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restorative Justice</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Roots of Restorative Justice</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Restorative Justice</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Pillars of Restorative Justice</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting Things Right</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Alternative View of Justice</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting the Stage</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### CHAPTER 3–SITUATING ................................................................. 70

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Brief History of Prison Ministry in the United States</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Literature Review of Prison Ministry</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Emphasis on Reducing Recidivism</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Experiences of Prison Ministry Chaplains and Volunteers</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lack of Qualitative Research on Catholic Prison Ministry</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### CHAPTER 4–GUIDING ........................................................................... 77

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Brief History of Phenomenology</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heuristic Inquiry</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Framework of Heuristic Inquiry</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Seven Processes</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Critical Advocate for Youth................................................................. 166
Carlo........................................................................................................ 170
Serving as a Couple and Being Spiritual Parents.............................. 172
Journeying Through the Sacraments.................................................. 174
Teresita.................................................................................................. 177
Possessing and Sharing a Personal Friendship with God................. 180
Francis................................................................................................. 184
A Businessman Making a Difference................................................ 187
Philomena............................................................................................ 190
More than Just a Volunteer............................................................... 193
Not Necessarily Spiritual................................................................. 196
Ephrem............................................................................................... 198
Comparisons from a Protestant Background................................. 201
An Awareness of Privilege and a Preference for the Poor............... 204
Saints in Detention.......................................................................... 206

CHAPTER 6–SEEING............................................................................. 207
With God in Detention...................................................................... 208
  God as Great Love........................................................................... 212
  Personal Faith and Prayer.............................................................. 214
  Humbled by God and Ministry...................................................... 216
  Sustaining Hope............................................................................. 219
Detention Ministry as a Classroom.................................................. 222
  Listening as the Entrance............................................................. 224
  Learning About the Difficult Realities.......................................... 227
  Raised Awareness–Fostering Criticality....................................... 233
Critiques of Justice.......................................................................... 237
  Critiques of Detention Facilities................................................ 239
  Critiques of Facility Staff............................................................. 241
  Critiques of Systems that Perpetuate Incarceration...................... 243
  Encountering Demonizing Attitudes............................................ 249
From Solidarity to Transformation.................................................... 253
  Reaffirming Dignity and Embracing Humanity........................... 255
  Through Visiting, a Greater Solidarity....................................... 261
  Forming Deeper Relationships.................................................... 266
  Mutual Transformation............................................................... 270
The Essence of Volunteering............................................................ 278

CHAPTER 7–VISITING......................................................................... 279
Prayer of the Detention Ministry Volunteer.................................... 279
The Whole Self.................................................................................. 281
Critical Pedagogy in the Light of Faith ................................................................. 284
Continued Action, Reflection, and Conscientização ............................................. 285
God in All Things .................................................................................................. 288
The Dialogue Underneath ................................................................................... 291
An Ongoing Journey ............................................................................................. 292
Solidarity Experienced ......................................................................................... 293
Thinking and Acting in Terms of Community ...................................................... 294
Human Lives are Prior ......................................................................................... 295
Combating Dehumanizing Structures ................................................................. 297
Confronting the Destructive Effects of Neoliberal Capitalism ......................... 298
A Way of Making History ...................................................................................... 300
Acknowledging Bounds ....................................................................................... 302
Onto the Next Journey ......................................................................................... 304
Implications .......................................................................................................... 305
Future Exploration ............................................................................................... 308
A Promise of the Kingdom .................................................................................. 310
An Invitation to Visit ............................................................................................ 311

REFERENCES ...................................................................................................... 313

APPENDICES ...................................................................................................... 339
Chapter 1—Encountering

During my undergraduate years, I had an affinity for the social sciences and decided to major in psychology and criminology. Beyond school, the majority of my free time was spent volunteering at my church parish through teaching catechism to children and being one of the leaders in my youth group. In discerning my career and trying to weave my Catholic faith with my love for volunteering as well as my academic interests, I came across an opportunity with the diocese’s detention ministry to help a weekend retreat for boys in the county juvenile hall. Having led multiple retreats for teenagers at my own parish, I was excited to share the joy and love of God to a population that has been marginalized and outcasted (reflecting back on these feelings, I acknowledge how my initial desires may have unknowingly perpetuated oppressive and proselytizing agendas).

This excitement soon turned into fear after I shared this opportunity with my friends and family. Immediately, my loved ones criticized me for choosing to volunteer in a space where I can be physically hurt. According to them, there are reasons incarcerated youth are locked away: these kids were violent criminals who disrupted the good in society. During the morning of the retreat, I was paralyzed with fear. Thoughts of how I could be harmed raced through my mind. As the boys entered the gathering space with the volunteers, my anxieties did not immediately subside as I was consciously minding my proximity with each youth. I was assigned a small sharing group comprised of four boys and I remember facilitating the first discussion. From my routine experiences of being a retreat leader at my church, I asked my usual introductory icebreaker question, “If you could have any superpower in the world, what would it be and why?” The first youth shared, “I want the power to change the past, so I can get rid of the bad things that happened to me.” Another youth, “I want the power to touch
someone and make all their pain go away.” And another, “I wish I could touch a book and be able to finish reading it.” With each response, I started to realize that these boys grew up in a world far different than my own. Bewildered, when it was my turn to share, I shyly said that I wanted the power to fly because I wanted to explore the world more.

As the retreat progressed, my worries eased with each activity and opportunity for connection. In fact, my day became filled with a growing consolation: we held spaces for difficult, but heartfelt conversations; we played games and laughed while breaking bread–sharing meals; we sang hymns and prayed over one another; we shared worship and shed collective tears in the presence of God during adoration. In this experience of solidarity and communion, I was reminded of each youth’s humanity. In these moments, their otherized and demonized entities faded away and I began to see how God might want me to see: I saw each youth in their wholeness and inherent goodness. Little did I know that my decision to volunteer for this retreat was ultimately a response to a greater calling from God to dedicate myself to the service of those impacted by the justice system. Since this initial encounter, I formally became a volunteer with the county probation department in conjunction with the Catholic restorative justice/detention ministry. I have been an active volunteer for the past eight years.

The purpose of the current study is not to find a solution to the problem of incarceration or the prison-industrial complex, nor to address the related criminological approaches, such as retribution and deterrence theories. This study is also not a theological analysis of religious doctrines and church teachings. Rather, this dissertation seeks to understand the experience of ministering to the incarcerated population: it is an exploration of human solidarity, dignity, spirituality, and mutual transformation as a response to the dehumanizing “social sins” (Himes, 1986, p. 184) of incarceration,
neoliberal capitalism, and what Boyle (2011) describes as “our lurking suspicion that some lives matter less than other lives” (p. xiii).

In this chapter, I introduce and briefly summarize the overarching context of the current problem: incarceration in the U.S. within a capitalist society; its historical roots, and the current political and social context that is plagued with injustice, inequality, and systemic oppression. This creates a context to inform the problem statement and the research questions that this dissertation seeks to address. Additionally, I discuss my position in relation to the larger issue of incarceration with the guidance of humanizing theoretical frameworks—Critical Pedagogy, Catholic Social Teaching, Liberation Theology, and Restorative Justice—that shape my approach to the topic of inquiry. Next, I propose my rationale for the study’s research methodology, the significance of this qualitative exploration, and how it contributes to the existing literature on prison ministries. With that in mind, I ask for your permission and indulgence, as I invite you to journey with me through this dissertation as I share my passion, hopes, findings, and reflections of this study in an effort to better the world into one that is more strongly grounded in love, solidarity, and social justice.

**Background: Setting the Context**

My experiences in detention ministry have highlighted the fact that conceptualizing incarceration as a larger system of social relations as well as its individual effects on human beings is multifaceted and complex. Notable efforts to address this issue have been enmeshed with various empirical studies, differences in state and local policies, poor implementation and harmful practices, polarizing views and attitudes, oppressive racial dynamics, and an overall lack of respect for human dignity. In the sections that follow, I outline the brief history of incarceration, the political and social
contexts behind incarceration, as well as its detrimental effects on human development. Because of the
distinct complexity and intricate nature of conceptualizing mass incarceration and the prison system, I
present a brief overview of the literature in order to provide some understanding of the larger context
in which I situate this dissertation.

A Brief History of Incarceration and U.S. Politics

Following the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and the rise of Black Lives Matter movement, the United States reawakened its slumbering social consciousness and began anew a powerful critique of systemic racism that continues to define America. COVID-19 revealed inequalities in terms of communities that were more likely to be infected and those who have access to healthcare. Counties with more demographic diversity had higher risk of COVID-19 infection; communities with greater proportions of individuals with disabilities or those in poverty had higher death rates; African Americans were more vulnerable than other ethnic groups to contract COVID-19 (Abedi et al., 2021). These factors also encompassed those who were less likely to have access to the COVID-19 vaccines (Bayati et al., 2022). Concurrently, the Black Lives Matter protests in response to the murder of George Floyd ignited greater public conscientization regarding police brutality, and the inequities within the justice system. These momentous events in history ultimately created a collective space for public opinion and open disputation regarding systemic and institutionalized racism (Thelwall & Thelwall, 2021). Despite this increased awareness, systemic racism and oppressive ideologies inherent within the prison system existed long before the pandemic.

Entering 2024, systemic injustices, dehumanizing practices, and demonizing attitudes still permeate our justice system. More recently, in regards to specifically the prison system, the Department
of Justice’s Office of the Inspector General (OIG) initiated an evaluation into the cause of death for federal inmates from 2014 to 2021 due to recent high-profile deaths: the homicide of James “Whitey” Bulger in 2018 and Jeffrey Epstein’s suicide in 2019 (OIG, 2024). With a focus on the operational and managerial failures of federal prisons, the report indicated that suicide was the leading cause of these deaths with homicides being next. These deaths could have been prevented: “A combination of recurring policy violations and operational failures contributed to inmate suicides. Specifically, deficiencies in staff completion of inmate assessments have prevented some institutions from adequately identifying and proactively addressing inmate suicide risks” (OIG, 2024, p. i). Furthermore, in response to life or death crises, the report found shortcomings in “staff’s emergency responses to nearly half of the inmate deaths...ranging from a lack of urgency in responding, failure to bring or use appropriate emergency equipment, unclear radio communications, and issues with naloxone administration in opioid overdose cases” (OIG, 2024, p. ii). The lack of care for human beings within the prison system is grotesque and unacceptable. In an effort to continually foster a critical awareness of injustice, I believe that this dissertation will uplift and embrace human life and dignity while shedding light on the ways this system continues to harm our sisters and brothers today.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union (2024), while the United States comprises 5% of the world population, it incarcerates more than 20% of the world’s prison population. The United States leads the world in total number of people incarcerated, with more than two million prisoners nationwide (Fair & Walmsley, 2021). This number is equivalent to roughly 25% of the world’s total prison population and leads to an incarceration rate of 629 people per 100,000—the
highest rate in the world. The United States imprisons more individuals than the rest of the world’s other countries combined.

Incarceration became a more prominent issue beginning in the 1970s. The main reason for the spike in the prison population was due to the creation of more punitive drug laws and the “tough on crime” era between the 1980s and 1990s. There was a cultural shift in America that led to draconian policies in response to drugs and crime. Guideline-based penalties were established within law enforcement and the justice system, driven by the premise that violent offenders needed harsher consequences (Lynch, 1997). Since then, the number of incarcerated individuals has increased by 500%, with a little over two million people behind bars today (ACLU, 2024). Currently, drug-related offenses are the most common reason for incarceration, making up ~45% of the prison population with weapons-related offenses being second (~22%) (Bureau of Prisons, 2024). These punitive policy changes ultimately reflected the crime rhetoric perpetuated by political campaigns.

Crime as a significant national issue was first featured at the presidential campaign of 1964 between Democrat incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson and Republican Barry Goldwater, where Goldwater criticized the Johnson administration for being too relaxed with law enforcement in the midst of increasing violence (Cronin et al., 1981; Gest, 2001). Since then, the topic of crime has been present in every national campaign as a priority for many politicians (Marion, 1995). More often, conservative, Republican candidates perpetuated the rhetoric of needing to address perceived lawlessness (Marion & Oliver, 2012) and key indicators of punitive cultural attitudes in the United States came from this “tough on crime” era: “law and order,” “no nonsense,” “zero-tolerance,” “three strikes,” “war on drugs.” Beyond law enforcement and the prison system, this terminology and
punitive practice began influencing other aspects of American life including education (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009). This rhetoric increasingly socialized American perceptions and attitudes to support legitimizing the expansion of law enforcement and incarceration (Friedman, 2011). Despite these narratives, violent crime rates were decreasing across the country, while arrests and lengthy prison sentences increased (Chapell, 2020). Cultural shifts in the criminal justice system highlight how more severe sentencing—longer sentences and increased conviction for almost all offenses—have been the primary factors influencing incarceration growth (White House, 2016). This logic can be better explained when situating the problem of incarceration within a larger capitalist society.

The Costs of Incarceration

In 2020, the average cost in the United States to incarcerate one youth was $588 a day, or $214,620 a year, a 44% increase since 2014 (Yoder, 2020). The cost to incarcerate a federal inmate in 2021 was $120.10 a day, or $43,836 a year (Federal Register, 2023). In 2019, the United States had a total expenditure of over $250 billion that included state and local corrections, judicial and legal costs, and employment (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021). The criminal justice system is the second fastest growing state budget behind Medicaid, with approximately 90% of the spending directed towards prisons (White House, 2016). The copious amounts of money spent is an issue considering the incarceration rates for nonviolent crimes compared to violent crimes. Lengthy sentences have been imposed on individuals who were caught in possession of small amounts of drugs as well those who engaged in shoplifting (“Throwing away,” 2013). Because of strict sentencing requirements put in place by laws, judges more frequently impart seemingly extreme and unjust sentences for petty crimes—which adds to the economic burden of incarceration. According to the ACLU (2024),
life-without-parole sentences for nonviolent offenses contribute to ~$1.8 billion in costs when incarcerating these individuals despite decreases in overall violent crime.

“Mass incarceration may be understood as the preferred method of social spending in late capitalism” (Deckard, 2017, p. 4). This phenomenon is a reality of neoliberal capitalism, where more money is spent on prisons than on social programs to help vulnerable communities (Fording, 2001; Wacquant, 2010). Several states spend more on corrections than on higher education (White House, 2016; Giroux, 2003). More money is spent on incarcerating individuals with mental illnesses than on social services to treat those who are suffering (Torrey et al, 2010; Beckett & Western, 2001). With the unforgivable amount of spending on prisons, Wacquant (2010) noted that “the construction of prisons [effectively became] the nation’s main housing program for the urban poor” (p. 12). This economic venture known as the prison-industrial complex was designed to prioritize profits over the well-being of the individuals it exploits.

**The Prison-Industrial Complex**

The prison-industrial complex (PIC) encompasses the profitable relationships among prisons, private corporations, and the government (Hammad, 2019). These relationships thrive as long as the government can supply a population that commercial interests can benefit from—the poor and vulnerable. This complex helps explain the rapid increase of incarceration in the midst of decreased crime rates by highlighting the reality that incarceration is “driven by racism and the pursuit of profit” (Hammad, 2019, p. 78). The PIC is dependent upon the perpetuation of “tough on crime” attitudes that reinforce the necessity of punishment as a response to crime. The overarching increase of the prison population since the 1980s has resulted in states operating at maximum capacity in their prison
facilities, with several needing to house at least 20% of their inmates in privatized facilities (Carson, 2015). The growing reliance on private prisons created an industry that “exists solely for the purpose of making profits from prison contracts with local, state, and federal authorities” (Marion, 2009, p. 213). When prioritizing capital and profit, who benefits? And at whose expense?

The New Jim Crow

According to The Sentencing Project, an overwhelming majority of the prison population consists of Black and Latino individuals, a staggering disparity given their overall representation in the general population: Black Americans are incarcerated at a rate of five times that of white Americans and Latinos are incarcerated at a rate of 1.3 times that of white Americans (Nellis, 2021). Generally, people of color, those struggling with poverty, and those with social and emotional disabilities are overwhelmingly overrepresented in U.S. prisons (Epperson & Pettus-Davis, 2015). “Although Black and Hispanic youth were more likely to be re-arrested and incarcerated than White youth...there were no racial or ethnic differences in self-reported offending, self-reported violence, or physical aggression” (Cauffman et al., 2021, p. 11). Additionally, following time spent incarcerated, youth of color generally had worse psychosocial outcomes than white youth (Cauffman et al., 2021). Alexander (2012) takes into account the grossly disproportionate impact of mass incarceration on Black American males and reconceptualizes the prison structure in her seminal book, The New Jim Crow. In her framework, she asserts that the current prison system perpetuates racial segregation and disenfranchisement similar to that of the antiquated Jim Crow laws.

Originally, these laws shaped the American lifestyle where Black people were inferior beings: these laws prohibited Black Americans from accessing public transportation, facilities, juries, jobs, and
neighborhoods (Pilgrim, 2012). Today, the spirit of these policies covertly function via the prison system and mass incarceration. For instance, several states prohibit former inmates from permanently voting, with added restrictions on civic engagement if they are on probation (ProCon, 2023; Manza & Uggen, 2006). Also, various cities throughout the country disallow inmates from residing in public subsidized housing (Alexander, 2012; McCarty et al., 2013). Through the guise of retributive justice (justice based on the punishment of offenders rather than on rehabilitation), mass incarceration ultimately masks inequality (Pettit & Sykes, 2015) and is essentially a form of modern-day slavery and segregation.

Incarcerating poor men of color—moving them from cities to economically stagnant rural prisons—is an example reflective of the political economy of the carceral state (Hooks et al., 2004). To better explain the perspective of this political economy, the rural poor as well as poor men of color are not deemed as beneficial to the global economy (Deckard, 2017). Therefore, having the white, rural poor employed as guards for the poor people of color is a way in which the state can profit from this economically valueless sector of the population (Gilmore, 2006). By imprisoning communities of color, the system improves the economic realities for their white counterparts, which aligns with the U.S. history of racial oppression.

A more dehumanizing, key focus of the neoliberal capitalist reality that perpetuates racial domination is the forced labor among prisoners (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Thompson, 2012). Forcing labor among inmates is a practice that has existed for many centuries often under the moral guise of atonement (Gaes et al., 1999). An uncritical lens of approaching prison labor is to justify its existence as a purely rehabilitative means. There are studies that deem prison labor to have its benefits such as
lowering prison expenditures for daily prison operations, reducing prison infractions, increasing likelihood of obtaining work postrelease, and decreasing rates of recidivism (Roberts, 1996; Johnson et al., 1997; Pierson et al., 2014), but these studies do not situate incarceration within an exploitative capitalist frame.

Behind the mask of morality and rehabilitation, prison labor ultimately sacrifices the freedom and humanity of colored people, especially Black males (Hammad, 2019). Furthermore, Hammad (2019) clarified that even with the passing of the Justice System Improvement Act in 1979, which established the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program (PIE) that set guidance for prisons to pay inmates minimum wage for their labor, privatized prisons do not need to comply with these standards. Additionally, prisons certified through PIE are able to deduct various fees—such as room and board, victim restitution, child support, court fees, and other related fees—from inmate earnings, not considering the reality that prisons receive government tax dollars to operate (Fulcher, 2013). This modern form of slavery hides behind the mask of mass incarceration and its detrimental effects are both physical and immaterial.

**The Psychosocial Effects of Incarceration**

In addition to the monetary cost of incarceration, there is a social and psychological fee that the prison system reaps from humanity. Historically and politically situating the issue of the prison system is not complete without the consideration of the psychosocial effects of incarceration on individuals. In particular, I touch on the detrimental effects of incarceration on mental health and development, post-release stigma with reintegration, and the impact of incarceration on families and communities of the incarcerated.
Incarceration on Mental Health

I focus this section on the research around the effects of incarceration on youth development because adolescence to early adulthood is a developmentally sensitive time period (Arnett et al., 2014). Incarceration during the teenage years removes children from prosocial settings and experiences while reducing their opportunities for achieving cultural and adult milestones such as obtaining educational degrees or employment (Wakefield & Apel, 2016). Generally speaking, youth who receive formal sentencing from a judge after committing a crime “were more likely to be re-arrested, more likely to be incarcerated, and reported more violence” (Cauffman et al., 2021, p. 11). Additionally, these youth demonstrated “greater affiliation with delinquent peers, lower school enrollment, less ability to suppress aggression, lower perceptions of opportunities, and slightly lower odds of graduating high school within 5 years” (Cauffman et al., 2021, p. 11) compared to youth who were informally processed, which includes pathways such as being given community service.

A common experience among incarcerated youth involves experiencing and witnessing abuse by staff or witnessing violence within the detention facility. Dierkhising et al. (2014) The majority of the youth encounter some form of direct abuse while incarcerated: excessive use of solitary confinement, peer physical assault, psychological abuse, and sexual abuse by staff (Dierkhising et al., 2014; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2023). Almost all who face incarceration will inevitably witness, or experience some form of abuse. Rather than rehabilitating or improving, incarceration tends to foster higher levels of aggressive and antisocial behaviors along with emotional distress (Boxer et al., 2009). Generally, youth who spent more time in prison struggled in areas of physical and verbal aggression, impulsivity, psychosocial maturity, temperance, responsibility, and decision making (Dmitrieva et al.,
Studies that specifically examined mental health correlates found that the majority of inmates clinically dealt with areas involving alcohol/drug use, anger and irritability, suicidal ideation, posttraumatic stress reactions, and diagnoses of depression and anxiety (Cauffman, 2004; Domalanta et al., 2003). These health effects of incarceration were also similar with adult populations and contributed to poorer adjustment after being released (Massoglia, 2008; Schnittker et al., 2012; Boxer et al., 2009).

**Difficulties with Reintegration and Post-Release Stigma**

Individuals who are released from incarceration face many challenges with reentry into society. The most common obstacle of post-release involves work discrimination and stigma because these individuals are depicted as being untrustworthy and dangerous (Turney et al., 2013; Pager, 2003). With the inability to find work and earn a livable wage, releasees often resort back to crime and substance use (Binswanger et al., 2012; Geller & Curtis, 2011). Individuals released from detention facilities have up to 80% chance of recidivating, or reoffending and returning to prison (Heller de Leon, 2012). Especially for those who serve longer sentences, these individuals adapt to a lifestyle encompassing the social norms within the prison subculture that eventually becomes an obstacle to successful reintegration into society after release (Schnittker et al., 2012).

In regards to health post-release, there is a higher prevalence of diseases such as hepatitis, tuberculosis, hypertension, and heart disease among former inmates (Binswanger et al., 2009). Another barrier to reintegration is the financial burden of paying off heavy debt. Harper et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of databases from 1990 to 2019 and found that 50-90% of people released from incarceration owe debt. These legal fees include victim restitution, criminal fines and surcharges, court
fees, incarceration charges, and probation fees (Martin et al., 2018; Shafroth, 2018). Additionally, when taking into consideration the overrepresentation of low-income individuals who are incarcerated, the burden of debt following release contributes to the increasing gap between income and financial obligations (Atkinson, 2019). It is evident that the challenges presented by the prison system extend far beyond the time behind bars as many continue to face a plethora of challenges when trying to re-enter society.

**The Impact on Families and Communities**

Beyond the individual consequences of the prison system, incarceration ultimately separates people from their families and relationships. There are various social problems that stem from incarceration. These may include problems with caretaking, child-rearing, delinquent behavior during childhood, educational concerns, joblessness, risky sexual behavior, substance use, and many others (Hagan, 1996). Approximately 2.6 million children in the United States currently have a parent who is incarcerated; with one in 14 children experiencing parental incarceration by the age of 14 (Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2021). The loss of a parent during childhood results in financial strains as well as familial strains in regards to relationship dynamics and family organization (Hagan, 1996). Because “the majority of prison inmates come from and return to disadvantaged, minority communities...high rates of incarceration might weaken already fragile inner-city neighborhoods” (Moore, 1996). Moreover, communities vulnerable to higher levels of incarceration find themselves supporting more individuals and families with debilitating social and financial difficulties: this additional responsibility may exacerbate already existing problems such as unemployment and crime.
(Moore, 1996). Incarceration ultimately tears away at the social fabric of the family, with rippling
effects into other areas of life.

**Beyond Incarceration: The School-to-Prison Pipeline**

The issue of incarceration is interconnected and embedded in a slew of other problematic systems. With my background in education, I particularly want to highlight the issue of the School-to-Prison Pipeline. As an educator (school psychologist) in K-12 schools, I continually see how the “tough on crime” ideology and rhetoric have influenced school policies and practices. Unfortunately, when addressing behavioral problems, schools have historically relied on punitive practices to discipline students. Reliance on practices that ultimately funnel students out of the schools and into prisons is a phenomenon known as the School-to-Prison Pipeline (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023). Students who face more exclusionary punishments, such as suspensions and expulsions, are less likely to graduate high school and more likely to engage in delinquent felonies (Teske, 2011). Academic failure, exclusionary discipline practices, and dropout have been identified as key components of the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Christle et al., 2005).

During the rise of mass incarceration in the 1980s, schools began increasing security measures despite their lack of efficacy in creating safer schools (Casella, 2018) and terms like “zero-tolerance” and “three strikes,” which originated in criminal justice policies, began seeping into education codes and policies (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009). Originally intended to respond to serious offenses such as gun possession, zero-tolerance policies are used by teachers and staff to address behavioral misconduct, with most using them to curb discipline problems with students (Martinez, 2009). These punitive practices prove to be ineffective in fostering positive student outcomes, rather they harm youth development.
(Reynolds et al., 2008). Moreover, similar to the corrections and prison systems, the School-to-Prison Pipeline unequally affects minority student populations, with black students being three times more likely to receive suspension and students with disabilities being twice as likely (Hoffman, 2014; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2022). These dangerous practices ultimately hurt the field of education and are a reminder that these injustices require attention and transformation.

A Call for Rehumanization

Everyone reading this dissertation is either directly or indirectly impacted by the profuse dehumanization perpetuated by the prison system. I say this from a position of human solidarity—what Mother Teresa diagnoses as the ail of the world: that “we have forgotten that we belong to each other” (“Mother Teresa,” 2021). In the United States, over two million people live behind bars. These are sons, daughters, fathers, mothers, and loved ones who are suffering at the hands of a system that seeks to separate and oppress. Communities, families, and individuals experience brokenness in a variety of ways. More often than not, people of color, those with disabilities, and poor and marginalized communities are overly represented among those who are incarcerated. Meanwhile, billions of dollars are spent each year on the correctional and judicial systems without proof of its efficacy. The harsh reality is that the criminal justice system falls short of promoting truth, healing, and restoration. It is an ongoing attack on human sanctity and dignity. Furthermore, “political discourse in the public square is nothing if not tense, as evidenced by seemingly endless power-seeking, demonizing, and retribution” (Morneau, 2019, p. x). Despite the research literature clearly highlighting the ineffectiveness of prisons, “The biggest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution that has to start with each one of us?” (Day, 1963, p. 215).
There were many studies that pointed to the oppression and harm perpetuated by incarceration: both during the time spent behind bars and the time after being released. Although I acknowledge this literature, my motivation for conducting this dissertation is to prioritize humanity, solidarity, and restoration. First and foremost, I am grounded in the truth that all human life is sacred and that “every person deserves to be treated with dignity, no matter the harm they have suffered or caused” (Morneau, 2019, p. 5). Therefore, this study is situated within the efforts of restorative justice. Simply defined, “restorative justice is a way of responding to harm that focuses on repairing relationships and healing all those who are impacted by crime” (Morneau, 2019, p. 3). Restorative justice seeks to address crime in a way that honors and respects the dignity of all those involved. From this lens, crime is not merely a violation of laws, rather it is a violation against people, relationships, and community.

As a detention ministry volunteer, I have had many direct encounters—the spaces shared, the stories heard, and the tears shed—with those considered the “least” (New American Bible, Revised Edition [NABRE], 2011, Mt. 25:40). This ministry reminds me that there is a collective responsibility to work towards rehumanization and liberation. With this research, I hope to remind the world about the humanity of those who have suffered incarceration. Given the culture of “tough on crime” and a generally pervasive rhetoric of demonization when discussing this phenomenon, it feels like an anomaly to know that there are people who choose to volunteer with and serve this population. In communion with my faith-oriented praxis, this study yearns to explore the experience of ministering to those impacted by incarceration from the perspectives of Catholic detention ministry volunteers. The dissertation aims to answer the following questions:
1. How do volunteers experience detention ministry and how does it inform their service to those impacted by incarceration?
   
   a. What brings volunteers to detention ministry and why do they continue to stay?
   
   b. How does detention ministry inform volunteers’ approach to serving those in situations of marginalization?
   
   c. What, if any, influence does detention ministry have on the volunteers as well as on those they serve?

In addressing these questions, I understand that there are key assumptions made about the prison population. I am assuming that every individual possesses inherent goodness and dignity: those who experience oppression are worthy of the efforts towards liberation. This stems from my belief that every person is made in the “image and likeness” of God (NABRE, 2011, Gen. 1:26). Despite the disparaging and otherizing narrative, I still believe in hope: there is a potential for reconciliation, solidarity, and an eventual freedom from injustice. Denouncing the dehumanization perpetuated by the prison system ultimately requires me to take a position that prioritizes humanity. This qualitative exploration is a further commitment to the common good and to social justice: it is ultimately an expression of love.

**Rationale and Significance**

Being mindful of prioritizing humanity and the oppressive tendencies of conducting research, I choose to engage in practices that uplift, rather than harm or selfishly reap from research collaborators. In this dissertation, I utilized the qualitative methodology of Heuristic Inquiry (Moustakas, 1961). Heuristic Inquiry stemmed from the methodology of phenomenology, which
essentially sought to deeply explore human experiences. These types of studies typically circled around
the inquiry of what it is like to be human and what constitutes the lived world. What sets heuristic
inquiry apart from typical phenomenological studies is an emphasis on the researcher’s deeply felt
interests or experiences with the phenomena at hand, and an attempt to grasp the nature and meaning
of the phenomena through self-reflection and exploration (Sultan, 2018).

I could not separate my own experiences as a prison ministry volunteer from what I gathered
from fellow volunteers. Because I am still actively involved in Catholic detention ministry, I analyzed
the findings of this study considering my own reflections and experiences as a source of understanding.
The research questions I posed touch on topics that are not only experiential, but reflective and
abstract. In order to better embrace others’ perspectives on humanization and restorative justice within
the context of incarceration, I spent time in prayer, reflection, and active volunteering during this
research period. Ultimately, I explored a very niche phenomenon, as many people do not identify as
Catholic detention ministry volunteers, therefore, it was important for me as the researcher to have
some insider knowledge and expertise in this area.

This dissertation is situated within the existing literature regarding prison ministry. In Chapter
4, I explain the difference between using the terms “prison ministry” and “detention ministry” to
ensure clarity. The majority of the research on the influence of prison ministries utilized quantitative
approaches that focused on how these programs impacted recidivism rates. There are very few, if any,
that qualitatively explore the experience of prison ministry volunteers through the specific lens of
Catholic spirituality. More often, works written about this topic were theoretical, rather than being
grounded within systematized research. This dissertation addressed this gap within the literature.
Again, this study does not aim to find a solution to problems within the justice system, rather it is a response to the dehumanizing system of incarceration and a reminder of the greater call to build a just society in a way that is more respectful and loving. Through exploring detention ministry–solidarity, humanization, and restoration–my hope is to disrupt the “tough on crime” culture and disparaging rhetoric around those impacted by incarceration. Ultimately, it is an effort to soften the hardness of hearts while inspiring action that is grounded in love and justice.

**Positionality: My Own Socio-Historical Context**

Reflecting on my dissertation, I acknowledge that I was not a neutral researcher. Rather, I possessed biases and influences that ultimately informed how I viewed the phenomenon before me. Being a first generation, Vietnamese American, heterosexual male, these identities inevitably shaped how I perceived, interpreted, and made sense of what I gathered. I was conscious of the privileges I brought to my spaces with others, particularly my class privilege. Currently, I possess a job that allows for financial stability. Without the preoccupation of meeting my basic needs, I have the privilege and time to volunteer and pursue this research exploration. I only became more aware of my privileges after immersing myself in the service of others. By listening to the harsh realities and systemic barriers that others faced, I reflected on where I was situated within a larger socio-historical context and developed a social-justice orientation. With this lens, I ultimately seek to “use my privileged voice to offer voice to others; to stand in front of, next to, or behind the voiceless” (Strasser, 2020, p. 2).

Before I entered the role of a qualitative researcher, the majority of my adult life and career revolved around my affinity for helping others, particularly serving those in situations of marginalization, oppression, or poverty. The two major roles that facilitated my service to others
included my profession as an educator (specifically, a school psychologist) in disadvantaged communities and my involvement with Catholic detention ministry. I learned that these vulnerable populations possessed the privileged ability of humbling me and teaching me the importance of fully embracing humanity—moreover, pointing me to the gospel message of love and inclusion. Underlying this desire to serve others were the inspiration and calling of God and my faith. My spirituality has been greatly influenced by the reflections and prayers of holy giants such as Mother Teresa, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, and Gregory Boyle, just to name a few.

By sharing my faith positionality, I want to affirm that I do not write or serve with intentions to convert or proselytize others, rather, my faith and spirituality have informed a “Christ consciousness” that Boyle (2021) describes as “embracing the marrow of the gospel, or taking seriously what Jesus took seriously, or dedicating ourselves to the creation of a tender kinship with each other” (p. 15). This dissertation takes on a noticeably Christian lens from the conceptualization of my theoretical frameworks to the analysis and discussion of findings. Through prayer and personal faith, I was ultimately reminded to embrace humility: no one life matters more than another, rather each human being has a greater calling—a social responsibility—to support and help each other.

A Need for More Humanizing Lenses

My doctoral studies have provoked me to consider how my positionality shapes the way I view the world, largely through the critical notion of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Moreover, there are aspects of my being that I hold with much value: my affinity for social justice and my desire to help create a world that is more loving and more kind. From an educational and philosophical stance, the framework of Critical Pedagogy has helped me understand my position within a world of conflicting
and contradictory structural constraints while reminding me to be more humanizing with my approach. From a spiritual dimension, I am highly driven by the tenets of Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology, which offer a foundation for respecting human dignity. Lastly, my approach to understanding justice and crime is grounded within the framework of Restorative Justice. There are commonalities and overlaps with these lenses and my hope is to offer a viewpoint that prioritizes humanity. In Chapter 2, I elaborate further on these theoretical frameworks and how they guide my inquiry, research literature, and methodology. In addressing the injustices of incarceration and the prison system, I believe it is important to situate this dissertation within a humanizing space and to “always cry out for human freedom and human dignity, even in the worst conditions of persecution” (Romero, 2004, p. 28)

Summary

In this chapter, I established the context for my study, as well as the context for my own passion and interest in this endeavor. The issue of incarceration and the prison system is complex and convoluted. More important than examining this issue from a cost-benefit economic approach was the prioritization of humanity and the critique on how the prison system continues to harm human dignity. To frame this dissertation, I described my positionality along with introducing the relevant theoretical frameworks. In Chapter 2, I further elaborate on Critical Pedagogy, Catholic Social Teaching, Liberation Theology, and Restorative Justice and how they inform the trajectory of this study. In Chapter 3, I synthesize the existing literature on prison ministry in the United States. Following that, Chapter 4 describes my research methodology and situates the practice of research
within a critical and humanizing lens. Additionally, this chapter specifically outlines the steps and methods used for conducting this study.

In Chapter 5 and 6, I present the findings of this dissertation. Chapter 5 specifically presents the individual depictions and themes of each collaborator while Chapter 6 presents the collective themes that arose across the data. Finally, in Chapter 7, I enter a discussion that connects the findings and themes to the existing literature and theoretical frameworks. In addition, this chapter includes the limitations as well as future considerations for the field. This dissertation addresses complex and difficult topics, but it is a very meaningful and needed exploration. I am excited to share with you this journey of encountering—a journey of learning, discovery, and greater humanization.

**Sharing a Common Language**

For clarity throughout this dissertation, specialized terms are defined below in efforts to provide a common language throughout this study. These terms are further elaborated in the later chapters of this dissertation.

*Volunteer.* In regards to this study, when I discussed volunteers, I specifically referred to prison ministry volunteers who are unpaid.

*Participant/Attendee.* In regards to this study, particularly in Chapters 5 and 6, I was specifically referring to those impacted by incarceration who essentially participate in detention ministry services.

*Prison Ministry.* Prison ministry refers to faith/religious-based programming within prison and detention facilities.

*Prison-Industrial Complex.* The prison-industrial complex (PIC) refers to the profitable relationships among prisons, private corporations, and the government (Hammad, 2019).
**Neoliberalism.** Neoliberalism is a concept embodying a free-market fundamentalism that “privileges personal responsibility over larger social forces, [reinforcing] the gap between the rich and poor by redistributing wealth to the most powerful and wealthy individuals and groups...encouraging a value system that promotes self-interest, if not an unchecked selfishness” (Giroux, 2014, p. 1).

**Solidarity.** Despite numerous definitions of solidarity, I draw upon Pope Francis’ understanding of the concept: solidarity is more than just being kind or generous, it means “thinking and acting in terms of community...that the lives of all are prior to the appropriation of goods by a few” (Francis, 2020, section 116).

**Critical Pedagogy.** Critical pedagogy, traditionally influenced by the writings of Paulo Freire, is an educational philosophy that calls for social justice and liberation from oppression by transforming (through praxis, dialogue, and critical consciousness) oppressive political and social contexts (Freire, 2018).

**Praxis.** Praxis is the cyclical engagement with “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 2018, p. 51).

**Critical Consciousness (Conscientização).** This “critical discovery” (Freire, 2018, p. 48) oftentimes involves the realization of injustice and how one plays an active role and is embedded within a larger oppressive societal structure. Critical consciousness tends to arise when individuals directly interact with those in situations of marginalization.

**Humanization.** The ideal and vocation for humans to become more fully human, which is opposed by the historical realities of dehumanization (Freire, 2018). Humans can pursue this vocation through engaging in authentic praxis and dialogue.
**Catholic Social Teaching.** Catholic Social Teaching is a body of Catholic doctrine concerned with uplifting human dignity, promoting the common good, and building a just society amidst the social, economic, and political challenges of today’s world (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2023).

**Liberation Theology.** Introduced and conceptualized by Gustavo Gutiérrez (1973), Liberation Theology is a “critical analysis linking the social, political, and economic conditions of the poor...in the light of theological reflection” (Kirylo, 2023).

**Restorative Justice.** “Restorative justice is an approach to achieving justice that involves...those who have a stake in a specific offense or harm to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations in order to...put things as right as possible” (Zehr, 2015, p. 48).

**Heuristic Inquiry.** Heuristic Inquiry is a qualitative, phenomenological research methodology that draws on the basis that the researcher possesses a deeply felt interest or experience that shapes their decision to further explore the particular topic (Moustakas, 1961; Sultan, 2018).

**Ministry.** Within Catholicism, a ministry is simply considered “the work that the church does in the world” (Hayes, 2011, para. 1). Stemming from the work of ordained religious, the work of ministry can also include unordained volunteers. For this dissertation, the ministry explored was specifically Catholic detention ministry.

**Mass.** Within Catholicism, Mass is a central act of worship taking the form of a religious celebration typically on Sundays, but it can be celebrated every day of the week. A significant part of Mass is the celebration of the sacrament of Holy Eucharist.
**Eucharist/Communion.** The sacrament of Holy Eucharist, or Communion, is the “source and summit of Christian life” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 1994, para. 1324). In the form of bread or wafer, the Eucharist is believed to be the literal presence of Christ.

**Sacrament.** Within Catholicism, sacraments are “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 1994, para. 1131). The Catholic Church recognizes seven sacraments that take the form of rituals and/or celebrations.
Chapter 2–Grounding

Most of my initial training to become a school psychologist was grounded within the premise that the gold standard for practice was anything evidence or research based. Influenced by the noticeably quantitative hold over academia, I truly believed that research efforts and worth only resided in studies that offered definitive data and results in order to make “actual” change. During my years of practice with students who come from under-resourced and working class communities, I often found that the overly preached evidence-based practices simply did not suit my students’ needs. With the primary concern on results and progress, I felt that educators would often “choose to work only with those who give us good ones” (Boyle, 2011, p. 178). My schools’ alarming priority on success, achievement, and graduation rates ultimately left behind the students I felt needed the most help. I internally struggled with the desire to utilize the gold standard of evidence-based practices, but this desire essentially kept me from truly seeing the student sitting in front of me. It was then I turned to theory.

“I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me” (hooks, 1994, p. 59). Theory is instrumental in guiding research. For me, grounding myself within a humanizing theoretical framework was like being a light shown through stained glass: it allowed me to view, interpret, and make sense of the world in all its fullness–its beauty and its oppression. With this awareness, this chapter seeks to immerse within the theoretical (including philosophical and theological) underpinnings that ground this dissertation. I begin with a broader discussion on critical inquiry and within this paradigm, my specific theoretical frameworks.
Specifically, I name Critical Pedagogy, Catholic Social Teaching, Liberation Theology and Restorative Justice as the drivers that guide my interpretation and inquiry.

Amidst the oppressive political and social conditions surrounding the topic of incarceration, the selection of theory was intentional in order to understand the contexts of dehumanization while striving towards a transformation of these unjust structures. I argue that these theories essentially selected me: they have provided the language to my thoughts, experiences, and choices as well as my pursuit in this endeavor. Moreover, my choice to utilize multiple theories rather than a singular one was due to the cross-disciplinary nature of this topic of inquiry. This study truly tapped into several disciplines in efforts to resist the “secularization, fragmentation of the disciplines, and reductionism in academia” (DeWitt, 2007, p. 119) that was seen in many other academic studies. In doing so, I garnered a better understanding to engage responsibly in a highly interconnected human system in which people live. These theories explain and guide my reflection and analysis throughout the course of this research endeavor.

**Philosophical Foundations and Critical Inquiry**

When I first engaged in research during my undergraduate studies, I believed that research was the only way to discover new truths or knowledge about the world around me. Innovative or groundbreaking research was always conceptualized as knowledge that “filled the gap” within existing literature, ultimately expanding human awareness and consciousness, making the unknown known. In gathering the literature behind mass incarceration and the prison-industrial complex, I have reflected on how knowledge and research have been situated within a larger societal structure delineated by
those who held power and influence. This reflection led me to reflect on my own understanding and personal philosophy of what it means to know, or come to know.

Birks (2014) defined philosophy as “a view of the world encompassing the questions and mechanisms for finding answers that inform that view” (p. 18). At times, it is difficult to engage with philosophy as it tends to garner thinking that is usually broad and abstract (Teichman & Evans, 1995), yet understanding foundational philosophies in regards to social research helps frame the process of discovering knowledge. Although philosophy encompasses various branches of study, the concepts relevant to conducting social research are ontology and epistemology, which is further discussed in Chapter 3. For this section, I focus on the primacy of critical inquiry as a research paradigm that housed this dissertation.

**Critical Inquiry**

Critical inquiry (also termed as critical theory) is a broader theoretical perspective, or paradigm that seeks to view the world through a critical lens. Paradigms are essentially wider “frameworks that represent a shared way of thinking in respect of how we view the world” (Birks, 2014, p. 18) and include “sets of logically related philosophical assumptions” (Mertens & Wilson, 2018, p. 36). Research paradigms also guide the ways in which researchers generate knowledge from those perspectives. Critical inquiry originated within the epistemological stance of interpretivism. Simply and generally speaking, interpretivism seeks to understand and explain human and social reality. In opposition to a positivist stance, where knowledge and truth is garnered through methods of natural science that endorse a value-free and objective reality, interpretivism “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social lie-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67).
With this viewpoint, interpretivism historically sought to understand the world through an uncritical lens. Critical inquiry, on the other hand, challenges the understanding of human reality by highlighting issues of power, oppression, and human struggle.

It is a contrast between a research that seeks merely to understand and a research that challenges...between a research that reads the situation in terms of interaction and community and a research that reads it in terms of conflict and oppression...between a research that accepts the status quo and a research that seeks to bring about change. (Crotty, 1998, p. 113)

Critical inquiry informs and guides the practice of research to include a focus on advancing human justice, equity, and freedom. From this approach, research has an added social justice dimension—research can not only serve to expand human knowledge, but it should initiate action in order to create a more just world. Prior to the emergence of critical inquiry, society and culture were not examined in the light of suspicion and criticality. Kincheloe and McLaren (2011) asserted that the basic concern of researchers and theorists—“criticalists”—in this domain was that of dominative relationships. These relationships can be better characterized by the beliefs that all thought is mediated by power relationships, that facts are inseparable from value and worth, that certain groups in any society have privilege over others, and that the relationship between concept and object is mediated by the social relationship of societal consumption and capitalist production (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011).

Acknowledging the political and social roots of incarceration and the prison-industrial complex, I saw that my selection of theoretical frameworks—Critical Pedagogy, Catholic Social Teaching, Liberation Theology, and Restorative Justice—needed to align within this critical stream. The
rest of this chapter presents foundational tenets of each framework in order to provide a basic understanding with the intent of laying the groundwork for the course of this study.

**Critical Pedagogy**

“Critical pedagogy resonates with the sensibility of the Hebrew phrase of *tikkun olam*, which means ‘to heal, repair, and transform the world’” (McLaren, 2015, p. 122). Often referred to as the “father” of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire is known as one of the most significant educational philosophers of the 20th century. Stemming from the struggles for liberation of oppressed communities in Latin America, Freire’s seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (published in 1968 and translated to English in 1970), illuminated human concepts related to banking/problem-posing education, oppression, *conscientização* (conscientization), praxis, dialogue, liberation/freedom, solidarity, and social justice. “Drawing on the work of Freire, praxis philosophers (Marx, Lukács) and the Frankfurt School, critical educators refined the categories of ideology, power, hegemony, and discourse to contextualize the struggle against capitalist schooling in the United States” (Vega & McLaren, 2019, p. 1). The more I learned about critical pedagogy and read the works of various critical scholars, the more I reflected on my own pedagogy and spiritual calling—bringing clarity to how my practice connected to what it means to be human.

Although the topic of detention ministry, specifically Catholic detention ministry, was not obviously connected to this educational philosophy, most of my understanding and conceptualization of oppressive structures stemmed from within this lens. Moreover, because I have learned so much from my experiences as a volunteer, I viewed detention ministry as a pedagogical space (Shor, 2012) that has opened my eyes (critical consciousness) to the work that still needs to be done to counter
injustice. Through continued dialogue and a reflection on my work (praxis), I was propelled to pursue this topic of inquiry.

**Stemming Within Education**

While promoting educational practices that are more humanizing, critical pedagogy fundamentally “examines schools both in their historical context as part of the existing social and political fabric that characterizes the class-driven dominant society” (McLaren, 2015, p. 121). Freire’s life and overarching body of work adhered to the belief that education was a means to becoming whole—to be fully human. Critical pedagogy has allowed me to embrace the truth that my service to others was not merely a job or task, rather it was a sacred vocation. A modern critical pedagogue, hooks (1994), further elaborated that the work of the educator was “not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of students” (p. 13). She humanizes education by reminding educators that students are not checkboxes on a to-do list, rather they are each unique, whole beings that deserve being educated “in a manner that respects and cares for [their] soul” (p. 13).

**Banking and Problem-Posing Education**

Freire (2018) situates education within a larger social structure of oppression: a class system consisting of the oppressed and those who oppress. Within this frame, educational attitudes and institutions “mirror oppressive society” through what he terms as the “banking concept of education” (p. 72). This view of education regards students as unknowing, lacking insight and intention, where the duty of the teacher—the knowledgeable, authoritative “Subject”—is to deposit information into their students—“objects” (Freire, 2018, p. 73). Perpetuating an ideology of oppression, those in authority or power exert (consciously or unconsciously) their interests in order to maintain the
dominant system. These interests lie in “changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them” (de Beauvoir, 1963, p. 34), forcing the oppressed to adapt to unjust structures, which leaves them vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation.

Theorists succeeding Freire have expanded the field of critical pedagogy by focusing on how the “centrality of politics and power” pervades education and producing “critiques of the political economy of schooling, the state of education, the representation of texts, and the construction of student subjectivity” (McLaren, 2015, p. 121). McLaren (2015) further situates education within capitalism and class struggle. From this lens, education plays an important role in “the generation of the capital relation...link[ing] the chains that bind our souls to capital” (Rikowski, 2001, p. 1). This perspective asserts that schools serve as a means to uphold capitalist structures in educating students—essentially laborers—under the guise of learning as a continuous process: ‘life-long learners” who “update their skills to suit the market” (De Angelis, 2000, p. 10).

In opposition to the current reality of education as a societal mechanism for oppression, critical pedagogy ultimately stands on the side of the oppressed. Freire (2018) opposes the banking model of education with “problem-posing education” (p. 79), where teachers and students exist in an egalitarian relationship, co-creating consciousness and knowledge that unveils the current realities of oppressive structures. This liberating form of education ultimately frames education “as the practice of freedom” (Freire, 2018, p. 81) where people “develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves” (Freire, 2018, p. 83). Through this conscientization, critical pedagogy further calls for those who find themselves in situations of
oppression to transform their realities, creating conditions in which people can be free—which Freire (2018) infers as the process towards being more fully human.

**Developing Conscientization (Conscientização)**

Working towards transforming the current reality requires a raised awareness or consciousness of one’s situation, also known as conscientization. To me, *conscientização* is like a brief enlightenment. This moment can move from a brief epiphanic state to a deeper longing and reflection. This lull in thought may bring about somber feelings of discomfort as critical reflection leads to addressing the harsh realities of dehumanization. This “critical discovery” (Freire, 2018, p. 48) oftentimes involves the realization of one’s role within a larger oppressive societal structure. Therefore, critical consciousness arises when individuals directly interact with those in situations of marginalization. Freire’s notion of conscientization requires an openness to allow myself to sit with and marinate in critical thoughts and feelings despite the discomfort and pain.

I learned that critical consciousness is not a static occurrence, rather my continued involvement with detention ministry and working with marginalized populations progressively informs and transforms my understanding of my historical, social, and situational position as a volunteer and educator to larger oppressive systems as a whole. The deeper longing I feel moves beyond just my consciousness as this “critical apprehension of reality moves one to action” (Kirylo & Boyd, 2017, p. 79). My critical reflections and conscientization has led me to this endeavor of further understanding the fullness of humanity in order to transform the systems that oppress it.
The Cycle of Praxis

“Freire argued that we must name the truths of injustice, examining the social structures that oppress but also the individuals who, knowingly and sometimes unknowingly, enforce these structures that benefit some at the expense of many” (Monzó, 2019, p. 241). Critical awareness of the injustices perpetrated by the prison systems at times feels overwhelming and I catch myself spiraling into cynicism where it is much easier to accept these systems: they are too complex and overbearing, and there are powers beyond my reach where I am helpless, even useless. During these moments of darkness, I acknowledge that it is not good to ruminate, to only remain in my head, and to overthink to the point of self-sabotage.

I believe it is a farce to only engage in this reflection without doing anything about it. Freire describes the necessity of praxis, “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 2018, p. 51). He also describes the notion of verbalism, where the thoughts and words that seek justice are “unauthentic” and “empty...without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action” (Freire, 2018, p. 87). For me, not only does action serve as a means to transform reality, but action also serves to engender lived experiences—human experiences—that inspire my motivations and passions. Praxis ultimately necessitates a cyclical movement between reflection and action in order to transform reality in a direction that affirms humanity.

In educational spaces, Darder (2015) describes praxis—the dialectical exchange between reflection and action—involving an interaction between a “language of practice” and a “language of theory” (p. 106). The language of practice is rooted in the concrete everyday experiences of students while the language of theory involves an “analysis that is produced through human efforts to
understand how individuals reflect and interpret their experiences and, as a result, how they shape and are shaped by their world” (p. 106). By exposing and engaging students with this awareness and critical language, teachers may possibly “awaken [students] to the tremendous potential available to them as social agents” (p. 106). Helping me further understand praxis, Au (2012) described reflection requiring both introspection and retrospection—“looking backwards and inwards to consider how our experiences and the outward social structures shape our consciousness” (p. 25). This incites the desire to act, and in dialectical thought, act upon the world in order to transform it. It is important to note that praxis is not an end state or goal to be achieved, rather it is a continual practice that permeates one’s way of living.

Connecting praxis to my spiritual life, I saw similarities with the Ignatian concept of being a contemplative in action. “Contemplation in action is about learning how to be, learning how to see, and learning how to love” (McCoy, n.d.). Part of this cycle also involves a time of “stopping, resting, reflecting, and then returning to activity with greater zeal and purpose” (Otto, n.d.). I believe that it takes years to not only scratch the surface of what it means to engage in a cyclical action and reflection, but to also see the fruits of this practice. From my personal reflections, engaging in this spiritual exercise helped sharpen and bring clarity to reality and the world around me—which forces me to acknowledge human injustice. For Freire (2018), “the more the people unveil this challenging reality which is to be the object of their transforming action, the more critically they enter that reality” (p. 93).

The Relationality of Dialogue

In critical pedagogy, Freire (2018) introduces the notion of dialogue as a human “existential necessity” which embodies “the encounter in which the united reflection and action...are addressed to
Dialogue is a means for how people come to know what they know. Dialogue takes critical pedagogy from a theoretical dimension and affirms its relational and humanizing nature. Moreover, dialogue encompasses the Freirean concepts of conscientization and praxis:

Finally, true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking–thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them–thinking which perceives reality as a process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity–thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved. (Freire, 2018, p. 92)

Critical pedagogy has heavily influenced the way in which I engage with others, especially those in situations of oppression. I have become more mindful of approaching my service to others with kindness, love, and humility. With efforts to avoid engaging in dehumanizing practices, I seek to employ authentic dialogue in all my interactions. “Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence” (Freire, 2018, p. 91).

**Love**

“Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for the people...Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself” (Freire, 2018, p. 89).

Freire asserts that love is essential in order to engage in dialogue. Not only is it a prerequisite, but love itself is the means in which dialogue can exist and function. hooks (2003) insists that love is
foundational in order to be in solidarity with those who are different from us: “What is the place of love in the experience of intimate otherness?” (p. 162). Freire explains that to love is to commit to others, to their cause—the cause for liberation. “If I do not love the world—if I do not love life—if I do not love people—I cannot enter into dialogue” (Friere, 2018, p. 90). My years of volunteering in detention ministry have allowed me to listen to the stories of many youth who are victims to oppression and harm; this has led to feelings of disillusionment with the world around me, but critical pedagogy has allowed me to journey towards what bell hooks (2003) calls a “self-recovery” (p. 161). Through my awareness of various forms of injustice in my spaces, I can choose to practice and live in ways that are more humanizing, more loving. In returning home to myself, I find that my love for others and my affinity for serving the “least” (NABRE, 2011, Mt. 25:40) is what affirms my humanity. “We all lose ourselves to find ourselves in the other, and then so find our true selves in loving” (Boyle, 2021, p. 27).

**Humility**

Freire asserts that dialogue “is broken if the parties (or one of them) lack humility” (Freire, 2018, p. 90). “People who met Freire or heard him speak often identified the quality of humility as one of his distinguishing character traits” (Roberts, 2000, p. 16). St. Theresa of Avila provides a foundational definition of humility: “Humility is truth. It is becoming aware of and accepting the truth of who we are” (Caluag, 2019). Without an adequate reflection on one’s privilege and the power dynamic that exists between oneself and others, true dialogue cannot exist. When engaging with youth during my detention ministry, I am unable to authentically enter into dialogue with them unless I am able to embrace and affirm their identities, cultures, and human dignity.
To avoid unintentionally harming or oppressing those I serve, I must grasp humility, which Freire (2005) further describes as requiring “courage, self-confidence, self-respect, and respect for others” (p. 72). I find myself needing to put aside the things I used to know—my expectations, values, understanding of morality, and my ego—and engage in a process of continual transformation, of becoming. Freire (1985) expands this insight and transformational process as a person’s “Easter, that they die as elitists so as to be resurrected on the side of the oppressed…[resulting] in a changing of consciousness” (p. 122-123). Ultimately, Freire (2018) introduces the need to have a “conversion to the people” (p. 61). He poses the following questions when describing the necessity of humility:

- How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own? How can I dialogue if I regard myself as a case apart from others—mere ‘its’ in whom I cannot recognize other ‘I’s’? How can I dialogue if I consider myself a member of the in-group of “pure” men, the owners of truth and knowledge, from whom all non-members are ‘these people’ or ‘the great unwashed’? How can I dialogue if I start from the premise that naming the world is the task of an elite and that the presence of the people in history is a sign of deterioration, thus to be avoided? How can I dialogue if I am closed to—and even offended by—the contribution of others? How can I dialogue if I am afraid of being displaced, the mere possibility causing me torment and weakness? (p. 90)

**Faith**

“Dialogue further requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human (which is not the privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all)” (Freire, 2018, p. 90). When discussing faith as a tenet of
Freirean dialogue, I am not referring to a personal belief system, rather believing in the oppressed and how they have power to liberate and overcome their oppression. Without true faith in them, I may manifest “the oppressor housed within” (Freire, 2018, p. 135), causing harm and upholding barriers to true liberation. Freire (2018) warns that “without this faith in people, dialogue is a farce which inevitably degenerates into paternalistic manipulation” (91). Monzó (2019) speaks of an “authentic faith in the oppressed” (p. 241) that fosters a “love and trust that acknowledges our humanity…[becoming] conscious beings for ourselves rather than for the oppressors” (p. 241). Faith is a pivotal tenet in dialogue as well as in critical pedagogy because the struggle for liberation and justice for marginalized groups comes with many setbacks and obstacles. Ultimately, dialogue serves as a space to foster the conditions for freedom: “We don’t liberate [others]. We can only create a place of liberation” (Boyle, 2021, p. 62).

**Freedom: The Work Towards Liberation**

Freire (2018) conceptualizes freedom within the notion of praxis: it “is acquired by conquest…[and] must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth” (p. 47). Freedom then, requires an ongoing process; one of learning, growing, striving, yearning, transforming, and being. Ultimately, he defines freedom as “the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion” (p. 47), or in other words, “the struggle for a fuller humanity.” Although Freire does not prescribe exactly what it means to be fully human, I imagine that he recognizes his own role in the collective struggle to work towards full humanization. Furthermore, he implies that freedom possesses a relational or social dimension as well: “[T]he practice of freedom…denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the
world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people” (Freire, 2018, p. 81). This freedom produces a “creative communion” (p. 48) that requires solidarity with all our brothers and sisters. This reminds me of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assertion, “No one is free until we are all free” (“No one is free,” 2012). Lastly, freedom is grounded in love—a love for others, a love that strives for the liberation of all.

Considering the dimensions of freedom—being grounded in love and possessing a relational nature—my understanding of freedom has pointed to the truth that to be free ultimately means having the ability to be. This ontological “be” takes into account what allows us to be fully human, which I believe is the ability and condition to fully live and be in the right relationship with oneself, others, and the world. Therefore, anything that prevents people from this freedom is ultimately oppressive and dehumanizing. Critical pedagogy then, is the antithesis of oppression. It is a theory and philosophy that seeks to be humanizing, to be life-giving. Engaging in the work towards fuller humanization for all allows me to also taste what it means to be free.

Criticisms of Critical Pedagogy

Within the educational community, critical pedagogy has received criticisms particularly from conservative right groups for being too theoretical and idealistic (Ravitch, 2000). Delpit (1987) has criticized pedagogy for not focusing on teaching students, particularly students of color, the technical skills needed for educational success, causing them to fall behind their white peers. Duncan-Andrade and Morell (2008) highlight the importance of linking the emergence of critical consciousness to the development of academic skills. Critical pedagogy should promote the development of critical reading and writing skills. Moreover, these authors assert that educators must possess a critical lens when
examining the purpose of education and how schools contribute to social reproduction. “Teaching poor urban students of color to think, act, and speak like wealthy, suburban, and white students is not going to ensure success for these students” (Andrade-Duncan & Morell, 2008, p. 48). Therefore, Andrade-Duncan and Morell’s (2008) critique implies that education should be a balance between the development of critical literacy and the acquisition of technical knowledge.

Given today’s sociopolitical context and the tense division in American opinion and politics, public education has been the target of right-wing conservative attacks. They have “launched culture-war attacks against teachers unions, masking policies during the pandemic, LGBTQ students, the content of school libraries and textbooks and the teaching of accurate history” (Stout, 2023). This includes attacks on critical education and contemporary critical scholars. Rufo (2023) compares the critical pedagogues, Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux, to communist leaders such as Stalin, Guevara, and Lenin. This unfavorable narrative serves to damage and disparage the entirety of critical pedagogy, reducing it to a weaponized tool that should be removed from public education. Additionally, Rochester (2006) analyzed their writings, claiming that critical pedagogy is a “chiliastic movement” (para. 29) that seemingly “fosters its own brand of anti-intellectualism” (para. 27). More often than not, these critiques of critical pedagogy stem from a fragility that seeks to uphold neoliberal hegemonic structures: where those in power, the wealthy and elite, remain in power. Any critical thought that seeks to reimagine the current order is immediately attacked and deemed to be un-American. Generally speaking, these critiques forget or dismiss entirely critical pedagogy’s cry for humanization, for a world more socially just.
Contemporary Pedagogies

Stemming from the work of Paulo Freire, contemporary pedagogues have furthered the field, expanding this domain to include multiple critical pedagogies (Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008). For instance, these modern pedagogies—feminist pedagogy (Shrewsbury, 1987), anti-racist pedagogy (hooks, 1990; Minh-ha, 1991), queer pedagogy (Bryson & De Castell, 1993), revolutionary pedagogy through a feminist lens (Monzó, 2019), critical pedagogies directed towards disability education (i.e., DisCrit) (Annamma et al., 2013), engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994), radical pedagogy (Giroux, 2020), and many others—have trickled into various fields of study and broader ways of thinking. These various pedagogies all possess the singular thread of empowering and liberating individuals to achieve social change by dismantling and transforming oppressive and unjust social structures. The beauty of critical pedagogy is how it embraces the identities and nuances of individuals, groups, and their specific contexts, allowing itself to continually take shape through different, yet intersectional perspectives. For this study, I draw upon critical pedagogy in the light of faith (Kirylo, 2023), which incorporates my other frameworks of Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology.

Summary

My understanding and perspective to critical pedagogy will continually transform and extend beyond the scope of this dissertation. In regards to Catholic detention ministry and this study, I leaned into Freire’s (2018) call for solidarity: “The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity” (p. 85). In order to create social change or transform the world, Freire (2018) further asserts that it cannot only be in the hands of leaders, rather it requires an “unshakeable solidarity...[that] is born only when the leaders witness to it
by their humble, loving, and courageous encounter with the people” (p. 129). This reminder to uplift, embrace, and create dignified conditions for our vulnerable brothers and sisters was at the heart of this pursuit. Although I discuss additional theories that frame this proposed dissertation, critical pedagogy served as the larger ship that carried the singular thread of social justice across all frameworks. Additionally, the tenets of critical consciousness, praxis, and the need to confront oppressive structures were noticeably highlighted in the other frameworks as well.

**Catholic Social Teaching**

Entering this discussion of Catholic Social Teaching (CST), I acknowledged that this discourse dived into the realm of theology, particularly Catholic theology. I wanted to clarify that this was not a conversation on the entirety of the Catholic religion, rather my sole focus was on a specific area of teaching within the Catholic Church. Although CST is not traditionally considered a theory, it still offered a lens and guidance to approach the social ails of today’s world.

In short, CST is an area of Catholic doctrine concerned with uplifting human dignity, promoting the common good, and building a just society amidst the social, economic, and political challenges of today’s world. CST is rooted in God’s unique and special love for the poor, marginalized, and oppressed (“Catholic Social Teaching,” 2024). It embodies a commitment to the poor. This body of teaching is founded on the words of Jesus Christ, who came to “bring glad tidings to the poor...liberty to captives...recovery of sight to the blind” (NABRE, 2011, Lk 4:18-19) and who identifies with “the least of these”—the hungry, the stranger, the sick, the incarcerated (NABRE, 2011, Mt 25:45). Therefore, the work towards social justice is inseparable from one’s spiritual life. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) organizes CST into seven central themes: (1)
Life and Dignity of the Human Person, (2) Call to Family, Community, and Participation, (3) Rights and Responsibilities, (4) Option for the Poor and Vulnerable, (5) The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers, (6) Solidarity, and (7) Care for God’s Creation (“Seven Themes,” 2024). These themes are not ideologically separate, rather they touch on different areas of human injustice. The rest of this section discussed a brief history of CST as well as these seven themes. The sources of this literature consisted of papal encyclicals, Vatican documents, scripture, as well as the wisdom from saints and holy people.

**A Brief History of Catholic Social Teaching**

Although the Catholic Church has a rich, yet tumultuous history of tradition and faith drawing back to the time of Jesus Christ, the first emergence of modern social teaching within the church occurred after Pope Leo XIII (1891) issued his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (*On the Condition of Workers*) (Kirylo, 2023). At the time, he was concerned with the living and working conditions of Europe’s urban poor and his encyclical made a clear stance against the exploitation of the poor. This essentially laid the foundation for future teaching on social justice (Dorr, 1983). Forty years after *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Pius XI (1931) released *Quadragesimo Anno* (*On the Fortieth Year*), which continued Pope Leo XIII’s position against the mistreatment of the poor and further critiqued the economic exploitation perpetuated by neoliberal capitalism (Kirylo, 2023). Additionally, Pope Pius XI conceptualized sin to possess a collective and structural dimension: social injustices and exploitation were perpetrated by a larger capitalist system (Smith, 1991). After the work of Pope Pius XI, Pope Pius XII contributed to the social teachings by touching on the topic of private ownership rights and how these rights must “be subordinate to the interests of the common welfare and the broad right of all
people to benefit from the wealth of the earth” (Smith, 1991, p. 85). The early works of Popes Leo XIII, Pius XI, and Pius XII from the 1890s to 1950s helped prepare for the more substantial works of Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI.

In 1961, Pope John XXIII (1961) released *Mater et Magistra* (*Christianity and Social Progress*), which spoke against colonialism and any form of economic, cultural, and political exploitation (Kirylo, 2023). A year later, Pope John XXIII convened the Vatican II Council, which was arguably one of the most momentous events in the history of the Catholic Church. Vatican II brought what Pope John XXIII termed as “fresh air” into the church (Fiedler, 2012). This council sparked a shift from the church’s conservative, authoritarian culture to a culture of pluralism, openness, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue (O’Brien & Shannon, 1977). During this council, Pope John XXIII (1963) issued his encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* (*Peace on Earth*), which highlighted justice, democracy, the common good, religious freedom, human rights, and the elimination of racism (Sigmund, 1988; Hennelly, 1990). Vatican II also addressed technological, economic, and political oppression in *Gaudium et Spes* (*Hope and Joy*) (Paul VI, 1965). Continuing the work of Pope John XXIII after Vatican II, Pope Paul VI (1967) issued *Populorum Progressio* (*On the Development of Peoples*), which brought attention to the quality of life of those in poverty, addressing the topics of hunger, poor living conditions, poor health care, and access to education. Following Vatican II, many papal encyclicals and Vatican documents were issued concerning CST themes. Within the United States, the USCCB has shared statements on social justice with *Economic Justice* (1986) and *A Decade after Economic Justice for All* (1995) being the most noteworthy.
Life and Dignity of the Human Person

The foundation of all social teaching principles and the motivations for any work towards social justice is based on the truth that human life is sacred (“Life and Dignity,” 2024). From this lens, human life and dignity comes directly from God and therefore every individual has value (NABRE, 2011, Gn. 1:26-31; Ps. 139:13-16). “Human persons are willed by God; they are imprinted with God’s image. Their dignity does not come from the work they do, but from the persons they are” (John Paul II, 1991, section 11). Therefore, any form or presence of dehumanization should be critiqued and ultimately abolished or transformed. Vatican II specifically touched on the injustices of poor living conditions, imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, and poor working conditions: “They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury” (Paul VI, 1965, section 27). In regards to this dissertation, I critiqued how mass incarceration and the prison systems dehumanized: within these structures, “the rights of God’s image are trampled” (Romero, 1988, p. 16). My own experiences as a detention ministry volunteer has constantly reminded me of human sacredness: I was inspired to explore the experiences of other volunteers through this dissertation in an effort to uplift human life and dignity from the depths of oppression.

Call to Family, Community, and Participation

Stemming from the inherent truth that each human being is sacred, CST acknowledges that human beings are also social creatures. “The existence of each individual is deeply tied to that of others: life is not simply time that passes; life is a time for interactions” (Francis, 2020, section 66). This tenet focuses on the importance of family as central to social institutions as well as the necessity to
participate in society in order to promote the common good of all (“Call to Family,” 2024). The United States Catholic Bishops (1986) states that “the family is the most basic form of human community” (section 93). Therefore, any societal barriers upholding family life should be critiqued and transformed. Furthermore, capitalistic economic systems must be careful of harming the family dynamic: “Efficiency and competition in the marketplace must be moderated by greater concern for the way work schedules and compensation support or threaten the bonds between spouses and between parents and children” (United States Catholic Bishops, 1986, section 93).

This tenet of CST also emphasizes the call for people to recognize their social responsibility to one another as individuals and as a community. By participating in community and political efforts, people enhance and contribute to the social dimension of living with each other: “responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2007, section 13). This goes against the culture of individualism, competition, and exclusion. The necessity to care for and uplift other humans is embedded within the Christian spirituality. “This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you” (NABRE, 2011, Jn. 15:12-17).

Rights and Responsibilities

CST asserts that creating a healthy community and respecting human dignity can only be achieved if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met (“Rights and Responsibilities,” 2024). Because every human life is sacred, every person has a “fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency” (Rights and Responsibilities,” 2024, para. 1). This area of CST comes from the critique of nations that clearly infringe on the rights of their citizens—nations that
do not ensure the “means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and, finally, the necessary social services” (John XXIII, 1963, section 11).

Specifically for this dissertation, the dignity and rights of incarcerated individuals have been neglected by the justice system. From deteriorating mental health, mistreatment and abuse from prison staff, post-release stigma, and the loss of ability to participate meaningfully in society through voting and obtaining work, it is clear that these individuals are not viewed as equal to others. These injustices are “fed by reductive anthropological visions and by a profit-based economic model that does not hesitate to exploit, discard and even kill human beings” (Francis, 2020, section 22). This tenet goes beyond the responsibilities of individuals and speaks about the necessity for governments to protect the rights of all its citizens: this “is the preliminary condition for a country’s social and economic development” (Francis, 2020, section 22).

**Option for the Poor and Vulnerable**

Based on scripture and directly from Christ himself, CST asserts the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable (NABRE, 2011, Ex. 22:20-26; Job 34:20-28; Is. 25:4-5). “What you do for the least among you, you do for Jesus” (NABRE, 2011, Mt. 25:34-40). There is a foundational belief that God uniquely identifies with the poor. In this sense, “the poor” broadly encompasses not only those who are financially struggling, but it includes vulnerable populations and people in situations of marginalization and oppression. Therefore, the efforts to praise God must involve uplifting the rights and supporting the needs of these groups. Pope Leo XIII (1981) discusses how the poor and vulnerable require special consideration. Those who are wealthy have the means to protect themselves while the poor primarily depend on the assistance of the government (Leo XIII, 1981). Furthermore, CST
emphasizes how a commitment to the poor should not reduce their agency, rather the process of supporting these individuals enables them to share in the collective effort of contributing to the common good.

“The ‘option for the poor,’ therefore, is not an adversarial slogan that pits one group or class against another. Rather it states that the deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community” (United States Catholic Bishops, 1986, section 88). CST conceptualizes justice in having a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, therefore, any effort that seeks to combat injustice is an effort to uplift the rights and dignity of the poor. Moreover, this work must be grounded in love: “Love for others, and in the first place love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Christ himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice” (John Paul II, 1991, section 58). This tenet of CST highlights the preference of social justice work to consider and value the “least” in society.

**The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers**

It was evident when reviewing the papal encyclicals of CST that the Church critiques the economy especially when profit and capital are prioritized over humanity. “The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation” (“The Dignity of Work,” 2024, para. 1). Human beings are the “source, the focus and the aim of all economic and social life” (Francis, 2015, section 127). A part of human agency is the acknowledgement that men and women have the capacity to “improve their lot, to further their moral growth and to develop their spiritual endowments” (Paul VI, 1967, section 34). From this lens, work itself has dignity, and therefore, the rights of workers must be respected. “Work should be the setting for this rich personal growth, where many aspects of life enter into play:
creativity, planning for the future, developing our talents, living out our values, relating to others, giving glory to God” (Francis, 2015, section 127).

CST conceptualizes how poverty is the direct consequence of a disrespect for the dignity of work. Poverty results from the “low value is put on work and the rights that flow from it, especially the right to a just wage and to the personal security of the worker and his or her family.” (Benedict XVI, 2009, section 63). The USCCB makes a clear stance that prioritizes the rights of workers: people have rights to fair wages, meaningful work, decent working conditions, as well as the ability to join unions (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996). This CST tenet highlights the criticality of the Catholic Church in regards to addressing the forms of dehumanization in the economic sector.

**Solidarity**

CST recognizes that human beings belong to each other. “We are one human family whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, wherever they may be” (“Solidarity,” 2024, para. 1). Even within solidarity, the needs of the poor and suffering are prioritized. Solidarity touches on the intangible connection that all humans have to one another. From a Catholic lens, this interconnectedness is possible through God’s grace and presence in humanity. “If one member of Christ’s body suffers, all suffer. If one member is honored, all rejoice (NABRE, 2011, 1 Cor. 12:12-26). In the midst of injustice and what Pope Francis (2020) says is a “globalized indifference” (section 30), the conceptualization of solidarity possesses more than just the dimension of being connected or united. Pope Francis denotes solidarity to be multifaceted:

Solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity. It means thinking and acting in terms of community. It means that the lives of all are prior to the appropriation
of goods by a few. It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labor rights. It means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money… Solidarity, understood in its most profound meaning, is a way of making history, and this is what popular movements are doing. (Francis, 2020, section 116)

Again, there is an underlying stream of criticality within the social teachings of the Catholic Church. Since the beginning of modern social teaching, the Church has critiqued larger systems (governments, cultures, attitudes) that persistently disregard the rights and dignity of the poor and vulnerable. Solidarity is not simply loving those in need or having sympathy for others: “[It] is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people…on the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good” (John Paul II, 1987, section 38). Viewed in this way, solidarity speaks to the social responsibility that every human has to each other.

**Care for God’s Creation**

The last theme of CST involves the responsibility of humankind to care for the earth and environment. Stemming from scripture, protecting the environment is a requirement of faith because it is also God’s creation (NABRE, 2011, Gen. 1:1-31; Gen. 2:15; Lev. 25:1-7). The church’s teachings on environmental justice became more prevalent as a response to climate change, growing pollution, and other harms committed to the earth. “When nature is viewed solely as a source of profit and gain, this has serious consequences for society…[R]esources end up in the hands of the first comer or the most powerful: the winner takes all” (Francis, 2016, section 82). Damage to creation is the antithesis of
the ideals of harmony, justice, and peace that is central to the gospel message. Naming the earth “our common home,” Pope Francis has asserted that taking care of the environment is a responsibility that does not only impact the present day, but extends to future generations in what he calls as embracing “intergenerational solidarity” (Francis, 2015, section 159). This tenet of CST reminds people of the responsibility to care for each other even beyond our lifetimes, because how we live affects the welfare of the earth for decades to come.

Summary

My earliest memories of honing a critical consciousness owe to learning about Catholic Social Teaching during my teenage years. A deeper examination of this body of teaching reinforces the special call that God has placed in my heart to strive for justice. As a whole, CST truly touches on various forms of oppression and dehumanization with a reminder that there is a spiritual necessity to build the kingdom of God. In regards to this dissertation, CST follows the critical stream of acknowledging the injustices that are driven by larger structural evils. Additionally, CST helps provide an understanding of foundational Catholic thought behind those who volunteer in a Catholic prison ministry.

Liberation Theology

While studying the frameworks of Critical Pedagogy and Catholic Social Teaching, I was introduced to Liberation Theology (Gutiérrez, 1973) as a “critical analysis linking the social, political, and economic conditions of the poor...in the light of theological reflection” (Kirylo, 2023). My faith essentially brought me to pursuing this study, and eventually to this framework. In the midst of witnessing injustice and overwhelming dehumanization, I leaned into my faith—“the total human response to God, who saves through love” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 6). For me, Liberation Theology
was a culmination of both Critical Pedagogy and Catholic Social Teaching, possessing a critical lens that centers the struggles and suffering of the poor and marginalized. Through this framework, I was reminded of my hopes for this study, which was to act and build a more just society.

Liberation theology was first termed by Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Catholic priest, in 1968 at a conference of bishops in Chimbote, Peru, through his presentation, “A Theology of Liberation.” A few months later, at a Latin American Bishops’ conference in Medellin, Colombia, Gutierrez and other bishops discussed the implications of the Vatican II ecumenical council for a Latin American context; the term, “liberation” emerged as a response to the social injustices of the day that violated basic human rights (Kirylo, 2023). Gutierrez then published his seminal text, *A Theology of Liberation* in 1971, and since then, further scholarship has brought his work into other academic, philosophical, and cultural sectors. Although I did not discuss the entirety of Liberation Theology, this section included prominent themes that undergird this dissertation: (1) A brief historical context, (2) Historical praxis, (3) Theology as critical reflection, and (4) Liberation.

**A Brief Historical Context of Liberation Theology**

Because Liberation Theology is a relatively newer approach to analyzing the Christian faith in relation to the world’s historical, political and sociocultural context, Gutiérrez et al. (2020) first described the shifts in Christian spirituality over time to make the case for this new analysis. During the early centuries of the Catholic Church, there was a primacy and exclusivity that prioritized the hermitical, monastic, and withdrawn form of sanctity. Around the twelfth century, attributed to Ignatian spirituality, the notion of shared contemplation, preaching, and apostolic activity began to
emerge. This perspective highlighted the mixed life of being a contemplative in action (Congar & Yves, 1965).

With a larger focus and further research on understanding the spirituality for lay people, religion became seen as less removed from the world, rather the activity of the Christian had a direct impact on the world (Congar & Yves, 1965). This notable shift marked by the Vatican II council “reaffirmed the idea of a Church of service and not of power” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 7). Rather than centering upon itself, the Church revisited the Gospel message—a reminder to love by centering the people, particularly having a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. Therefore, “the presence and activity of the Church in the world [is] a starting point for theological reflection” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 7). These efforts by the Vatican II council were seen as a theology of the signs of times (Chenu, 1967).

Discerning the signs of the times essentially juxtaposes the Christian faith with the worldly realities and developments of history; this is the lens in which Christians are called to analyze and reflect upon the current issues of today:

With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage. (Paul VI, 1965, section 44)

Within the context of Latin American politics of the time, Gutiérrez et al.’s (2020) analysis of liberation theology ultimately critiqued the traditional alliance of the military, the government and the Church (Lernoux, 1980). He borrows a Marxist analysis to conceptualize the economic and social
conditions, a position too progressive for the Catholic Church under the papacy of John Paul II and later Pope Benedict XVI (Cleary, 1985). Therefore, the institutional church has not historically received Liberation Theology well—although not entirely rejecting its theological approach.

As a response, Gutierrez (1984) asserts that critics who misinterpret liberation theology “as a theological rationale for a class struggle in which the poor claim their rights and try to break the power of their oppressors have ignored the center of the struggle for freedom. Jesus is the center” (p. xvii). Through the leadership of Pope Francis, the message of liberation theology seems to be more embraced, although not explicitly. During the first year of his papacy, Francis invited Gutierrez to Rome to meet and concelebrate Mass (Cox, 2013). This invitation and meeting “was an affirming signal to the universal church that a theology of liberation is fundamentally rooted in the Gospel message” (Kirylo, 2023, p. 54). It is clear that Pope Francis draws from liberation theology through his critiques of current injustices. For instance, he speaks against a modern colonialism that is marked by global capitalism, an economy that prioritizes materialism while perpetuating inequality and the exploitation of the poor (Yardley & Neuman, 2015). Presently under this papacy, the Church has noticeably shifted its ecclesial posture towards embracing the social teachings, an orientation which incorporates the liberation theology lens.

**Historical Praxis**

“[A] theology of liberation springs from a practical reading of both the Bible and the lived social context of the moment, interpreting the Scriptures and the historical situation each in light of the other” (Danforth, 2005, para. 10). In order to conceptualize liberation theology, one must understand the concept of praxis within this lens. Praxis within liberation theology embodies the active
presence of Christians in history. First and foremost, the foundation of Christian praxis is charity: “love is the nourishment and the fullness of faith, the gift of one’s self to the Other, and invariably to others” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 6). Additionally, praxis within this lens requires faith–action and commitment to God and others, a relationship fueled by charity (Mouroux, 1959). “[C]ommunion with the Lord inescapably means a Christian life centered around a concrete and creative commitment of service to others” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 9). Within liberation theology, to be authentic, faith must take action in the midst of oppression and injustice. Rather than keeping faith and spirituality to oneself or to the past, Christians are called to act upon the world in order to transform it. The Gospel message is “incarnated in the community of faith, which gives itself to the service of all” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 7).

A historical praxis asserts the need for God’s love to be manifested throughout history. This is accomplished through Christian activity. If Christians are called to be united to a God of love, then Christians need to acknowledge the realities that are antithetical to this love. With a preferential option for the poor, Christians then must make efforts to understand these injustices through the eyes of the marginalized and oppressed—those who experience much suffering, a world of lovelessness. Upon this realization, denouncing “any form of dehumanizing activity must be accompanied by the annunciation of the path leading to transformative justice” (Kirylo, 2023, p. 60). It is difficult for a Christian to preach and share the love of God without a commitment to building a reality that is the incarnation of this love. It is impossible to experience a “full and definitive encounter with the Lord and with other humans” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 8) without concrete action to transform oppressive realities. Therefore, this faith-centered praxis was foundational in my efforts for conducting this study.
Theology as Critical Reflection

In this study, I argued that faith and religion were embedded within the experiences of detention ministry volunteers, therefore, I grounded my understanding within the theoretical framework of liberation theology. Not only were faith and religion directly related to the topic of inquiry, but this Christian lens guided me in reflection and analysis throughout the course of this research endeavor. Although this dissertation cannot entirely convey the functions of theology, I discussed this notion within the context of liberation theology. Broadly considered, theology embodies “an effort to understand the faith, something like a pre-understanding of that faith which is manifested in life, action, and concrete attitude” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 3). The functions of theology have transformed throughout the history of the Catholic Church and Gutiérrez et al. (2020) argues that the liberation lens requires theology to function as critical reflection upon the world.

Upon consideration of the Christian calling to be in communion with God as well as the commitment to serve others, there is the opportunity to further discern theology possessing a function of criticality. “Theology must be critical reflection on humankind, on basic human principles. Only with this approach will theology be a serious discourse, aware of itself, in full possession of its conceptual elements” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 9). Moreover, a reflection on humankind inevitably leads to the critique on current realities: the economic and socio-cultural issues that harm humanity (Mariátegui, 1970). This theological reflection approaches history through a non-neutral lens: essentially, it is “a critical theory, worked out in the light of the Word accepted in faith and inspired by a practical purpose” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 9).
Using my own involvement with detention ministry as an example, I found that my service to those in positions of marginalization sparked deeper reflection. I could not continue my ministry within the prison setting and ignore what this activity might mean to me, those whom I serve, and the world. “Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 9). Furthermore, this reflection ultimately seeks for the presence of God and the ways in which the Spirit moves within this work, inspiring further action (Gutiérrez, 1973; Gutiérrez, 1987). Because this critical reflection on society and the Church journeys through history, theology will inevitably grow and change.

Through the continual accompaniment of pastoral activity in the world, theology can preserve Christians from “fetishism and idolatry, as well as from a pernicious and belittling narcissism” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 10). Liberation theology ultimately brings the Word of God into today’s light, progressing from the secluded, elitist, ivory tower where the Church has historically resided. “A theology which has as its points of reference only ‘truths’ which have been established once and for all–and not the Truth which is also the Way–can be only static and, in the long run, sterile” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 10). Through this lens, I understood that my faith was not stuck within a fixed or rigid religion, rather my approach possessed a socially just orientation: I believe that God actively moves in my life, by means of my reality and activity in the world.

**The Dimensions of Liberation**

At the heart of this framework and through the amalgamation of theology and praxis is the notion of liberation. This concept stemmed from Gutiérrez et al.’s (2020) analysis of papal encyclicals and other Vatican documents that discussed social justice themes and formed the body of Catholic
Social Teaching. He first focuses on the notion of *development* which was introduced in *Mater et Magistra* by John XXIII and later in *Pacem in Terris* and *Gaudium et Spes* (Calvez, 1964). These documents stressed the imperative to eradicate injustices and the need for economic development to support humankind, particularly those in countries that lacked resources. In *Populorum Progressio*, the theme of development was further expanded as it discussed the global economic disparities: “nations on the road to progress…continually fall behind while very often their dependence on wealthier nations deepens more rapidly” (Paul VI, 1964, section 9). Pope Paul VI (1967) also acknowledges that although all people around the world are making progress towards gaining independence, “it is still far from true that they are free from excessive inequalities and from every form of undue dependence” (section 85). Gutiérrez et al. (2020) asserts that these documents imply the need for a liberation from a dependence on wealthy countries, ultimately a liberation from larger economic systems that perpetuate poverty and keep people oppressed in various forms.

Upon further analysis, liberation extends beyond just freedom from economic or societal structures, rather there “lies a deeper and more widespread longing. Persons and societies thirst for a full and free life worthy of man” (Paul VI, 1965, section 9). To better understand liberation, it is essential to consider the personal, human dimension of freedom, which is part of the motivation to combat unjust structures of oppression. There is a calling to build “a world where every man, no matter what his race, religion, or nationality, can live a fully human life, freed from servitude imposed on him by other men or by natural forces over which he has not sufficient control” (Paul VI, 1967, section 47). Despite these implications from church encyclicals, Gutiérrez et al. (2020) critiques how these documents do not explicitly use the language of liberation, blunting its message of having a
preference for the oppressed: to encourage “them to break with their present situation and take control of their own destiny” (p. 23).

The synthesis and understanding of liberation was more fully discussed at the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops held in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968. There, the focus of eliminating injustices seemed to change. For the first time in the history of the Church, the authority over social justice conversations has shifted to those not in traditional positions of privilege and power: “The situation is not judged from the point of view of the countries at the center, but rather of those on the periphery, providing insiders’ experience of their anguish and aspirations” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 23). This liberatory message bypasses the Church’s long-time avoidance of what Gutiérrez et al. (2020) calls the “conflictual character of human history, the confrontations among individuals, social classes, and countries” (p. 23) while embracing the “core of Christian existence and of all human life: the passage from the old to the new person, from sin to grace, from slavery to freedom” (p. 23). More importantly, this struggle for freedom is anchored in the biblical message where liberation was the work of Christ.

Delving deeper into the theological dimension of liberation, Gutiérrez et al. (2020) references the letters of St. Paul in the bible: “For freedom Christ has set us free” (NABRE, 2011, Gal. 5:1). This perspective of freedom emphasizes the liberation from sin, where sin refers to a selfishness that refuses to love others and therefore, God. “Sin—a breach of friendship with God and others—is according to the Bible the ultimate cause of poverty, injustice, and the oppression in which persons live” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 24). While acknowledging the personal nature of sin, liberation theology does not disregard the systems, structures, and realities that perpetuate dehumanization, rather it brings to light
how “things do not happen by chance and that behind an unjust structure there is a personal or collective will responsible—a willingness to reject God and neighbor” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 24).

Lastly, Gutiérrez et al. (2020) circles his analysis of liberation back to the notion that Christ liberated humanity to be free to love. He references Bonhoeffer’s (1969) definition: “freedom is not something man has for himself but something he has for others...Freedom is not a quality of man, nor is it an ability, a capacity, a kind of being...In truth, freedom is a relationship” (p. 37). Therefore, liberation requires breaking free from sin, from selfishness, and from all the structures that uphold this selfishness—because the foundation of freedom is an openness to being in relationship with others. Liberation theology ultimately points to the call for solidarity: the “fullness of liberation—a free gift from Christ—is communion with God and with other human beings” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 24).

Summary

Liberation theology takes on a much more critical stance that demands liberation in the midst of oppression. As a response to the historical injustices of the time, the work of Gutierrez (1988) resonates with the ails of today. In regards to addressing incarceration and the current prison system, the continued harm perpetuated by these structures requires a transformation and re-envisioning of how people treat others, particularly those in situations of marginalization. Within the stream of criticality, and stemming from a deeper, spiritual demand, liberation theology puts at the forefront the need for justice.

Restorative Justice

Because this proposed study crosses into the field of criminal justice, I believed that it was important to ground its theoretical dimension in the framework of restorative justice. Throughout my
years as a volunteer in detention, friends and family have criticized my service to the incarcerated population. Oftentimes, I faced questions or heard statements such as, “Why are you helping criminals? You can be helping others who deserve it more,” or “These people deserve to be locked away because of what they did.” Despite the literature in regards to the ways the justice system is problematic, the predominant narrative around this population is fettered with demonization and the notion that some lives are worth less than others. A value within restorative justice is respect for all people. A restorative lens views crime as harm to relationships, a wound to community, where both the offender and victim reside. Therefore, justice involves the healing of relationships, making amends, and putting things right. Acknowledging the difficulty of condensing the framework into a single definition, Zehr (2015) offers this working definition:

Restorative justice is an approach to achieving justice that involves, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense or harm to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations in order to heal and put things as right as possible. (p. 48)

This section will present the roots and principles of restorative justice in order to provide a basic understanding of this framework. I drew primarily from Howard Zehr’s (2015) book, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice: Revised & Updated*.

**The Roots of Restorative Justice**

The modern understanding of restorative justice developed in the 1970s in North America. Beginning with religious groups and other communities who sought to apply their faith and perspective of peace to the criminal justice system, this movement first developed programs as a response to crime in these communities (Zehr, 2015). Groups such as the Mennonites experimented
with victim-offender encounters that helped lead to the theorization of restorative justice. Although this framework was more concretely defined during the efforts of this time, its tenets stemmed from a variety of earlier cultural and religious traditions (Zehr, 2015). For instance, many indigenous traditions possess restorative elements. The basic assumption behind restorative justice is that all people are interconnected and many cultures touch on the centrality of these relationships. “For the Maori, it is communicated by *whakapapa*; for the Navajo, *hozho*; for many Africans, the Bantu word *ubuntu*; for Tibetan Buddhists, *tendrel*” (Zehr, 2015, p. 29). Although the specific words in these cultures are not exactly the same, they carry the overarching message that all people are connected and are in relationship with each other. Restorative justice owes its grounding to indigenous ways of knowing. The centrality of human connection and relationships also highlights the greater calling for solidarity.

A more notable historical example of efforts utilizing a restorative justice lens was following the end of apartheid in South Africa during the 1990s. Transitioning from apartheid to a democracy was made smoother through the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Gibson, 2005). This restorative process was an institutionalized attempt to address the human atrocities of the former oppressive government. The goal of the commission was to promote unity, reconciliation, and understanding that transcended the conflicts and divisions of the past (Borer, 2003). It spent roughly five years holding hearings, interviewing thousands of victims of apartheid, and granting amnesty to approximately 850 human rights violators (Gibson, 2005). Although not all people viewed this process positively, the majority of South African citizens believed that the truth and reconciliation efforts were effective in nonviolently transitioning to a democracy (Gibson, 2005). “Indeed, the world has
acknowledged the success of South Africa’s TRC through the numerous attempts to replicate its truth and reconciliation process in other troubled areas of the globe” (Gibson, 2005, p. 344). Within the American context, the restorative justice movement has grown as an alternative to the traditional retributive criminal justice system.

**Understanding Restorative Justice**

Restorative justice is built on three pillars: the *harms and needs* of the victimized and the communities of those who commit harm; *obligations* of the offender and community that rise from the harm; and *engagement* of all those involved, including those who caused harm, those who were harmed, and community members (Zehr, 2015). The inclusion of the community in repairing harm highlights the assumption that people possess a social responsibility to each other.

**Three Pillars of Restorative Justice**

In regards to the *harms and needs* stemming from a crime, restorative justice is first concerned for the victims and their needs. “It seeks to repair the harm as much as possible, both concretely and symbolically” (Zehr, 2015, p. 32) even if there has not been an identified offender. More importantly, those who have been harmed must have the opportunity to define their needs rather than having a system define it for them. Additionally, focusing on harm from the crime also includes the harm experienced by those who committed the crime as well as their communities. This focus helps with the prevention of further harm.

Next, crimes result in *obligations*, where restorative justice emphasizes accountability and responsibility for those who cause harm (Zehr, 2015). The current legal system equates accountability as receiving punishment. Rather, a restorative lens sees accountability as understanding the extent of
the harm committed and its consequences. This implies a responsibility to repair the harm and “making things right as much as possible, both concretely and symbolically” (Zehr, 2015, p. 33) in order to deter future offending.

Lastly, restorative justice promotes engagement or participation for all those affected by crime—the victim, the offender, and members of the community (Zehr, 2015). The hope for greater participation is to identify and decide what justice is required for the specific case. This may involve dialogue or conferences between parties, or indirect exchanges through surrogates or other forms. In summary, “[r]estorative justice requires, at minimum, that we address the harms and needs of those harmed, hold those causing harm accountable to ‘put right’ those harms, and involve both of these parties as well as relevant communities in this process” (Zehr, 2015, p. 35).

**Putting Things Right**

Central to restorative justice is the notion of making things right, which aids in the healing process. This implies an opportunity for those who caused harm to correct and mitigate the consequences of that harm. Again, there is a responsibility for the offender to take steps towards repairing the harm to the victim as well as the community as much as possible. Despite this effort, not all crime can be repaired to the way things were. This is true in cases like murder; “however, symbolic steps, including acknowledgment of responsibility or restitution, can be helpful to surviving family members and loved ones” (Zehr, 2015, p. 39) and is still a responsibility of offenders within a restorative frame. These active steps towards making things right has the possibility of helping the victim in their healing process.
The idea of “putting things right” addresses both the harm and the causes of crime. It also requires the community to help address the harm and causes of crime. The causes of crime may be more complex and mentioned before, communities that struggle with poverty and other systemic barriers possess numerous factors that contribute to crime. Addressing social injustices that cause or create conditions for harm are the responsibility of communities and larger society (Zehr, 2015).

Within a restorative framework, there is an obligation beyond those that are directly responsible for their specific harm. Unjust systems and larger systems of oppression must also be considered in efforts to put things right.

Lastly, restorative justice acknowledges that offenders are in a way, victims themselves. “Studies show that many of those who offend have indeed been victimized or traumatized in significant ways. And even when they have not been directly victimized, many people who offend perceive themselves to be victims” (Zehr, 2015, p. 41). This perspective conceptualizes violence as an attempt for justice or to undo injustice: crime is a response to a sense of victimization, whether individually or systemically (Gilligan, 1996). In order to prevent further offending, there is a responsibility to address causes of victimization. From my experiences as a detention ministry volunteer, I have heard numerous backstories of individuals who have experienced compounding forms of trauma: homelessness, grief, experiencing and witnessing violence, drug abuse, sexual violence, and so on. There was a connection to how these larger community and systemic issues contributed to the individual’s offending behavior. Viewing the offender as victims themselves is a difficult concept to embrace especially for those who have been unjustly victimized by others. Therefore, restorative justice seeks to examine specific cases by starting first with those who have been harmed. However, embracing a respect for all people, the
ultimate goal of restorative justice is to “encourage outcomes that promote responsibility, reparation, and healing for all” (Zehr, 2015, p. 43).

**An Alternative View of Justice**

Restorative justice offers an alternative lens to what it means to achieve justice. The United States’ current criminal justice system is outlined by laws and guidelines. Within this rigid frame, crime is viewed as a violation of the law and the state (Zehr, 2015). Determining justice is the work of authorities—laws, judges, or juries—who reside outside of the conflict. It includes an adversarial process where professionals stand in for the offender and the state. “Victims, community members, and even offenders rarely participate in this process in any substantial way” (Zehr, 2015, p. 35). The central focus of the criminal justice system is to make sure offenders get what they deserve, which in itself is subjective to those in power and authority. On the other hand, restorative justice prefers collaborative and inclusive processes that better result in consensual outcomes, rather than imposed decisions. Restorative justice is a more humanizing approach to handling crime: this alternative view sees crime as a violation of people and relationships rather than a violation of laws (Zehr, 2015). It is important to note that restorative justice is not necessarily a replacement for the legal or prison system. Rather, taking these tenets seriously can reduce the over-reliance on prisons and other punitive practices while promoting a healing process that respects the dignity of human beings.

**Summary**

I chose to bring the theory of restorative justice to my dissertation because the nature of this study involved understanding justice and working with those who commit crime. More often than not, it was difficult to conceptualize justice without demonizing groups of people or valuing certain groups
less. Restorative justice grounds itself upon the truth that every human being possesses an inherent
dignity and deserves to be respected regardless of their choices or behavior. The experience of
volunteering in detention ministry resides in this space. Until all people can view each other with the
same respect, worth, and dignity, any efforts for solidarity—to uplift and embrace marginalized groups
will be futile. Lastly, restorative justice calls for the transformation of oppressive and harmful systems
that perpetuate crime. Although it does not outline a specific plan on how to do so, it acknowledges
that larger systemic injustices must be addressed in order to promote healing and solidarity for all.

Setting the Stage

Chapter 2 established the theoretical grounding for the present study. By discussing the
applicable theoretical frameworks of Critical Pedagogy, Catholic Social Teaching, Liberation Theology,
and Restorative Justice, I provided a guiding railway for the rest of this dissertation. This pathway
ultimately possessed a critical, yet humanizing lens that strives for social justice—not just in the topic of
inquiry, but also through the methods and methodology of this endeavor. With critical pedagogy as the
overarching framework that houses my prior knowledge and steers my continued analysis, I ultimately
set a stage in which this dissertation can engage, transform, and come into actualization as an extension
of my service to the world.
Chapter 3—Situating

I ultimately came to this dissertation study through engaging in a faith-centered praxis. I eventually landed on the present topic after deeply reflecting on my service as a detention ministry volunteer and the theoretical frameworks that undergirded my pedagogy. In this chapter, I presented the literature review behind the field of prison ministry. The purpose was to situate this dissertation within a space of inquiry that has not been explored.

Broadly speaking, through my Catholic lens, a ministry is simply considered “the work that the church does in the world” (Hayes, 2011, para. 1). Stemming from the work of ordained religious, the work of ministry can also include unordained volunteers. For this dissertation, the ministry explored was specifically Catholic detention ministry. The overarching literature related to this topic uses “prison ministry,” which I clarified and differentiated in Chapter 4. This review briefly introduced the history of prison ministry in the United States and discussed the sociopolitical context of prison ministries within the criminal justice system. Next, it presented the findings of previous researchers in regards to the impact of prison ministries and synthesized the literature through a critical lens. I organized the literature into themes that highlighted the necessity of this study and how it contributed to understanding the influence of prison ministry.

A Brief History of Prison Ministry in the United States

Since the inception of the penal system within the United States, religion has been tied to punishment: the idea that offenders should be given the opportunity to repent for their crimes (Dodson et al., 2011). These efforts to reform prisoners primarily coveted a Judeo-Christian lens; prisoners were typically given a bible. Religiosity or spiritual transformation was seen as an effective
response to reduce offending (Wright, 1987; Dodson et al., 2011). With the growing fields of social
science in the 20th century, scientific knowledge and inquiry superseded religion as the best way to
reform criminal behavior and religion was no longer considered as an adequate way to manage crime
(Clear et al., 2000).

By the 21st century, the ideology of the corrections system began shifting back to religious
strategies to reduce recidivism. Tied to conservative politics and views that aligned with the “tough on
crime” rhetoric, religion was viewed again as the better response to reducing recidivism (Clear et al.,
2000). Religious programming was the most common form of rehabilitation for inmates (Clear,
1991). The majority of the research that examined the impact of prison ministries took place during
this era, with efforts to empirically prove the efficacy of these programs. In the early 2000s, the Bush
administration created the White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives, which
promoted and funded faith-based organizations as a social service that helped prisoners and other
at-risk populations (Dodson et al., 2011). This further expanded the presence of prison ministries
across the United States as many facilities funded their own chaplains and faith-based programs.
McDaniel et al. (2005) critiques the involvement of government funding in these programs as it may
jeopardize the spirit of faith-based efforts.

The Literature Review of Prison Ministry

There were very few studies that researched the topic of inquiry related to this dissertation.
After a review of the available literature, I organized the rest of this chapter into three main critiques:
(1) The majority of research in this area tended to focus on how prison ministries reduced recidivism.
(2) When examining the experiences of those who serve/minister, most studies mainly gathered
perspectives from prison chaplains and few examined the perspectives of volunteers. (3) Qualitative studies specifically examining Catholic prison ministries were very sparse.

The Emphasis on Reducing Recidivism

Johnson et al. (2002) conducted a review of the research literature on the influence of religiosity on outcomes. The researchers gathered and analyzed studies that examined the influence of faith-based organizations on health outcomes such as hypertension, mortality, depression, suicide, sexual behavior, alcohol use, drug use, and delinquency. In general, individuals who were involved in religious practices or identified with greater religious commitment were associated with more beneficial health outcomes (Koenig et al., 2001). Additionally, the study examined the relationship between religion and well-being outcomes. Well-being in this study included the positive constructs of mental health such as happiness, joy, satisfaction, fulfillment, hope, self-esteem, educational attainment and other indicators of life well-being. The researchers found that most of the studies found a positive relationship between religiosity and well-being outcomes (Johnson et al., 2002).

When specifically examining the impact of faith-based organizations within the prison system, the majority of research studies emphasized how these programs influenced recidivism. Young et al. (1995) found that inmates who participated in a 2-week religious seminar were less likely to recidivate compared to a control sample of inmates. These seminars had aims to deepen religious commitment, prepare participants to minister to others, and create fellowship with fellow participants in the seminar. Johnson et al. (1997) examined faith-based programs from adult facilities in New York that offered bible studies and life plan seminars that were designed to provide ongoing opportunity for inmates to study scripture, foster Christian fellowship, and help with reintegration into society after release.
Those who participated in these programs were less likely to commit prison infractions and be rearrested. Johnson’s (2002) study examined two prisons, one of which adopted a faith-based approach to various aspects of the prison such as administration, security, and programming. Over a three-year postrelease period, the inmates who were in the faith-based programming had lower rates of recidivism.

Although religiosity has been tied to numerous positive health and well-being outcomes, the overarching research on prison ministries generally measured program efficacy by examining its impact on reducing recidivism. From a positivist and pragmatic paradigm, research is deemed valuable or credible if it possesses hard data to prove efficacy. Therefore, studies that examined recidivism rates had tangible data to measure the successes of these faith-based programs. Focusing primarily on recidivism masks the complexity of crime, the nature of incarceration, resilience, and the other factors that influence reoffending. Lastly, conducting studies that emphasize the need for prison ministries to reduce recidivism may reinforce the misleading and disputed purpose of religion to save or correct people.

**The Experiences of Prison Ministry Chaplains and Volunteers**

With the history of religion tied to the inception of the prison system, federal and state prisons have long been employing chaplains (Kerley et al., 2010). Prison chaplains hold a unique position within prisons because they are not the guards or wardens, hence serving an important role in rehabilitation (Glaser, 1964; Sundt et al., 2002). Despite their presence, prison chaplains were rarely the subjects of research. Studies that examined the role of prison ministers primarily gathered the perspectives of prison chaplains. Sundt and Cullen (2002) surveyed 500 prison chaplains and their views on punishment. They found that more than 90% of these chaplains believed that punishment
was not the only way to reduce crime. Additionally, 60% of these chaplains believed that the best method of rehabilitation was through religion. Chaplains who served prison inmates believed that their spiritual work possessed a rehabilitative dimension (Sundt & Cullen, 1998; Sundt et al., 2002).

There were even fewer studies that examined the perspectives of volunteers who were not chaplains. Kerley et al. (2010) explored the prison ministry perspectives of both chaplains and volunteers. The researchers found that these ministers valued compassion within their ministries: from their personal calling to their connections with those who they served. The first study that solely examined prison volunteers was conducted by Tewksbury and Dabney (2004). The researchers sought to evaluate the prison volunteer program by analyzing survey data from one prison in the southern region of the United States. Their results indicated that the majority of the volunteers were affiliated with the religious ministry while some volunteered through other programs. Most volunteers reported having a personal religious calling and found a sense of satisfaction with their ministry. Tewksbury and Collins (2005) sought to contribute to the literature on prison volunteers and examined survey data from volunteers in prisons from one state. By gathering the perspectives of prison volunteers, the researchers aimed to evaluate volunteer programs to better provide services to inmates.

In reviewing the literature in regards to prison ministry workers (chaplains and volunteers), the majority of studies explored the experiences and perspectives of chaplains. The primary methods included interviews and survey data. A personal critique in regards to examining chaplains include how some were paid employees while others volunteered. This nuance has not been addressed in the literature. On the other hand, the presence of studies only examining prison volunteers was scarce, with most only using survey data. Generally, the findings from these studies indicated positive
perceptions of serving in prison ministry for both chaplains and volunteers. Most discussed the significance of religion and personal faith as a motivating factor to serve as well as a factor that influenced volunteer satisfaction.

**The Lack of Qualitative Research on Catholic Prison Ministry**

In general, the literature behind rehabilitation programs within prisons often excluded religious programming (Young et al., 1995; Johnson, 1984). Although minimal, the majority of studies that existed on the topic of prison ministries were primarily quantitative studies in the 1980s to 90s with a few using ambiguous qualitative methods. The literature on prison ministry in the United States primarily examined programs and workers that were predominantly Christian (Evangelical Protestant). In the United States, approximately 70% of the population identifies as Christian with Evangelical Protestant (25%) and Catholic (21%) as the two largest denominations (*Religious Landscape Study*, 2023). A few studies gathered data from volunteers who served in non-Christian religious programs such as Muslim, Jewish, and others, but did not specifically examine these other religious programs (Tewksbury & Collins, 2005; Kramarek, 2016).

When conducting a review for previous research on specifically Catholic prison ministries, there were very few. In general, studies that utilized large surveys examining the influence of prison ministry chaplains and volunteers would denote and include those who identified as Catholic (Sundt & Cullen, 1998; Sundt and Cullen, 2002; Tewksbury & Collins, 2005), but few only focused on Catholic prison ministries. The studies that did only focus on Catholic ministries were either dissertations (Palacio, 2012) or unpublished studies conducted for Catholic social services agencies
There was a paucity in the literature when specifically examining the influence of Catholic prison ministry on inmates as well as its own volunteers.

**Summary**

In general, the literature around prison ministries was minimal. The existing studies on this topic primarily focused on the effectiveness of prison ministries to reduce recidivism. Additionally, very few studies considered the perspectives of prison ministry volunteers and primarily focused on the views of prison chaplains. Moreover, the studies conducted were typically quantitative in their approach. There was a gap in the literature in regards to qualitative approaches that examined prison ministries. My interest in qualitatively exploring the experiences of Catholic detention ministry volunteers was unaddressed in the literature. With this specific topic of inquiry, there was a large gap in the literature of what was known through the lens of the volunteer. This dissertation sought to add knowledge to the larger field of prison ministries in the United States.

In composing this study, I found it important to consider the sociopolitical context of prison ministries: this form of social service can be seen as a response to the increase of incarcerated individuals, reflecting the political views surrounding the prison system. Therefore, when conducting this study, I aimed to be mindful of the proselytizing and political views of the volunteers and the goals of the specific detention ministry being examined. I believed it was necessary to parse out those who used religion and spirituality for personal or political agendas in order to better embrace the spirit of faith-based efforts.
Chapter 4—Guiding

It was important to acknowledge that as a qualitative researcher grounded within a critical paradigm, I claimed my subjectivity as a vital tool in guiding this study. I recognized that I possessed a unique lens that helped me make sense of the world around me: this hermeneutic stance determined how I approached designing this dissertation, gathering and analyzing data, and coming to an understanding in regards to the topic of inquiry. Hermeneutics etymologically derives from the Greek word *hermeneuein*, which means “to interpret” or “to understand” (Crotty, 1998). Within the context of social research, the researcher’s “historical and social context is the prime source of understanding...their lived experience is incarnate in language, literature, behaviour, art, religion, law—in short, in their every cultural institution and structure (Crotty, 1998, p. 95).

As a researcher, I drew upon my experiences as a Catholic detention ministry volunteer as well as my profession as a school psychologist. As mentioned in Chapter 2, I was also grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Critical Pedagogy, Catholic Social Teaching, Liberation Theology, and Restorative Justice—all with the underlying premise of desiring a socially just world through centering the lives of the oppressed and seeing how God sees: a world in need of greater love, solidarity, and humanization. Therefore, I approached this study not as a neutral researcher, rather the findings from this dissertation required a critical analysis in response to the larger sociopolitical and historical context surrounding mass incarceration and the prison system.

The intention of this study was to deeply examine the experience of volunteers who have been serving in their detention ministry; in particular, what this experience meant to them and to those they encountered. In conducting this dissertation, I detailed the volunteers’ experience of service within the
context of Catholic detention ministry as well as how the ministry influenced their understanding of humanization. As a detention ministry volunteer myself, I possessed insider knowledge and experience that helped me gather the research participants as well as speak in a relatable language. This study differed from previous literature on prison ministry because it was situated within a faith-oriented praxis and formally explored this phenomenon through a qualitative research design.

To clarify the verbiage used in this dissertation, the predominant research literature in this area uses “prison ministry” while I specifically utilized the term “detention ministry” because the participants of this study possessed experiences within a singular California county: in jails or detention facilities only. To further clarify, jails and detention facilities are intended to detain individuals for short terms and are typically operated by local and county governments. On the other hand, prisons are intended to detain individuals for long terms and are typically operated by state and federal level governments (First Step Alliance, 2023). Despite these intentions, there is ambiguity to what was considered short or long terms. Later described in this dissertation, the participants visited individuals who spent copious amounts of time within detention facilities.

In order to adequately understand the complexity of the experience of volunteering within detention ministry, this study entailed in-depth qualitative methods to discover the essence of the experience. By only gathering the experiences of volunteers, this study sought to garner a greater understanding and grasp of how detention ministry may contribute towards social justice within an oppressive system and how this ministry influences its volunteers. I used the qualitative methodology of heuristic inquiry to explore this phenomenon and answer the primary research question and sub-questions:
1. How do volunteers experience detention ministry and how does it inform their service to those impacted by incarceration?
   
a. What brings volunteers to detention ministry and why do they continue to stay?

b. How does detention ministry inform volunteers’ approach to serving those in situations of marginalization?

c. What, if any, influence does detention ministry have on the volunteers as well as on those they serve?

This chapter explores and discusses this heuristic research design, which was initially developed by Clark Moustakas (1961) and further elaborated by Nevine Sultan (2018). Stemming from the broader methodology of phenomenological research, heuristic inquiry uniquely challenges the researcher to rely on one’s intuitions, feelings, and reflections in order to bring clarity to the topic and findings (Moustakas, 1990). In this chapter, I briefly discuss the history of phenomenology, explore the elements of heuristic inquiry, and outline the research design and procedures for this study.

**A Brief History of Phenomenology**

During the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, in response to the over-reliance of positivistic scientific thought, phenomenology as a research methodology sought to understand the *lived experiences*—what it is like to be human and what constitutes the lived world—of humans, which was unable to be fully understood through the positivistic objectification of the world (Schwandt, 2003; Smith et al., 2009). Considered the founder of the phenomenological movement, Husserl (1857-1938) asserted that the human experience should be studied in the way it occurs: grasping the experience of a phenomenon involves understanding how humans come to know their
own experiences as well as identifying the essential qualities of that experience (Mills & Birks, 2014). Phenomenology invites people to “engage with the phenomena in our world and make sense of them directly and immediately” (Crotty, 1998, p. 79) with the possibility of discovering new meaning or enhancing previous meaning. Therefore, researchers who position themselves to utilize phenomenology ultimately become instruments that explore, analyze, and transform the participants’ spoken experiences in hopes of capturing the essence of the human phenomenon. Since Husserl, researchers have developed other forms of phenomenological methodologies stemming from his original work.

**Heuristic Inquiry**

Heuristic inquiry seeks to understand the experiences of a particular phenomenon through the exploration of the relationship or interaction between the individual and their experience (Sultan, 2018). Formally introduced by Moustakas (1961), heuristic inquiry draws on the basis that the researcher possesses a deeply felt interest or experience that shapes their decision to further explore the particular topic. Thus, what is sensed, felt, and thought about a certain phenomena are taken into consideration during the research process. With humanistic philosophical foundations, heuristic inquiry is a phenomenologically aligned research approach that views the human experience as wholly relational, acknowledging the possibility for self-actualization:

[Heuristic Inquiry] creates a space for the magic that happens when researcher and co-researchers come together in shared curiosity and open ourselves up to becoming enchanted and transformed, not only by findings embedded in real-life experience, but by the pull of the process itself on our souls. (Sultan, 2018, p. 22).
What made heuristic inquiry uniquely different from more traditional phenomenological methodologies was that phenomenology does not necessarily require the researcher to have a direct personal encounter or relationship with the topic at hand. Rather, heuristic inquiry is grounded in the researcher’s intense relationship with the phenomenon being studied in addition to the “embodied attunement” (Sultan, 2018, p. 26) and engagement with the inquiry process. Tying back to my theoretical frameworks of Critical Pedagogy, Catholic Social Teaching, and Liberation Theology, my experiences and years of prayer and dialogue with those who were incarcerated have really shaped my interest to further understand the experiences of volunteering with people in situations of oppression. Heuristic inquiry allowed a space for me to conceptualize how my experiences and interior reflections have pointed me to this topic of interest. Moreover, what I found useful was how heuristic inquiry intentionally outlined and defined the processes and phases throughout the research journey.

**Conceptual Framework of Heuristic Inquiry**

Although heuristic inquiry is a creative research process that is open to the emergence of new insights and meanings, there is an underlying structure that helps guide the researcher to facilitate the elucidation of understanding. Even as I outline the processes and phases that guide the researcher, it is important to remember that this methodology is “unique in its high tolerance for the uncertain...honor[ing] the power of imagination while challenging the very concept of absolute certainty” (Sultan, 2018, p. 80). Moreover, the intention of the processes and phases of heuristic inquiry are to function mutually, giving the researcher freedom to engage in the research journey in whichever order, fashion, or direction the researcher deems fit for the study. This freedom of reflective engagement aligned with the notion of pedagogical praxis: how reflection and action can inform each
other. Within this methodology, the research trajectory does not have a specific blueprint, but may change or transform according to what is being heard, felt, or sensed.

**The Seven Processes**

Sultan (2018) describes the seven processes—identifying with the focus of inquiry, self-dialogue, tacit knowing, intuition, indwelling, focusing, and the internal frame of reference—of heuristic inquiry that ultimately serve to help the researcher arrive at a deeper and more holistic understanding of the phenomena. As I explain these processes, I tie it back to my own reflections in arriving at my dissertation topic. The first process involves identifying with the focus of inquiry. Other research approaches would identify this process to be synonymous with conceptualizing the research topic, question, or problem. In a heuristic study, the focus of inquiry is unique as it necessitates an autobiographical experience or reflection for the researcher, including co-researchers. With a focus on oneself, this process involves the immersion within the experience in order to better understand how one is positioned or oriented in relation to the phenomena. For me, my interests in exploring solidarity between ministry volunteers and those who are incarcerated stemmed from my years of service in detention ministry. After hearing the stories of trauma, hurt, and injustice, I not only left these conversations praying for the youths, but I was drawn to deeper reflection about the systems of oppression.

The second process involves self-dialogue, which is “all about communicating with yourself—and with your phenomenon–about your phenomenon” (Sultan, 2018, p. 85). This reflective and ongoing process resonated with Freire’s notion of praxis because it required an “oscillating from concept to experience and back” (Sultan, 2018, p. 85). Self-dialogue brings the researcher face-to-face
with oneself (Moustakas, 1990) and this internal dialogue allows for critical reflection and self-disclosure. Journaling is an example of a research practice that can help illuminate self-dialogue. “At the heart of heuristics lies an emphasis on the disclosing of self as a way of facilitating disclosure from others—a response to the tacit dimension within oneself sparks a similar call from others” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 50).

The next process of tacit knowing is similar to conscientização or critical consciousness. Tacit knowing involves a revelatory process of meaning-making regarding the topic that allows for an implicit understanding of it (Moustakas, 1990, Polanyi, 1969). Essentially, one’s tacit knowing comes from personal knowledge and experience of the phenomena that one deeply feels and believes without always being consciously aware of how the understanding came to be. Ellingson (2008) describes embodied knowing as a concept closely related to tacit knowing with the former highlighting the researcher’s body as the epistemological tool that gathers understanding from its own living experiences and immersion within the phenomenon. Tacit knowing is not a static feature, rather it is a dynamic process that is informed by both past and present experience of the phenomenon (Polanyi, 1966).

Another process in heuristic inquiry is intuition, which Moustakas (1990) describes as “the bridge between explicit and the tacit...the realm of the between” (p. 23). The intuitive process utilizes clues from perceptions and observations—the subjective and objective—to infer experience while honoring the experiential and embodied dimensions of heuristic inquiry (Merleau-Ponty, 2013; Sultan, 2015). Intuition helps the researcher make decisions and judgment regarding emerging themes and insights.
Next, *indwelling* is the process that invites the researcher to look inward, with the aim to comprehend the facet of experience more holistically. Sultan (2018) describes this process as highly reflexive and requiring patience as the researcher returns “to the phenomenon repeatedly to unravel its essential qualities” (p. 90). Indwelling should mainly aid in yielding new knowledge to add to what is already known or understood, which may foster personal growth and transformation. Similarly, the heuristic process of *focusing* adds the dimension of openness and acceptance as it invites the researcher to clear an inner space in order to clarify facets of an experience that may have been missed (Moustakas, 1990). Sultan (2018) describes focusing as the process that allows for decluttering of the mind during the research journey: “it allows you to transcend the confines of traditional research designs that require the use of tangible variables or ideas and instead interact with experiences that exist within the realm of the ambiguous” (p. 92). Both indwelling and focusing involve “sitting with” the research data or themes in order to allow multiple layers of meaning to emerge.

Lastly, the *internal frame of reference* is part of the heuristic process that reminds the researcher to not overly focus on one’s inner experience, rather to also empathize and trust the “intersubjective experience unfolding” (Sultan, 2018, p. 92) between researcher and co-researchers. This process reminded me of critical pedagogy’s notion of the co-creation of knowledge between student and teacher, or a shared/collective consciousness that arises from dialogue. Sultan (2018) describes this as the “we-oriented nature” (p. 92) of this methodology.

Before and throughout the dissertation process, I engaged in these seven processes to bring about meaning from this study. Embracing the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy and possessing a faith and spirituality that was highly contemplative seemed to naturally lend to the
reflective processes outlined within heuristic inquiry. Again, I continually revisited my experiences, prayer, and desires because I was drawn to conducting a study that promoted further humanization.

**The Six Phases**

Within a heuristic study, “the processes and phases work in concert to support the exploratory, introspective, creative, experiential, and relational facets” (Sultan, 2018, p. 94) of research. Heuristic inquiry possesses a structure (not necessarily in sequential fashion depending on the needs of the study) that guide and inform the research process: from posing the research question to data collection methods and analysis, and to disseminating the findings. There are six essential phases outlined by Sultan (2018)—*initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis*.

Heuristic studies are grounded in the researcher’s personal experience and the inquiry emerges from the researcher’s *initial engagement*, the personal experience that deeply arouses the central issue and question of interest. It was not merely the years of volunteering experience for me, but the relationships and friendships I formed with youth impacted by incarceration inspired me to further explore the experience of serving those in situations of oppression. Next in the process is a practice of *immersion* that allows for an openness to the ambiguity of the phenomenon, with the researcher as a learner in the vastness of the topic. Moustakas (2015) describes this point in the process as the researcher interacting with the research question, or the “lingering presence” (p. 309) in hopes to discover or co-create new knowledge. For me, once I solidified my desire to explore the experiences of volunteering in detention ministry, I developed an excitement to find out what this meant in relation to humanization.
With newfound knowledge and understanding, the researcher will move towards the incubation phase, which promotes growth and encourages further insight and integration. For me, this phase required the processes of indwelling and focusing, for incubation took time. Through an intentional self-exploration and exploration of the intersubjective experiences of co-researchers, the researcher can reach illumination, which involves further development of an awareness, discovery, and deeper understanding of the phenomena (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). This phase is when the unconscious insights residing within one’s mind surfaces into a conscious awareness.

Following the illumination of new dimensions or themes, the researcher moves into the phase of explication, which requires the researcher to “attend to their own awarenesses, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and judgments as a prelude to the understanding that is derived from conversations and dialogues with others” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31). This phase is when the researcher can develop a depiction that is a holistic representation of the illuminated themes. Finally, in consideration of all the data and findings, the researcher can generate an interpretation of the experiences that encompasses and represents the phenomenon—the creative synthesis phase. According to Sultan (2018) the creative synthesis phase can take form in a variety of ways including, but not limited to a drawing or painting, a narrative story, a poem, a photo collage, a mosaic sculpture, or an audio/video recording.

**Methods**

“We must realize that the aspirations, the motives, and the objectives implicit in the meaningful thematics are human aspirations, motives, and objectives” (Freire, 2018, p. 107). The heuristic process is ultimately a humanizing process that requires an engagement in methods involving interacting, collaborating, and dialoguing with co-researchers, or participants, to construct new and shared
understanding of human experiences. This methodology shifted the view from researchers who use research as a tool to researchers becoming the research tools themselves: “transformation happens because the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and thus has direct access to and intimate involvement with whatever is emerging throughout the course of the study” (Sultan, 2018, p. 13).

It was important for me to differentiate between a research methodology and research methods. According to Mills and Birks (2014), a methodology “determines how the researcher thinks about a study, how they make decisions about a study, and how they position themselves to engage firstly with participants and then with the data generated/collected” (p. 32). In this case, heuristic inquiry helped inform what methods best answered the current research questions. On the other hand, research methods typically encompass “choice and recruitment of participants or sampling, data generation or collection, fieldwork, data recording, data analysis and the reporting of a study” (Mills & Birks, 2014). For instance, the primary methods used in this dissertation were in-depth interviews (or rather, sharings) and thematic coding for data analysis.

**Co-Researchers (Collaborators) and Relationality**

Heuristic inquiry is a humanistic research methodology where the personhood and wholeness of human beings is brought to the forefront of each study. Therefore, the relational processes between individuals within the study is emphasized. In regards to terminology, heuristic studies refer to participants as *co-researchers* or *research partners*. With this spirit, co-researchers are seen as more than just sources of data or information, rather they are “companions and collaborators on a journey that will ultimately transform each of us: researcher, co-researchers, and readers of the findings” (Sultan,
Traditionally, research, particularly quantitative research, has viewed data and information as being completely separate from human beings. In social research, a critical and more humanizing approach asserts that human experiences cannot be completely removed from humans and investigating these themes should not mask or hide people in the process.

Some may think it inadvisable to include the people as investigators in the search for their own meaningful thematics: that their intrusive influence will “adulterate” the findings and thereby sacrifice the objectivity of the investigation. This view mistakenly presupposes that themes exist, in their original objective purity, outside people—as if themes were things. Actually, themes exist in people in their relations with the world. (Freire, 2018, p. 106)

When considering co-researchers to be part of the study, Moustakas (1990) highlighted the importance of finding research partners who are willing, enthusiastic, committed, interested, and able to describe the phenomenon that is being examined. Moreover, it is important that each co-researcher possesses an intimate relationship with the topic of inquiry (Wertz, 2005).

For this study, I specifically referred to the research participants as “collaborators” or “volunteers.” I made this decision because I believed that calling them co-researchers may be misleading to the reader. Through the member-checking process, I truly collaborated with those who participated in this study in order to honor their words, experiences, and meanings (presented in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6). Simply put, because the participants volunteered to take part in this study as well as possessed the title of being a volunteer, I felt that it was suitable to refer to them in this way. The benefit of collaborating with those who already possessed an identity of being a volunteer was that they
already have the willingness, altruism, and a commitment to a greater cause without much self-interests.

**Site and Collaborator Selection**

In order to identify collaborators with rich experience within this niche topic, I utilized purposive sampling (McMillan, 2016) in this study to recruit volunteers from a restorative justice, detention ministry that was part of a larger Catholic diocese in southern California. The ministry services adult and juvenile detention facilities throughout a southern California county. Situated within a Catholic restorative justice framework, the ministry purports to provide hope and healing to the incarcerated and all those affected by crime and the criminal justice system. The ministry provides services to adults and juveniles impacted by incarceration, victimized minors in protective custody, families of victims and offenders, and various church parishes throughout the county.

For this study, I sent a recruitment flier that included the completion of a Google form via email to the ministry’s director, which was then shared to all the volunteers within the ministry. The Google form gathered basic demographic and volunteer information such as age, race/ethnicity, years of involvement in detention ministry, interests for participating in the study, and brief understanding of restorative justice. The criteria for the current study were as follows: must be an active volunteer with direct experience of serving individuals who are incarcerated, must have volunteered within the ministry for at least five years, must speak English, must be available to interview in-person or via teleconference for three separate sessions (approximately 60 minutes each), and must consent to being audio recorded during each interview. Moustakas (1990) recommends “as many as 10 to 15 co-researchers” (pp. 46-47) for a heuristic study.
After reviewing the Google form submissions and contacting the eligible volunteers, I recruited 14 volunteers for this dissertation. The demographic information of the volunteers were as follows: seven were male and seven were female; five identified as White/Caucasian, four identified as Vietnamese, three identified as Hispanic/Mexican, one identified as Filipino, and one identified as half White and Hispanic; the youngest volunteer was 52 years old and the oldest was 84 years old, with an average age of 64 across all the volunteers; six volunteered within juvenile facilities, six volunteered within adult facilities, and two had experiences in both; and the volunteer with the least amount of volunteering experience had six years and the volunteer with the most had 29 years, with an average of approximately 13 years of experience across all the volunteers. I intentionally recruited volunteers to represent the age and cultural backgrounds of the general volunteer population within the county’s detention ministry.

The volunteers possessed direct experiences of serving individuals within various detention facilities through the following types of ministry services: (1) Bible study, in which the volunteer facilitates small group discussions regarding specific bible passages. This also involves faith sharing discussions and each session lasts approximately one hour; (2) Communion service, in which the volunteer dispenses Communion to those who attend the service. This also included sharing a reflection on the Sunday’s specific bible readings; (3) One-on-one visits, in which the volunteer visits an assigned youth or adult on a consistent basis. These visits last approximately one hour each meeting; (4) Sacramental preparation, in which the volunteer teaches catechism curriculum to their assigned individual or individuals on a weekly basis. Each meeting approximately lasts one hour. The volunteers
in this study facilitated either one or a combination of these services throughout their years of volunteering.

**Data Collection**

Within heuristic studies, data collection requires the researcher to immerse oneself within the topic through reflection and self-dialogue as well as engaging in dialogue with co-researchers who share the same interest. More concrete data collection can occur through interviews, focus groups, observations, and media sources. According to Sultan (2018), “due to the highly experiential nature of heuristic inquiry, the typical methods for collecting data are interviews, artifacts, and researcher journal entries/ reflections” (p. 123).

**Individual Interviews (Faith Sharings)**

Interviewing is the primary data collection method for heuristic inquiry as it is for most qualitative methodologies. Due to the relational nature of heuristic inquiry as well as the personal nature of the topic of interest, the hope of conducting interviews in this study was to garner genuine discourse and truthful findings. I was intentional in utilizing these sessions for authentic dialogue. When considering dialogue, my frame of reference came from Freire’s (2018) tenets of humility, love, and faith. My experiences as a school psychologist taught me that entering spaces of counseling or dialogue required immense humility and non-judgment in order to facilitate genuine conversations. SooHoo (2013) describes humility within research as practicing a collaborative inquiry that requires listening and learning, as well as “not taking action without consultation and consideration” (p. 212).

In-depth interviewing is the primary method used in qualitative research studies (Marshall et al., 2022). Opposed to a highly structured design, I conducted informal, conversational interviews
(Patton, 2015) for this study. In efforts to be culturally responsive in my research methods (Berryman et al., 2013), I termed the individual interviews in this study as “faith sharings.” The conversations held within each interview essentially allowed the volunteers to share their faith experiences and reflect on their praxis of serving. Because I was a volunteer as well, I shared the same faith and similar language when having these discussions. Each session began with an invitation to prayer and concluded with a prayer as well.

Seidman (2019) describes how phenomenological studies typically consist of three in-depth interviews with each co-researcher. With each volunteer, I held three in-depth interviews, or faith sharings, that took place between October 2023 to December 2023. Each lasted between approximately 50 to 70 minutes. The three faith sharings for each collaborator were primarily spaced out from one week to one month in between each session, depending on the availability of myself and each volunteer. Across the 14 collaborators, I had a total of 42 faith sharing sessions. Although there was the option for teleconferencing, I chose to conduct each faith sharing in person, at a mutually agreed upon time and place. Most of the faith sharings took place at the volunteers’ homes, while some took place in public spaces: churches and local coffee shops.

I deviated from Seidman’s (2019) themes for the three faith sharings and focused on topics related to my research questions. Approximately three to seven days prior to each session, I shared the interview questions (reflection questions) with each collaborator to give them time to reflect on their thoughts and experiences before beginning the faith sharing. I reminded the volunteers that these questions were to help guide the dialogue and each session would be informal and conversational. The first faith sharing focused on getting to know each volunteer’s background and motivation for serving
in detention ministry. The second faith sharing focused more on the specific experiences of directly
serving those who are incarcerated. The last faith sharing focused on the volunteers’ perceptions of the
prison system and their call to action in regards to any perceived injustice surrounding incarceration.

The faith sharing guide used for this study can be referenced in Appendix A.

**Embodied Relational Interviewing.** Within a heuristic approach, Sultan (2018) describes
embodied relational interviewing as a way to help maintain a balanced sense of engagement during
interviews when dissonance occurs. This type of interviewing highlights the need to take into
consideration one’s cognitive, emotional, perceptual, spiritual, and social dimensions in order to “lay
the foundation for a holistic, relational experience that honors the experiences of all who are involved”
(p. 125). Sultan (2018) further provides numerous considerations when engaging in discourse. I listed
the examples that aligned with a more critical approach to research:

- Bring openness, interest, and curiosity to the encounter.
- Know your agenda, but see if it’s okay to leave it at the door.
- Be an active listener and receiver.
- Identify the potential impact of context.
- Attend to sociocultural considerations.
- Use person-centered approaches and microskills.
- Embrace the silences.
- Practice cultural sensitivity.
- Attend to power differentials.
- Highlight the shared moments and experiences.
Considering Power Dynamics. It is important to be mindful of power dynamics within a conversation—there is a need to establish or work towards an egalitarian relationship. Asymmetrical relationships (Sandstrom et al., 2006; Kvale, 2002) may have one party or individual imposing dominance over the other. Privilege and oppression are deeply embodied experiences (Johnson, 2015) that are oftentimes unconscious or not realized until one intentionally engages in reflexivity to develop a self-awareness of one position of power. For instance, I recognized that conducting research has historically been a colonizing practice (Smith, 2000). When interviewing individuals from marginalized groups or positions of oppression, the researcher must be mindful of one’s positionality and identity and the power and biases that come with them. Because I interviewed detention ministry volunteers, this was not exactly the case for my dissertation. It was still important to hold these considerations because the topic of inquiry involved sharing spaces with those in positions of oppression.

Data Analysis

“[D]ata analysis begins as soon as you make your first contact with co-researchers...However, formalized data analysis happens after you have collected and organized your data” (Sultan, 2018, p. 145). The data analysis for this study occurred iteratively and simultaneously as I progressed through the faith sharings with the collaborators. In this section, I elaborated on the conceptual framework of heuristic inquiry in regards to data analysis and theme explication as well as explained the procedures used for this dissertation.
Member-Checking and the Researcher Journal

In addition to my own reflexivity and analysis of the data, I sought to consult and collaborate with the collaborators in order to bring clarity and accuracy to understanding their experiences throughout this process. In order to ensure a valid representation of the phenomenon, I went back to the volunteers after transcribing and organizing their dialogue—a process known in qualitative studies as member-checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Rolfe, 2006). Additionally, the member-checking process helped balance my personal biases when it came to interpretation of the data. It was important for me to do my best to maintain the integrity of the collaborators, the faith sharings and their experiences during the analytical process. In order to try and disrupt the unequal power dynamics held within traditional research practices, I utilized member-checking as a way to enter critical solidarity (Boucher, 2019) with the volunteers. Member-checking took the form of email correspondence or conversations over the phone that lasted for approximately 15 minutes. Through this, some of the collaborators in this study were able to provide specific feedback and clarification in regards to the wording and interpretation of their dialogue.

Also known as memoing in other qualitative designs, I utilized a researcher journal, which was essentially a “hybrid literary form in which the researcher uses one’s own personal experience as the basis of analysis” (Angrosino, 2007, p. 80). The researcher journal is intended to elucidate “novel ways of perceiving and understanding experience, as well as inspiring new questions or processes of inquiry” (Sultan, 2018, p. 136). Journaling is a qualitative tool to “become aware of the ideological imperatives and epistemological presumptions that inform the research” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 305). I began the researcher journal prior to conducting the first faith sharing. After each session, I hand wrote
in my journal. My previous experiences of personal journaling have always been within the context of my faith and spirituality. Therefore, for this dissertation, I wrote the researcher journal entries similar to that of personal conversations with God. Each entry summarized my thoughts, feelings, and anything that resonated from the faith sharings. I also wrote down possible themes I saw emerging as I conducted more faith sharings with the volunteers. This process of memoing helped me materialize conscientization, or new awareness regarding the topic. During my analysis of the data, I referenced my researcher journal to help formulate individual and collective themes. Lastly, I used my journal to help me creatively compose a prayer (presented in Chapter 7) that highlighted the experience of volunteering in detention ministry.

**Theme Illumination and Identification**

Similar with other qualitative methodologies, interviews are recorded and transcribed to become raw data within a heuristic study. Sultan (2018) suggests verbatim transcripts which include “the exact dialogical exchange between co-researchers and [researcher], plus notes and commentary about pauses, changes in voice tone, and interruptions” (p. 142). For this study I used Descript, a transcription software, to transcribe the audio files from my faith sharings. Afterwards, I reviewed the transcripts to grammatically clean each volunteers’ conversations, referring to the audio file if needed. Some volunteers possessed strong accents or communicated with me that their English was not grammatically the best. Therefore, each transcript was not 100% grammatically correct because I opted to stay as close as I could to the original responses.

**Coding.** Heuristic inquiry encourages the researcher to engage with the data through immersion, incubation, and reflexivity. To do so, the researcher completes a “vertical” and “horizontal”
review of the transcripts and artifacts in order to gain both a deep and broad understanding of the data. Generally speaking, after cleaning the transcripts, I read and reread each transcript multiple times. I did not use any software to analyze the data other than a word processing program (for this study, Google Docs). I printed hardcopies of the transcripts to begin my coding process. I utilized a loose “incident with incident” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 128) coding process to locate common ideas and potential themes: first within each volunteer (vertical), then across all the volunteers (horizontal). I highlighted and labeled these codes prior to grouping them and analyzing them. This form of initial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) allowed me to deeply engage with the data and organize patterns.

For both the vertical and horizontal reviews, I used a cutting and sorting (Renner & Taylor-Powell, 2003) technique in order to create “piles” of codes representative of the different ideas stemming from the data. Although I printed hard copies of the transcripts to highlight and label the codes, I sorted and piled the codes electronically via Google Docs. Following this procedure, I read and reread the codes to locate connections and identify potential themes and subthemes. In addition to the technical aspect of sorting and finding connections, I spent time praying, reflecting, and ruminating over the data in order to authentically allow the words of my collaborators to point towards the finalized themes.

Vertical Review. I began this level of analysis for each collaborator after the completion of their three faith sharings. This vertical review sought to understand individual meanings from each volunteer. Sultan (2018) argues that this process requires a holistic approach when reviewing the data for themes: “Unlike the process of coding used in grounded theory (which often involves careful
line-by-line analysis of transcript content), data analysis in heuristic inquiry gives equal value to all co-researcher content” (p. 145). It was important to review data from each collaborator as a whole, rather than parsing out pieces of information or breaking apart the stories and experiences. By doing this, the wholeness of each volunteer was preserved and I was able to better grasp the positionalities of each and how they approached their services.

**Horizontal Review.** After identifying the themes within each volunteer, I sought to locate the collective themes across all of the collaborators as well as the potential universal meanings the experience may have for others outside of the study. In order to garner a holistic picture with an overall impression of the phenomenon being studied, I read over the transcripts again to immerse myself in reflexivity and personal prayer. When trying to illuminate and identify themes, it was important that I was not “deliberately fishing around for patterns...looking for them where they do not exist, potentially privileging [one’s] biases over the actual content” (Sultan, 2018, p. 147). Moustakas (1990) recommends the need to step away from the data once in a while to allow the information to incubate. In trying to reach saturation of the identified themes, or reaching a point at which my themes and subthemes were well developed (Birks & Mills, 2023), I asked myself: “What was essential to the volunteering experience?” It was important to note that although some volunteers better articulated their experiences and understanding compared to others, the identification of themes considered the phenomenon that was being experienced by the whole. After much review and reflection, I identified four main themes from the data (presented in Chapter 6), each having three to four subthemes.
**Theme Explication**

Following theme illumination and identification, I utilized the recommended theme explication methods of *individual depictions*, *composite depictions*, and *creative synthesis* (Sultan, 2018; Moustakas, 1990). The purpose of an *individual depiction* is to give a holistic illustration of a co-researcher’s experience regarding the topic of inquiry. This conceptualizes the individual’s unique experience in relation to the whole. Individual depictions can include a brief demographic profile, a self-description, verbatim excerpts of the interview (Moustakas, 2015), any artifacts, and a summary of core themes. For this study, I composed 14 individual depictions, or portraits of each volunteer. I presented their backgrounds which included, but were not limited to, their professions, personal history, family history, reason for joining the detention ministry, and direct quotes from their faith sharings (presented in Chapter 5). I shared these individual portraits with each respective collaborator as a way to check for accuracy (part of the member-checking process).

After completing individual depictions, I developed a *composite depiction*, which represented the shared experiences of the phenomenon among the research partners (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2015). The composite description “acts as an accurate, vivid, unifying representation of the core themes illuminated through each of the individual portraits” (Sultan, 2018, p. 153). In Chapter 6, I developed and organized the main themes and their subthemes that were collectively experienced by the collaborators. This composite depiction was filled with a wealth of direct quotes from all of the collaborators across the various themes and subthemes. After drafting the composite depiction, I shared the collective themes with the volunteers to gather any feedback. The last step of theme explication within heuristic inquiry is *creative synthesis*, which is a personal process that allows the
researcher to creatively express and explicate the newly discovered themes. Researchers have the range of freedom to use any creative outlet such as writing a story, poem, metaphor, musical composition, or artwork. For this study, I composed a prayer that encompassed the breadth of the volunteering experience (beginning of Chapter 7).

**Ethical Considerations**

This study sought to investigate the experiences of volunteers through individual faith sharings. Throughout the research study, I made conscious ethical considerations about the well-being of my volunteers. I was mindful to adhere to the processes of ethics, confidentiality, and trustworthiness in order to maintain the integrity of the research process and to ensure the protection of my collaborators.

**IRB**

Part of the ethical procedures prior to beginning this study included submitting my dissertation proposal to Chapman University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. Part of the approval was my completion of the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) modules that discussed the history, laws, and policies that govern conducting human research. All forms including recruitment forms, consent forms, and interview guides were approved.

**Informed Consent and Confidentiality**

The first area of ethical practice that I considered was informed consent. Prior to participating in this study, the volunteers provided informed consent through written agreement for their participation in the data collection process and the inclusion of their experiences in this study. After the volunteers expressed interest and met eligibility criteria for this study, I explained with each the
purpose, approximate duration, procedures, and research aims of this dissertation. Additionally, the limits of confidentiality were explained and I preserved anonymity through the use of agreed upon pseudonyms. For the sake of this study, I suggested the volunteers pick the name of their favorite saint or holy person. All information or data (i.e., transcriptions, field notes, coding analyses, etc.) were electronically stored, secured, and backed up to a secondary drive to ensure no data was compromised.

In addition, the collaborators were notified about possible risks or discomforts that may deter participation. For this study, risks were minimal to none, and I maintained sensitivity to my volunteers’ emotional temperature during each faith sharing. I worked to ensure that no harm will be done to the research partners, and if there is anything that may cause any level of harm, I will be sure to address these issues immediately (Fisher, 2003; Bersoff, 2008). There was no compensation for participating in this study other than contributing to furthering academia in this area of inquiry as well as the potential benefit “toward self-actualization and integration through individual and communal reflection and meaning-making” (Sultan, 2018, pp. 216-217).

**Trustworthiness, Goodness, and Rigor**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) address the basic questions of whether readers should believe the claims a research study puts forward—essentially considering the truth value. In quantitative research, this evaluation process tends to examine the validity, reliability, objectivity, and overall quality of the study. Qualitative approaches seldom conduct studies establishing causality or statistical significance. When evaluating the quality of qualitative research, studies seek to have the elements of trustworthiness and rigor. Jones et al. (2006) uses the word goodness alongside trustworthiness to assert that a study’s findings can justify social change and action. The evaluation of rigor and trustworthiness/goodness of
a qualitative study is broken down into four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

*Credibility* is primarily tied to the confidence and believability of a research design, which includes the purpose, research questions, and theoretical framework. Beyond my own personal experiences and decisions regarding the data, I enhanced the credibility of my findings through member-checking, triangulation, prolonged engagement with the study content and process, external review by my dissertation committee, and the use of thick descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). The notion of *transferability* takes into consideration the study's context, setting, and other situations of the study. Rather than generalizing the findings of a qualitative study, transferability speaks to the potential to apply aspects of the findings to other populations or contexts (Guba, 1981). This was further elaborated in Chapter 7. *Dependability* refers to the justification for choice of research methodology, data collection process, and how the findings align with the methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). *Confirmability* speaks to the link between the findings and interpretations to verify that the researcher is not making random assertions (Patton, 2015). Because heuristic inquiry and other qualitative approaches are highly subjective, I used the strategies of researcher reflexivity, member-checking, and tying back my findings to the literature and theoretical frameworks to enhance confirmability. In evaluating the integrity of a heuristic study, Sultan (2018) provides several suggestions with the following questions resonating with my study:

- Do you acknowledge your role, including biases, values, and attitudes and their potential impact on the research?
• Are your research questions and process based on the assumption that reality is relative and subjective?

• Does your study focus on illuminating deep understanding and uncovering the essential nature of the topic of inquiry?

• Do the guiding questions of the study originate within you?

• Do you bring curiosity, openness, and wonder into your process of inquiry?

• Do you attend to your personal experience and to that of your co-researchers, as well as to how both experiences are interfacing?

• Does your study allow for the intersection of being and knowing?

• Is your study characterized by personal involvement and full engagement with the topic of inquiry?

• Does your study promote change and social justice, either directly or indirectly?

• Does your study design demonstrate nontraditional approaches to data collection, organization, and analysis?

• Does your study explore the topic of inquiry as a present-moment, ongoing, living human experience, even when exploring its manifestation in the past? (pp. 184-186)

Ultimately, these guiding questions allowed me to make holistic considerations (also including the influence and guidance from my theoretical frameworks) throughout the process of conducting this study.
Summary

I acknowledge that this study’s methodology was not traditional. In fact, I challenge traditional methods of research inquiry because I believe that only through a critical and creative methodology could this topic of inquiry be fully explored and honored. This study was designed with the intention to be humanizing and collaborative: I yearned to better understand the phenomenon of volunteering within detention ministry and I sought to garner knowledge and understanding through engaging in dialogue with fellow volunteers. To accomplish this, the dissertation employed a qualitative, heuristic methodology that allowed for the creativity and freedom to explore the lived experiences of this phenomenon. I collected the words, stories, and reflections of the research collaborators through faith sharings. In addition to my theoretical frameworks, the heuristic method guided me to engage in a critical examination of the experiences of volunteers who served individuals within an oppressive system. My hope in choosing a heuristic approach was to garner rich and nuanced depictions to further crystallize what it meant to not only strive for a socially just society, but how these efforts ultimately bring us closer to God, who uniquely identifies with the poor and vulnerable.
Chapter 5—Serving

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of detention ministry volunteers. The findings in this chapter were derived from faith sharings with each participant across three individual sessions. In this chapter, I present individual portraits, or depictions, of each volunteer and their service within the ministry. These depictions provide a description and background to each collaborator and how they came to detention ministry. Within each portrait, I discuss one to three individual themes unique to the volunteers, which are presented in italics within the body of each portrait. These themes ultimately highlight their positionalities as well as the differences among the volunteers who serve in this capacity. In efforts to use humanizing language, I avoid terms like “inmate,” “prisoner,” or “criminal,” when discussing the volunteers’ experience. I refer to those impacted by incarceration as “attendees” or “participants” because they participated in the ministry services. I recognized that not all of the collaborators possessed this consideration and I chose to honor their excerpts by including their words in their direct quotes.

The intention of this chapter is to respect and know more of the whole volunteer in order to better understand their unique outlook on this shared experience. By identifying their lens, I am able to garner deeper meaning through the unique perspectives of their experiences. In the next chapter, I present the collective themes that were shared across the volunteers. There is no specific order of these portraits, rather, I organize them to best illustrate the diversity within this niche population. I thoroughly enjoyed composing the individual depictions because these portraits ultimately revealed the holy lives of who I saw as “saints” in detention.
Mary

Mary is a 62-year-old white woman who has been a volunteer in Catholic detention ministry for 11 years. She described herself as a wife and mother of two children. She currently works in the finance department at her local Catholic parish and has been there for 22 years. Additionally, she has taught children’s catechism and planned retreats for groups at her parish. Although Mary was raised Catholic by her parents, she described how she left the faith for a substantial portion of her life. After the loss of her brother at a young age and a tumultuous marriage, Mary harbored anger and resentment towards God:

I left the faith after a combination of things...I was young, and I had been hurt when I was 14 by losing my brother...My brother died when he was almost 19...My first marriage didn’t make it. I was 23 and believed the first man that told me he loved me...I took it out on the Church and God, which was really bad because the priest who did our premarital training told us, “You should not be getting married.” All that did was make me mad...I was in my “hating religion and angry at God” period of my life.

During this time, Mary did not associate with her faith. Mary began to eventually shift her views during her 40s.

Through what Mary described as a series of “pretty amazing things,” she was able to return to her Catholic faith. She shared how the conversion of her close friend to Catholicism helped renew her own faith:

I would go with her to her inquiry meetings. I wanted to hear what they had to say. I kept going to the meetings and the people there were so lovely—not like the Catholics I grew up
with. I’m judging them from a very immature place…I kept raising my hand and I had all these questions about this and about that, and this lady and man were always very kind. They could see I had a lot of anger. This lady was so kind, and she was so hard to say no to. And not much later on, she said, “I would like you to be this woman’s sponsor.”…I came back to God when I turned around 40, and nothing in my life had physically changed. Same husband, same house, same kids, same everything, but all of a sudden, everything was better. I had a huge restoration. He just came after me and got me, and I’ve been grateful ever since, every day of my life.

Through her interactions and the kindness of others, Mary sparked her interest in knowing more about God and about her faith. She recognized that the moment she allowed God back into her life, she began living more meaningfully, despite nothing physically changing about her life.

Mary also reflected back on how different her lifestyle was when she was distant from the Church. She discussed what her career was like and how she felt miserable during that period of her life:

I had a big job in the studios for nine years. I felt like I was literally working around Satan. It was so horrible. I liked my job because I was in my 20s and it was fun. We had so much fun all the time. But there was such debauchery. I’d just go home sometimes thinking, “These people have no souls.” I never felt comfortable in my own skin...It was the head of the studio who I worked for at the time, he was gonna retire. And he said, “I will literally put you anywhere you want. What show do you want? What do you want to do? I’m going to give you that before I leave.” And then he said, “I have to say something. I like you. You’re really competent, but you
don’t have that killer instinct to really be in this industry. That’s what I get from you.” I started to cry...This place is so scary to me. It was fun, but the people and the way they behaved.

Mary was grateful that through a series of events, she was able to leave her job and enjoy life more. During this time, she met her current husband and decided to approach living differently. She also shared how these events in her life were ultimately God’s protection over her:

I worked for a few more years and got really lucky, I met my husband and we ended up dating. After a few years, we traveled for a year. We put our cars on blocks, packed up our houses, and left. That’s probably what made me realize I dodged a bullet because I could still be in that industry. I could still be as miserable as all the women I knew in that industry.

Throughout our faith sharings, Mary radiated a deeper joy in living and in being grateful for her life. She often spoke about the ways in which God has blessed her life and her family.

Acknowledging her blessings, Mary found fulfillment and a sense of peace in her roles as a mother, daughter, and wife, which she felt were important in defining who she was. She ultimately credited her life to God:

I’m one of five kids. Incredible mom and dad. They were married for 68 years. My dad just died last year. I’ve been spending a lot of time with my mom, which has been a big part of my life. I’m married to a wonderful guy. God sent me this guy. I didn’t deserve him and I really did try hard to push him away for about 10 years. I’ve been married for 32 years. I have a beautiful son who’s 31 and a daughter who’s 27. We are super blessed. Our life is wonderful...I don’t take anything for granted. I’m truly a happy person. I have always been a happy person on the outside, but it’s gotten me to here and the last 25 years have just been an amazing ride.
For Mary, her intimate relationship with God allowed her to appreciate the richness of what she had in her life: her family, her experiences, and her faith. Our dialogue was filled with Mary’s unceasing positive energy and love. She truly possessed a bottomless well of good spirit:

I just appreciate everything I have...God is so full of mercy and it’s a love I’ve never felt before. I love my children, I love my husband, and when I had [my first child], I was like, “Wow, I’ve never felt a love like this.” I would say it’s the first time I felt God back in my life. He was literally in the room. It brings me here. I am a child of God. That’s what I am. That’s how I define myself.

Mary talked about how she shares her love and joy of God with those whom she serves. From listening to her experiences of being a detention ministry volunteer, I was able to envision Mary as a light to those who suffered. Currently, Mary volunteers within the adult detention facilities conducting weekly bible studies.

A Mother and a Child of God

My initial impressions of Mary involved her great devotion to God. I felt a sense that she wholly dedicated and credited everything in her life to God. She radiated a joy that conveyed a greater peace with herself and her life. She invited me into her home, and made sure I felt like I was part of her own family. Aside from our faith sharing questions, Mary was very open about her familial relationships and roles. Throughout our conversations, Mary noted how being a mother has shaped her perceptions on her spiritual calling:

I think God has a plan for me...I love my husband, I love being a wife, but I’ve always been called to be a parent. I’ve always wanted kids. I started late. I was 32 and 35 when I had my kids,
thank goodness. I probably would’ve had a lot more. I think that everything that’s happened to me in my life, God has used. Every bad thing that’s happened in my life, I find and I see clearly now that He’s used it to give me the tools to do what I do.

Having children was a defining moment for Mary’s life. She described how she began to experience a great love and how being a mother was part of what brought her back to her faith.

Mary also shared how her position as a mother influenced her service within detention ministry:

I feel motherly with all these people. And I say motherly because it’s just a term. I don’t want to be everyone’s mother. It’s hard enough to be a mother of two. It’s hard because you’ve never loved like that before...That makes you relate to God even more when you’re a parent. You’re just like, “I think I love as much as God loves? No.” So how much worse it must be for Him to see us not get out of our own way and welcome Him into our lives.

Being a parent gave Mary a sense of what God may feel as a Father to humankind. She reflected on what it meant to love other people, especially those who suffer. After listening to the many stories of her bible study participants, Mary described how her heart was touched and filled with greater compassion. She also felt a sense of suffering and could only imagine how God must feel when acknowledging the great suffering in the world. Her position as a mother allowed her to deeply care more as a volunteer.

Another prominent theme that arose from conversing with Mary was her acknowledgement of God’s greatness. She frequently spoke of God as a confidant who was beside her every moment of her life. She discussed the primacy of God throughout her detention ministry services:
I’m so madly in love with God that there is not a day where I’m not wanting to be with Him. I think that’s what this ministry has really done for me. That’s really it. You can’t go in there without the Holy Spirit. I suppose you can, but I cannot...Because I’m in there, the presence of the Holy Spirit is never missing. Ever. I have not had one bad experience. Not one that hasn’t been good. Some are really great and some are just okay, but no bad experiences.

Moreover, Mary was not able to describe her experiences of volunteering without God. Because of her services within a faith-based context as well as her intimate relationship with God, Mary consistently praised God throughout her stories.

Mary reflected on how God was the fuel that allowed her to continue serving in this ministry over the years. When asked about how her experiences have changed over time, she shared:

I went in very cautiously, and now I go in arms wide open, heart wide open, ears and eyes wide open. I have a passion now that I had to build because even though I was never nervous about it, every step of the way, I stopped and said, “Is this what You want me to do? Is this? I’m not going to just do this because I need something to do. It needs to be what you want me to do or I’ll do something else.” [This passion] has gotten more powerful every single month that I’m there.

Part of her glorification of God was a trust and reliance on how God wanted her to serve. She often turned to God for assurance. Over the years of her services, she acknowledged how this assurance has deepened.

For Mary, God concretely facilitated her experiences of detention ministry. She noted God’s activity affecting the reality of her experiences and the experiences of those she served:
I’m addicted to this feeling of the joy that I get. And I see it in [the inmates]. That is God working. To get to see that. That right there is the frosting on the cake, just to get to see people affected by the Holy Spirit, because I’ve been there...He was just saying, “I love you. I have always loved you. I have never left you.”

In serving others and bringing God to her participants, Mary reflected on how God has touched her as well. Mary wanted others to also experience the transformative capabilities of God. Not only has God been present in her service, He has also influenced her approach to better understand and love those who she served:

It’s so important that people don’t define themselves by the worst thing they’ve ever done. I lived much of my life not feeling worthy and defining myself by all the terrible things I thought I had done. When that changed for me, I realized God loves me anyways and He loves us all, no matter what. So now, it’s so important for me to let anybody, all people, know that.

Because she recognized God’s immensity in her life, Mary sought to spread God’s expansive love to others, especially those who she saw needed it most. Mary made it clear how she could not imagine herself without engaging in this ministry. These experiences have been instrumental in forming her awareness and ability to notice the ways God worked in her life.

**Joseph**

Joseph is an 84-year-old Vietnamese man who has been volunteering in detention ministry for 22 years. Prior to the faith sharing sessions, Joseph informed me that he was more fluent in Vietnamese, but knows enough English to have our conversations entirely in English. He asked me to correct any
grammatical errors when composing this dissertation. As part of the member-checking process, I collaborated with Joseph to review his quotes used in this chapter in efforts to honor his experiences.

Joseph described himself as a husband, father, grandfather, and great grandfather. Joseph was born in Vietnam and escaped his home country as a refugee in 1980 after the war, eventually coming to the United States in 1981. Joseph described the period of his life before and after his settlement in the United States being entrenched with war:

I come from an undeveloped country and I now live in the United States. I suffered a lot living during the wartime. When I was still young, I went to school, but it was not a peaceful life. Everyday was about the war and there was news about the war all the time. Bad news. I had to join the army because they had to draft for the war. The communists invaded South Vietnam and I was kept in jail for three years. After I left and came to the United States, I was involved in an organization that looked for revenge. After some time, I realized that revenge is unhopeful and it’s not real. So I changed my mind and did not want to be involved and be part of any earthly activity. I went back to my origins, which was to go back to my religion.

Joseph experienced incarceration during wartime in Vietnam. He held onto anger and hurt even after coming to the United States, but realized that he did not want to harbor further resentment.

Joseph shared that he spent three years of his life incarcerated under the communist rule of Vietnam and he described his experiences as a prisoner:

When I was in communist jail, I felt like an animal. I had to look for food. I was very hungry and had nothing. There was no hope at all. We were isolated in a jungle with no communication. Nothing. Just trees and a jungle. There was no information from the outside,
from family, or anyone. At that time, I didn’t have any hope. I didn’t know what was going to happen tomorrow or the next day. It was very difficult for me at the time.

Joseph’s time in prison influenced his perceptions of the prison system in the United States after seeing the detention facilities. He commented on the stark differences from his personal experiences in Vietnam compared to what he sees while volunteering:

My first impression surprised me. When I entered the facility, I thought, “Oh wow.” They live so nicely. The buildings are so nice and everything is organized. It looks like they are enjoying a resort because the buildings and everything is clean and organized, just like a hotel. So it surprised me. And when I met the inmates, they were young people. They looked smart and handsome too. So I was surprised at why these guys are prisoners. I couldn’t imagine.

Joseph’s experiences of being incarcerated in Vietnam framed his understanding that the prison system in the United States was not as bad as he initially thought. Joseph further elaborated:

When I was imprisoned in Vietnam, [the communists] called it a re-education camp. But it’s worse than jail. When I came here and saw the prison system, it’s very good. Sometimes, I think if I was kept like them, I would have a lot of time to meditate and think. I think the physical aspect is very comfortable. So I think that it is good to compare this system to my country.

His personal experiences with incarceration was part of his inspiration to become a volunteer in detention ministry.

Joseph specifically mentioned how he wished that he had the opportunity to have volunteers visit him while he was incarcerated in Vietnam. He believed that he can uniquely relate to those experiencing incarceration.
I have been a prisoner under the communists. I know how the prisoners are feeling...I felt how
good it was for someone to come talk with me. So I want to share how this affected me. I want
to share my knowledge and faith with them...I like that [the prisons] allow volunteers to come
share about faith.

Currently, Joseph serves within the adult facilities conducting bible studies. Joseph acknowledged that
he has grown and improved over the years of his volunteering.

When he first began volunteering, Joseph was part of the Vietnamese branch within the
ministry. Today, there are not as many adult inmates who require only Vietnamese interpretation, so
Joseph primarily conducts his services in English. Joseph described how this was very difficult for him.
Despite the language barriers, he would practice his English in order to adequately provide services to
the adult prison population:

After I was transferred to the English speaking services, it was very hard. I had to spend a lot of
time to prepare...When I know my English is not good before coming in to serve, I spend a lot
of time trying to read and compose my presentation to them because my understanding of
religion is in Vietnamese. For me, explaining in English is very hard. I think that with my accent
in English, the adults can’t understand anything. For me, it was because of God. Sometimes
when they speak, I cannot understand the whole thing. I think that it’s the same when I speak.
They do not get it, but the Holy Spirit inspires them and helps me to understand them. And
that’s why I continue to serve.

For Joseph, his detention ministry experience involved an added layer of preparing and practicing his
English in order to better serve his participants. I was amazed at Joseph’s persistence and desire to
continue serving even with this barrier. This can be explained by his love for God and his deep faith. As a retiree, Joseph noted that most of his time now is spent volunteering and serving various ministries:

> When I was young, I was already involved in religious life. I was in a seminary and I liked learning about my faith. I think that is the seed God already put in my mind. Now, ministry is an opportunity for me to live my faith. I am old now. I am retired and I don’t have to work. My life now is going to church and working for God...I thank God for this. I like this work and I hope I can do it for long. I think I will do this until the end of my life.

He shared about his joy in volunteering and dedicating the remainder of his life in service to God. Joseph talked about how participating in the current study was another opportunity for him to offer his time and efforts for God.

**Evangelizer and Encourager**

Throughout the interview sessions with Joseph, I was reminded of my own grandfather, who also escaped Vietnam as a refugee. Moreover, I really look up to Joseph and aspire to be as faithful as him when I am his age. The interview sessions with Joseph took place at local churches; we sat outside of the church near gardens and religious statues/artwork. Joseph exuded an aura of humility and his dedication to his faith and service even in his old age was truly inspiring for me. One of the prominent themes throughout Joseph’s responses was his value to continually evangelize, or share the message of God. After coming to the United States, Joseph joined a Vietnamese Catholic organization that emphasized the value of prayer and evangelization: “the real role of [the organization] is to evangelize, to bring the gospel to all, to have people come back to God.” Joseph is currently the president of the
Vietnamese branch of this organization and his involvement in this group ultimately formed his spirituality.

Joseph’s involvement in this ministry shaped his life to emphasize the importance of evangelizing the faith. When Joseph received the recruitment email for this study, he believed it was an opportunity for him to spread awareness of the detention ministry:

It’s a surprise that somebody wanted to study about this. Because I like this ministry, I want to share it with others...my English is not good English, but I have enough words to say. I want to participate in this study because I want to spread the word about this ministry. I am happy to join this study.

Joseph embodied evangelization through his time and dedication to the ministry. He viewed his service as a way of spreading the faith to others:

I think that this ministry is a very good opportunity for me to share with the inmates because if I wanted to have these discussions with people outside, I don’t think they would want to hear the teachings about Jesus, even in my own family. When I come to jail, they open my heart because they are listening. They come to the service and they want to listen. I say to God, “I don’t know much, but at least they want to hear you.” I feel happy.

Joseph shared how his ability to evangelize relied on his faith in God: “I feel good to contribute to the spreading of the gospel. I don’t have any talent. I don’t have the talent to convince [the participants]. God does it. And I trust in God one hundred percent.”

Lastly, Joseph hoped to share this ministry to others who may be interested in becoming a volunteer:
I think that this ministry is good. I want to share it to others and not keep it to myself. I can spread the gospel in this environment. When I recruited one person to the ministry, she did not stay long and quit. Others who know I go into the jails, they get curious about what I do and what the system is like there. I let them know that we share the teachings of Jesus to them...This ministry requires commitment so it is hard sometimes for people.

Joseph emanated the importance of spreading faith to all those around him. Through his ministries at his parish and with detention ministry, Joseph used any opportunity he had to let others know more about God.

Another prevalent theme that pertained to Joseph’s experience of serving in detention ministry was how he *always encouraged* the adult inmates to acknowledge their misdoings, improve themselves, and change their ways:

They recognized that they did something wrong. So I say to them, “It’s normal, don’t worry because I fall too. Remember when you learned to walk? How many times did you fall? When you start riding a bike, you can’t ride fast right away. That is normal. Don’t worry. The past is already in the past. You committed something and it’s already done. But from now on, and for the rest of the future, it is in your hands. You can change and you can rebuild your life. That is normal.

For Joseph, it was important to share positive encouragement and advice to his participants.

Throughout our faith sharings, Joseph presented like a wise sage who was already well respected due to his old age and life experiences. I imagined that his participants felt the same presence.

Joseph gave examples of the conversations he would have during his services:
I encourage them to keep looking at themselves. I encourage them because when you commit a crime, you don’t think about it and need to get out of that. “If you hear me, then hear my advice before you do something bad...I don’t think that you are a prisoner. You have faults, but it’s normal. Try to do good and you will not be a prisoner forever.” I encourage them and they feel very happy about that.

Not only did Joseph offer advice from his own wisdom, he also referred back to scripture and faith as a source of encouragement:

“Oh, you come back again for the second time? It’s okay. Jesus forgives not seven, but 77 times. So don’t worry. The most important thing is that you want to change. Do no more bad. This is not a good place for you.” I remind them about their family and relatives and I tell them, “You will miss your family, your relatives, and outside activities. Know the value of the presents God has given you. Because you miss them now, you will appreciate them more. When you are out, treat your family and relatives like you treat me here.”

Part of Joseph’s rationale behind his advice is to remind the participants of their humanity. He encouraged them to think about their family members and loved ones, in hopes that it would help them improve their ways.

Not only did he remind his participants of their relationships, he also shared a selfless compassion during his services. Joseph’s encouragement stemmed from his great love for those he served:

I share with you from the bottom of my heart. I love you and I regret what you already did. I think that you lost your opportunities and did not think before doing. In the bottom of my
heart, I believe that you did not understand before you [committed crime]. I come here to
wake you up, to make you wake up. Real life is different than what you think. We live life in a
community.

Joseph believed that it was important to help his participants realize their full potential in life. He
acknowledged that their experiences with the prison system are temporary and encouraged them to live
better lives. His experiences of being a detention ministry volunteer ultimately highlighted the
dependence on his faith and his belief that the Word of God needs to be spread. When sharing about
his personal history and his current experiences, Joseph conveyed a great deal of empathy as well as his
love for humankind.

**Dymphna**

“We have been blessed with so much, and certainly, those are all gifts from God. The
responsibility that goes with that is vital... We all do our part. We all find our mission,” shared
Dymphna, a 65-year-old Hispanic woman who has been volunteering with Catholic detention
ministry for 10 years. Prior to becoming a volunteer, Dymphna described her personal formation as
one filled with experiences working in educational spaces. Dymphna worked as a paraeducator for over
20 years in public schools. Her role included working with students who required more academic
interventions in the areas of mathematics and reading. She shared how her school district served a
substantial population of immigrant families, so she worked with many students where English was a
second language. Additionally, Dymphna discussed how there was a gang influence among her
students. Her school district collaborated with a gang intervention program, where Dymphna was able
to directly support students by “giving them the opportunity to share with an adult who would just sit, talk with them, and look them in the eyes.”

In addition to working in education, Dymphna volunteered at her local church parish by teaching catechism, serving in youth ministry, and teaching adult religious education. After Dymphna left her job with the school district, she began working at her local parish as the administrator over the faith formation program. Today, Dymphna currently serves the food pantry and is part of a ministry that advocates for respecting human life. Dymphna’s wide range of experiences working with various youth and adult populations have helped her in her current position as a detention ministry volunteer.

In 2008, Dymphna and her family experienced a significant event in their lives: the incarceration of her brother. This incident was pivotal for her personal life as well as her faith life. Dymphna reflected on how her brother’s incarceration and her experiences of helping him through his situation led her to become a detention ministry volunteer:

My brother was incarcerated, which was not along our family's way. We didn’t have issues. He went through a very dark time and he made some bad choices, so he served time in prison. It became a huge conversion story for him. Journeying along with him through that conversion story and also with the people that he touched and affected was huge. It was a turning point in all of our lives and our faith journey: the surrender and trust in God that puts you at a whole different level when you’re brought to your knees like that...Helping my brother with all that he was going through and also supporting some of his fellow inmates was what led me to the path of detention ministry on a personal level.
Dymphna’s relationship with her brother as well as her interactions with those impacted by the juvenile justice system influenced her faith and brought her closer to God. This unique experience sparked her desire to further help those who have been incarcerated.

Dymphna shared how the opportunity to volunteer in Catholic detention ministry came when her friends had planned retreats in the juvenile facilities for the ministry. They invited Dymphna to help because there was a need for more volunteers. During the application process to become a volunteer, Dymphna ran into barriers because her brother was incarcerated. Without the advocacy of the detention ministry director, she did not think she would have been qualified to become a volunteer. When she first began volunteering, she described how it was not too shocking or surprising for her because of her experiences with her brother. Since then, Dymphna has primarily been conducting bible studies and one-on-one visits for youth within the juvenile facilities. When asked about the experiences she enjoyed, Dymphna shared that she particularly found the ministry’s special events memorable: sharing Thanksgiving dinner, hosting movie nights, facilitating Easter prayer services, and leading weekend retreats.

**Through the Lens of Faith and Education**

Throughout my interview conversations with Dymphna, I appreciated her awareness of the difficulties the youth experienced. It was apparent that her awareness was formed by her prior experiences of working in education with students who had various difficulties. During our faith sharings, Dymphna mentioned often about the importance of education for children. Moreover, what resonated most from Dymphna’s sharings was her affinity for both education and faith as means to a fuller life. This individual theme that arose from our conversations truly encompassed the
dissertation’s overarching motifs of pedagogy and faith. Dymphna has possessed a value for education since she was young. Dymphna shared,

I have always been interested in education from the time I was young. As early as I could, I got involved with faith formation at my local parish. I would do that as an aide. Faith and education have always been prime goals for me and are things that I’ve enjoyed.

For her, both faith and education were mutually connected aspects of her life.

Dymphna had an aptness for serving in educational spaces. When talking about her prior experiences working in a public school, Dymphna saw education as a means of preventing negative outcomes:

One of the reasons I transferred from the high school to elementary school [in my district] was because I was thinking I can make a difference in the younger lives of children. It’s so they don’t have to become institutionalized because we know [the impact] of early intervention.

In particular, Dymphna referenced how education can prevent children from interacting with the justice system. She believed that youth who were engaged in their schooling during early childhood were more likely to be well-adjusted. Furthermore, she asserted that education can influence the lives of all people, no matter their circumstances. Dymphna felt that those who are incarcerated should seize any educational opportunity that is available:

For so many of the adult inmates, nothing is required of them. They can sit around and watch T.V. all day long if they choose to. At least the youth have to attend classes. They have to go to school. But for a lot of the adults, it’s just buying time. All they’re doing is spending their time.
They’re not taking advantage of what’s offered. I don’t even think they’re encouraged to participate, so that makes it all the worse.

In some of the facilities where Dymphna volunteers, she observed how there were various programs offered. Because she believed in the value of education, she wished for all those who are incarcerated to utilize or attend any programming that would help with skill development or self-growth.

For those she encountered, Dymphna wondered about their relationship or perception of education. During our conversations, Dymphna’s awareness and understanding of the difficult realities of her participants was framed by her perceptions of their educational levels:

You can just tell from their level of education, from their stories, from what they share, that it’s been a difficult life for them. Some of them want so much: to do well. And they’re disappointed in themselves. Of course, those are the ones that you know will probably progress a lot easier or at least have a path. And then for some—God love them—whether it’s the drugs, or ADHD, or special needs, we’re just there for them. We meet them where they’re at and that’s all we can do.

When discussing the realities of these youth, she acknowledged risk factors such as having “low income” and “low education.” She knew that her position was to simply visit and encourage her participants.

Beyond these barriers, Dymphna recognized how her youths desired to do well in life. She did not want to judge based on perceived educational levels. Sharing her understanding of why youth commit crimes or harm others, she stated,
That’s not innate behavior. As much as we’d like to think it is, when you think of their environment, nobody is really there. That goes back to teaching them right from wrong. Learning right from wrong is the dignity of a person, first and foremost. When you violate that, it is wrong, even beyond the law. She recognized that many of her youths did not have a proper education, or that there was a lack of adults in the home to teach them. For Dymphna, teaching children morals, especially how to treat each other, was a fundamental factor in influencing their behaviors.

Dymphna spoke with great enthusiasm whenever she shared about her reflections on the collaboration of faith and education. Through her position of being a catechist and volunteer—being able to teach and minister through faith-based means—Dymphna was able to share her passions for both:

It’s wonderful to have the opportunities to share our own growth and journeys. It makes a difference...For me, it’s second nature: the combination of education and sharing and teaching, along with our faith, which is who we are. It wasn’t hard for me to make the decision [to become a volunteer].

Dympha compared her experiences of volunteering in detention ministry to that of a student-teacher dynamic: she held discussions that resonated a pedagogical spirit. She posed questions such as, “It almost makes you pause and think, okay, who’s the teacher here? What am I supposed to be learning from this?” She also mentioned, “You’re not just the lecturer...you ask questions, which is awesome because that is certainly one of the models that Jesus had for us. Not only did he tell parables and stories, but he would ask questions.” For Dymphna, being a Catholic detention ministry volunteer
highlighted how education and faith go hand in hand. Beyond her opportunities to teach and share, Dymphna ultimately learned from the incarcerated population.

**The Value of Consistency**

The last individual theme that arose from my interviews with Dymphna was how she valued consistency in her service. Dymphna believed that volunteers who visited consistently had a significant impact on their participants. Oftentimes, the lives of youth impacted by the justice system are riddled with uncertainty, ambiguity, and inconsistency. Most youth recidivate multiple times, moving among multiple facilities and units for varying amounts of time. Given the complexities of the justice system, youth often have no control or stability when serving their time. Dymphna described how it was important for her to have consistency in her services. She stated,

Consistency makes a big difference. With [the coordinator] being back, there’s more of that.

Before, it was like, “Okay, where are you sending me?” You didn’t know what units you were going to go to. [Consistency] helps because there are a lot of revolving doors for these juveniles.

Through listening to the experiences of her service attendees, Dymphna recognized the ambiguity of their circumstances. This awareness influenced her to strive to become a consistent volunteer to the best of her abilities.

Dymphna also discussed the importance of consistency in regards to the impact of the service as well as the relationships that are formed between the volunteers and their participants:

[The youth] don’t really know from week to week if a volunteer is going to show up. That’s where consistency comes into play. The last time I was there I had a group for bible study. They were a little edgier, a little tougher, and a little older. The toughest ones were saying, “Where
have you all been? Nobody came last week. Nobody came the week before. We don’t know when you’re going to come.” Oh my gosh, they really do miss us when we’re not there. And I didn’t even realize that it had been that long... Whatever the reasons, I think, “Wow, they do notice.”

By conducting her services consistently, Dymphna was able to develop closer relationships with her youths. These relationships also motivated Dymphna to show up every week. Moreover, Dymphna noted how the lack of consistency may contribute to why youth sometimes decline attending ministry services:

Maybe that’s why, earlier in the day, they think, “I’m going to go to bible study, but [the volunteer] is not even going to show up.” So they decline. That’s hard and it’s sad. Because you want to just be able to be there.

Dymphna felt a sense of sadness and guilt whenever she was unable to consistently serve because she knew how much it meant for her youths.

The incarcerated population is unique where the youth do not have much freedom or choice to maintain their relationships, therefore, Dymphna saw how the consistency of a volunteer’s visit held much more meaning. Lastly, Dymphna shared an instance of when she misjudged a volunteer, but realized that their consistency or relationship with their youths made an impact:

It’s part of the judging part of me, but there are some volunteers who seem unhappy, and I think, “Gosh, I hope you lighten up a little once you get in there and meet with whoever is in there.” Then I’ll go meet with the youth and they’ll tell me, “I haven’t seen so and so in awhile” or “She hasn’t come to visit me lately.” Well, you see, me being judgy. Obviously, they have a
relationship. There’s either a consistency or the youth look forward to seeing them. God is always working through all of this. That was a little slap in my face with that. But, you just want them to be ready and on for these kids, because that’s the least we can do for them.

Ultimately, Dymphna’s value of being a consistent volunteer came from her belief that these youth deserve and need it. Dymphna still saw these youth as children, despite their circumstances. If anything, this population required more consistent relationships and Dymphna wanted to offer herself in ways she could. From the faith sharing conversations, it was clear that her continual service stemmed from her love and passion for supporting students and youth over the years.

Paul

“There’s a lot of people in the world who have no clue about God and what life is really about, and will never have a chance. With a little bit of love and encouragement, their whole life could change,” claimed Paul, a 66-year-old Caucasian man who has been volunteering with Catholic detention ministry for the past nine years. A husband and a father to four children, Paul described his life as blessed:

Today, I am basically a very blessed ex-executive of a couple major companies. I have my own company and my formal job these days includes being an adjunct professor in a master’s program for engineering management. I teach strategic project management.

Despite Paul’s notable professions and experiences, he discussed how he came from humble beginnings:

I was born into a very poor family, in a dairy farm community. I was there all the way through high school before I got into college. No one in my family ever went to college. Most of them
did not graduate from high school. My parents were young out of the military and didn’t really have a lot of knowledge about parenting...But the one thing I had that a lot of people in [juvenile hall] do not have were parents with a strong faith in God. They expected the most from me...My first house was made from a barn. We had an outhouse. I carried jugs to the neighbors for water. We didn’t have much. I was excited every birthday because I got a new pair of sneakers.

Paul emphasized how having good parents was significant to his upbringing. He reflected on how he was raised by loving parents and how he sought to cultivate the same love for his own children.

Paul also shared about the temptations that he faced as a child. Particularly, Paul struggled with negative peer influences and the allure of joining a gang:

As I grew up, I got bigger. I was athletic. Even in dairy farm communities, there were gangs and I was being enticed into joining a gang and doing some bad things. Actually, a bunch of us went into a major store once and stole a bunch of stuff. I took things I didn’t even need, but just did it because we were all doing it at night. When I got home, I felt terrible.

This event was momentous for Paul. It sparked genuine thoughts, curiosity, and questions about his faith. Paul recalled early memories of having fears about death and how his encounter of God changed his mindset and lifestyle:

I had anxiety about death. Do we just die? What happens to us? I needed to know and when I found out about God through catechism classes, I was so excited. Basically, He’s been with me, in my heart ever since. That whole incident [the stealing] caused me to reflect on my life and what I wanted to do. I decided, right about then, when I was 14 or 15, “No, I am not going to
have friends. I’m just going to work hard at sports. I’m going to do good in my academics. I’m going to go to college.”

Since then, Paul was able to succeed educationally and he moved to Southern California, where he has resided since.

In regards to his personal faith, Paul talked about how he had a distaste for his faith throughout his early adulthood. Getting married early and working full time was what kept him busy during those years. He recognized his unhappiness and dissatisfaction with life at the time:

In high school, I was really tired of the Catholic Church. It was the days before Vatican II. We went to a parish where the priests had heavy Irish accents. You couldn’t understand a word they said. And not only that, all the readings were in Latin, while spoken to the altar. You never really learned anything. You went because you had to go. When I was in college, I decided it was not for me. So I stopped going… I got married very young. Too young. I had kids right away. I decided to go to school and get a master’s degree because I was in the peak of the baby boom population. I started out doing really well, but I was working endless hours. I was trying to do way too much and it didn’t do well for my marriage.

During this realization, Paul desired to find avenues to improve his overall life. He started reading more and this included reading the bible, where he started learning more about God and reconnecting with his faith:

I decided that I was going to figure out how to improve myself by reading books about how to win friends, influence people, and the power of positive thinking—all these books. For whatever reason, and I know now it was because God was watching over me, I read the bible from
beginning to the end. It was very easy to read and I read it within two months. It was just
entralling. After I was done, there were a lot of things I did not like about it because it was
criticizing me, but I couldn’t argue with anything.

Paul was moved by reading the bible and sought to have a deeper understanding of the scriptures. He
then decided to join a six-year non denominational bible study program from an invitation by his
coworker.

Paul’s renewed interest in his faith also led him to the darkest moment of his life. Paul shared
about the challenges he faced within his first marriage that eventually ended in a divorce:

I’m going back to church. I’m going to go back to my Catholic origins because I really
understand it and I wanted my kids to go to church. We would go to church and it turned out
that my wife, who was born and raised Catholic, was not really into church. We were separated
in our thinking and she would call me a Jesus freak. Church and bible study was something I
thought could keep me in my marriage because I knew things were going wrong, and the kids
were so young. I had something keeping me in my marriage, and it did work for awhile, but
there was a tipping point. Getting a divorce was probably the biggest disappointment in my
entire life. I’d always thought I was better than that. It broke my heart that I had to go through
that. It was almost like God hardened my heart. I couldn’t love my wife in a way a husband and
wife should be in love.

After experiencing this hardship, Paul eventually remarried and his current wife shares a strong faith
with him. He even underwent an 11-year process of obtaining an annulment in order to better serve in
the church. He considered becoming a deacon, but currently enjoys humbly serving in his community.
He volunteers at his home parish as an usher, Eucharistic minister, and has experience teaching teenagers through the confirmation program. With his desire for greater service, he came across an invitation at his parish to volunteer in detention ministry and has been serving in the juvenile facilities conducting bible studies, Communion services, sacramental preparation, and one-on-one visits.

**A Model of Love and Service**

Throughout the faith sharings with Paul, it was very apparent that he strived to be a good person in all aspects of his life and desired to share goodness with others. He truly possessed a *service-oriented heart*. When hearing and seeing the difficult realities of the youth he encountered, Paul acknowledged the ways in which he was fortunate and how his blessings continually inspired him to give back to those in need:

> I tell [the youth] I’m very blessed, but at the same time, because I’m blessed, I think I have a lot more work to do in my ministry and in my relationship with God. I think God expects more from me. It’s a funny thing. It’s almost harder to satisfy God. You have to be in a position where you think God’s happy with you when you have a lot.

Paul acknowledged having a social responsibility to help others who are not as fortunate. His generous orientation stemmed from his desire to satisfy God.

Recognizing his blessings and interacting with those who were less fortunate, Paul found more inspiration to continue helping others. He shared:

> I have to admit, to a degree, it was a guilt thing. I felt guilty about how much I had. Now, it’s not so much my guilt. It’s that there’s some people who need help. That I can help. I’ve seen
that I can help them. This is what God wants, right? You don’t get into this kind of ministry to
make money and you don’t get in this to buy your way to heaven.

Initially starving to serve God, Paul learned that volunteering in detention ministry grew to become an
integral part of how he wanted to live his life. He made sure to include serving others into his weekly
routine:

I rearranged my whole week. From Saturday night to after church on Sunday is my sabbath. My
Sunday morning is dedicated to this ministry and then my Sunday night is church stuff. Every
day of the week, I’m reading the mass. I pray everyday. I do it because I need to do it for myself.

I’m doing it to satisfy God as much as I need it for my own survival.

Paul’s faith inspired him to live more purposefully. Part of that purpose includes helping those around
him. He also noted:

I truly believe that we cannot get direct help from angels. The only direct help we can get is
from each other. God has set it up that way...So we, you and I, we’re the ones that can help the
people. We gotta do it. It’s not even an option for me not to do this. It’s too much a part of me
now.

While sharing his testimony, there were moments when Paul cried from the deep emotions and passion
he felt. I saw that Paul’s service-oriented heart radiated a desire to love and help others, which I believed
was ultimately a reflection of the immensity of God’s love.

In addition to helping others, Paul found it important to serve as a good example to children.

From our conversations, another theme that emerged was how Paul believed in the importance of being
and having a positive male role model. Paul primarily interacted with boys during his ministry services.

When Paul first began volunteering, he instantly noticed the need for more male volunteers:

The first day I came into juvenile hall, I walked into the little volunteer office, and there was the coordinator and four other women. They said that I would be the role model. That’s what these boys need, but there were mostly women [volunteers] and I didn’t even realize that.

When ministering to the boys in prison, Paul shared how he would inquire about their male role models:

I ask the boys, “Do you have any males in your life that you talk to or get any advice from?” I have had only one say, “Yes, my uncle,” but none of them have male role models...They don’t even know a role model. Many of them unfortunately don’t have a father in their life. They might have an uncle or a brother, but very few have male role models...I think for young men in particular, you need that.

Paul expressed a similar sentiment in another portion of our faith sharing:

I learned that there’s a really strong need, a very important need for male role models. The impact you can have on these young minds: by sharing information that they’ve never even thought of or never been exposed to. And for them to see that you’re not some weirdo or anything. You never know how that impacts them. They can change.

For Paul, he believed that having loving and responsible adults was crucial for children.

For boys in particular, Paul felt that the ones who struggled the most in juvenile hall often lacked a positive male figure in their lives. Paul strived to be a positive role model through his services as a volunteer. When asked how the youth viewed him, Paul described:
I’m this old guy who comes in and tells them about God. Who has a passion for God. That isn’t scared, isn’t ashamed of religion, and can probably hold his own in the hood, in the streets. I hope they think that I’m not a wimpy-ass guy who just reads the bible and is scared of my own shadow. No, I don’t want to be that person. I want to be a normal person who shows them that there’s a different way of living and why...Maybe I’m like the father they wish they had or the uncle they wish they had.

Paul’s desire to be a loving male role-model spoke to the relationality that the detention ministry experience encompasses. Paul believed that by fostering positive relationships with his participants, he was able to better share God’s presence in hopes to help.

The last individual theme that arose from our conversations highlighted Paul’s value of love. In particular, Paul’s dialogue revealed that he often promoted others to love more. Paul described how he does not hesitate to share a smile to all those around him, hoping that this love can spread onto others:

It’s a different side of us that comes out when we smile. It’s a loving side. It’s unconditional love and God wanting it. I’ve gone through figuring out who all the people are that I didn’t like and going to apologize to them. And telling them how much I love them. It’s hard with some people. But it’s what God wants us to do: he really wants us to love each other. We’re complete strangers, but we’re all brothers and sisters. I tell the kids that we’re all brothers and sisters. We need to love each other. That’s what it’s all about.

When serving the youths, Paul believed that they had the potential to contribute to a more loving world. Paul’s constant encouragement to love stemmed from his faith and God’s greater calling for love:
The one thing I focus on probably more than anything is trying to get them to understand what love really means. That’s what it’s all about: if we could love everybody; if we can really look at everybody as if they’re all our brothers and sisters. God wants us to love each other. How can we do that? How can we really love each other? If we could, we would be perfect in God’s eyes. That’s the ideal... What’s the most important of all the commandments? Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. But the big thing is to love your neighbor as yourself. Then all the other commandments are underneath. So it’s all love. It’s every bit, every commandment is targeting love. And if they don’t have love in their heart, they won’t know how they can love.

He sought to use his volunteering experiences to contribute to the larger purpose of promoting love.

Paul believed that if he could encourage others to love more, then he was ultimately making the world a better place. Paul’s testimonies of his detention ministry experiences exemplified this value. He shared a specific interaction he had with one youth:

This one kid, probably the worst kid at [the facility] was in one group I was meeting with. We were talking about something and I said, “I want you to step out of your comfort zone and really show some love to someone that needs it in this facility this week. Then, I want you to tell me how it goes.” And this one kid, who the guards say is the absolute worst, comes to me later on and says, “I did it.” They listen, and they want you to know that they’re improving. Who else cares in their world? I think this is definitely a ministry that can change the world and change people.
Paul believed in the transformative power of love. His belief points back to his assured faith in God. From my faith sharings with Paul, I truly felt the richness of his life. During our conversations, Paul exuded a spirit of generosity of not only his time, but his love, wisdom, and the life lessons he has learned over the years.

Monica

“It’s an incredible thing: the more you trust in God and the more you let God guide you, the more things will fall into place. Things are going to be okay,” reflected Monica, a Vietnamese 52-year-old woman who has been volunteering with Catholic detention ministry for approximately 29 years. When asked to describe herself, Monica shared that she was an immigrant from Vietnam and currently is a wife and mother to one daughter. Monica talked about how she possessed close relationships with her parents and siblings, which served as a steady foundation of love for her:

I grew up in a very tight knit family. When my dad passed away 17 years ago, for me and my siblings, our mom became the number one priority. My dad always loved us. My dad would take my mom grocery shopping every Sunday and every weekend. Mine and my siblings’ families would always gather. All my nieces and nephews would be there. They always liked coming home to grandpa and grandma, who would feed them anything; whatever they liked. That was a seed that God gave us. Nowadays, since both my parents passed away, we had to step up and cook for the family gatherings. Some of us are working so it’s harder. We now gather once a month. My siblings and I learned that now our parents have passed away, we only have each other. We appreciate the bonding time and we all really appreciate one another.
Her sense of faith, love, and security came from having a close and supportive relationship with her family members.

Monica specifically talked about her parents and how they lived their lives. She discussed how her value of helping was shaped by her parents’ example:

I’m very fortunate that I was born and raised by my parents. Even though each family has their own conflicts, my parents were very religious, especially my mom. Even though she had a different religion, I admired her. My mom was Buddhist and she embraced Vietnamese culture. Buddhist teachings are all about doing good. I learned a lot from her by seeing her do good deeds and helping others. Some Vietnamese people are not into volunteering for free and my mom told me that all the time. She helped the poor and she would do other things. I would follow her, but in a different way. I served differently and she understood that. I’m really thankful that she understood. I was finding my own identity, but at the end of the day, it’s all the same—helping. I followed the example of my parents.

Monica dedicates her life to volunteering in different capacities. Currently, she is part of an organization that focuses on feeding the homeless. Her organization also has international projects such as partnering with groups in Vietnam and Thailand to help feed the poor. Additionally, she volunteers to teach Vietnamese language classes to children on the weekends.

In regards to Catholic detention ministry, Monica was first introduced to become a volunteer right after graduating college. At the time, she joined a Vietnamese Catholic young adult group that focused on service missions such as feeding the homeless, visiting the imprisoned, and visiting the elderly. The group helped bring Vietnamese volunteers to the diocese’ detention ministry, where there
was a need to serve Vietnamese-speaking populations within the detention facilities. Monica recalled her early years of volunteering with her young adult group and her experiences within the ministry:

The group would tell us of the different things they do. I tried to volunteer in all three. I quickly realized that I could not do all three at the same time because of conflicts. Because your spirit has to be cheerful to visit the jails, that’s what I did. I visited the juvenile facilities. After serving for a while, there were more demands from the ministry. We started planning retreats for the juveniles. That was a long time ago, but now we don’t do it anymore. I spent ten years serving the juveniles. The kids grew up and they went to the adult jails. So me and the other volunteers transitioned to the adult detention ministry.

When Monica first joined the Catholic detention ministry, she served with the Vietnamese speaking branch. She now volunteers in adult facilities serving anybody seeking Communion services. She has been volunteering for approximately 29 years, with some breaks due to various reasons such as the birth of her daughter and the COVID-19 pandemic. Her original Vietnamese young adult group disbanded years ago and today, Monica is the only member from that group who continues to volunteer with detention ministry.

A Three-Decade Journey of Faith

“When you learn and you gain the faith to allow God to use you for whatever He needs, that’s it.” Upon my initial encounter with Monica’s interest to participate in the current study, her number of years as a volunteer along with her age puzzled me: she has been volunteering with Catholic detention ministry for more than half her life. Among my collaborators in this dissertation, Monica has the most years of volunteering experience. Throughout our faith sharings, an individual theme that
emerged from Monica’s sharings was her *journey of faith* coinciding with her life journey into and through adulthood. She oftentimes shared about how her personal faith, views, and *reliance on God* transformed over the course of her volunteering years. These two individual themes highlighted Monica’s volunteering experiences.

When asked how Monica was able to sustain being a volunteer for so long, Monica described how God was the source of her strength and inspiration:

> God helped me by giving me strength. To tell you the truth, when you ask me how I lasted this long, it’s because I now see what God meant when he said to go visit the people in jail. God wanted to help me by changing and converting myself before I can actually bring the good news to others. What other people don’t realize is that Jesus meant for us to enhance ourselves, give ourselves up, and change ourselves first. You can’t change others, so I gave up wanting to change others for a long time already.

Monica reflected on how her years of volunteering ultimately formed her. She also prioritized the importance of improving herself. Whether it included taking more classes or venturing into different ministries, Monica opened herself to personal growth. Her openness grew from what she felt was God’s call for her.

Even when receiving compliments from others for her years of service, Monica pointed to God as her reason:

> Other people tell me, “You have a special skill” and all this and that. I don’t think so. I know that it is because I gained trust in God and because of my faith. I can only speak for myself. I can’t say to others that if they don’t do this work, that they wouldn’t get the same grace. For
me personally, because of what I’m doing, it helps me and my faith...But since I’ve been doing this for so long, I feel like anybody can do it.

Monica exuded humility because she did not let her decades of service determine her worth, rather she felt that she was like anybody else who chose to volunteer for God. Along the years of volunteering, Monica was required to take and renew certification classes through the diocese, which she disliked doing at first. She acknowledged how her continual formation and training also influenced her view of detention ministry in addition to her direct experiences. Over time, she realized the necessity to form herself in order to better serve others:

When they told us the requirements for taking classes to get your basic certification, I was already hating the idea. I was like, “Why? Is my time not worth enough already?” I later prayed on it and pondered and God just told me, “Go take the class.” After taking some classes, I realized how the bible is so much more than I thought. There is so much to learn and for me, my service became a way of God shaping me and changing me. His encouragement to take the classes made me realize that I needed it for myself. Because, if you go into jail and if you don’t learn, do your readings, or even read the Sunday gospels, then you don’t have anything to offer the inmates. I just can’t go in there empty handed.

Over the years of volunteering, Monica continued to gain new experiences as well as new training. She believed that this was God’s doing to continually mold her to not only become a better volunteer, but to become a better person.
Despite her years of service, Monica did not believe that she was the cause for any change or transformation in her participants. When asked about whether she or the ministry had an influence on those who attended the services, Monica pointed out that inspiring change ultimately came from God:

I don’t believe that any of us, all of the volunteers here, can see whether we touched their lives or say that we changed them completely. We don’t get the chance to talk to the adults once they’re released, so we don’t know. I only remember a handful of individuals who I saw some changes, but really, not many. At the beginning [of my volunteering], yes, I was all about making an impact or change. But really, how much do we allow God to use us? Because He can see much better than I can. So when I go in [the facility], I pray and tell the Holy Spirit that I am coming. I want to do good and all those things, but after these many years, I can truly say that conversion is not what the ministry is about...Trust God that he will use you in the right ways to help others.

Monica’s reliance on God grew over the years of her volunteering. She initially volunteered with hopes to make changes and to make a difference. In time, she realized that creating change in others was the work of God. She understood that she only needed to allow God to use her for His work.

Monica further shared how the detention ministry has personally influenced her overarching approach to faith and life over the years:

I can’t say that I have any particular experience that has helped me be more humble, and to be able to pray more and to trust in the Lord. [This ministry] has definitely shaped me by having me pray more. 10 years ago, I did not really pray the rosary. It took me 10 years to start praying the rosary before I can share with the inmates, “Hey, praying the rosary will help you.” So this
ministry transformed me to be more mature in my faith and of course it is with God’s help. It’s an incredible thing: the more you trust in God and the more you let God guide you, the more things will fall into place. Things are going to be okay.”

Finally, through our conversations, Monica expressed her joy of serving in this capacity. In particular, what she enjoyed most was being able to bring Communion to those who desired it in prison: “I’m so happy when I am able to go to a priest, ask for Communion, and bring it to them; those who are ready and open to receiving Communion. That brings the most enjoyment to me.” Monica’s volunteering experience was unique in a sense that she grew up alongside the ministry. Her services over the years ultimately shaped her faith and values. Moreover, it helped her gain a greater sense of God’s movement in her life, and she felt a joy in bringing His presence to those impacted by the justice system. Today, Monica continues to do Communion service every Sunday morning for the adult facilities and hopes that there will be more volunteers who can help bring God to the prison population.

Pio

“When you try to do your best—not because of you, but because of Him—people get touched by the Holy Spirit,” said Pio, a 65-year-old Mexican man who has been volunteering with Catholic detention ministry for the past 18 years. Pio described himself to be a husband of 42 years and a father to three children. Pio dedicates a lot of his time to volunteering at his local parish and the detention ministry. Throughout our faith sharings, Pio primarily discussed his life in relation to his Catholic faith and service. Prior to his rich involvement in his faith, Pio noted that although he was born Catholic, he did not truly practice his religion.
Because of his wife’s faith, prayers, and invitation to volunteer at his local parish, Pio began his newfound faith in action:

My wife started serving at church when she took our kids to have them prepare for their first Communion. She started to volunteer there and she asked me to help on retreats. I said, “No, no, no, you go ahead and go. I am going to stay home.” She didn’t mind and went by herself. She didn’t tell me until recently, that she was praying for me the whole time...It was after a year of her inviting me that I decided to join her. I started off only helping a little bit. I would go and help for the last 20 or 30 minutes of an event. Then I started to see that I liked it. So I eventually started serving and we both were serving our community. She was preparing the little kids to receive their first Communion while I was preparing the parents to help their children.

Pio recognized how the initial invitation from his wife to volunteer has grown into his further involvement with multiple groups at his parish. Today, Pio currently volunteers as a Eucharistic minister, a Mass lector, and a catechist for parents and godparents prior to their children receiving the sacraments. Pio also holds a leadership position of being in charge of preparing and organizing the Mass lectors at his parish. Despite Pio’s numerous engagements, he shared how he does not want to be overly involved because it is time consuming. Yet, he believed that in all his works, as long as he put in the preparation and effort, “God will do the rest.”

In regards to his time with Catholic detention ministry, Pio declined the first invitation by one of the deacons at his parish. He shared how there were multiple invitations to become a detention ministry volunteer and it was not until the fifth invite when he accepted to be a volunteer. At first, he...
consulted with his wife, and she discouraged him from taking on another responsibility given all that he already did for the church:

I was invited to help the jails 18 years ago. When I told my wife about their invitation, she told me, “No, you already have plenty to do at the church, so I don’t want you to be involved in something else.” Later on, I was invited again and they asked me to help just once a month. I told them to let me ask my wife. Again, she said, “I told you, no. You do a lot for the church. We need more time for us and for the kids.”

Despite Pio’s declinations, he was asked a few more times to help. He shared how the multiple invitations must have been a greater calling from God and after the fifth time, he decided to become a volunteer. He was able to balance his responsibilities to his family as well as his responsibilities at his parish.

When Pio first began volunteering, he noticed that the detention facilities were not like what he saw in the movies. He was pleasantly surprised that those who attended his services were respectful. Pio emphasized how he put forth great effort in preparing himself for the services: taking classes through the diocese, reviewing over the scripture readings, praying, and reminding himself to trust in God.

I like to first pray and I try to be simple. I try to be myself so I don’t have to be anything that I’m not...If you trust God, He will help you. We do our 1% and he is going to do the 99%.

Pio also commented how he has taken catechism classes which he feels has prepared him to serve in this ministry:
I went to take classes with the diocese. There were classes you had to take for four years. You're taught about Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and Mother Mary. In the four years, they teach you a lot even about the history of the Church. I feel like all these trainings are what God gave me to prepare myself so He can send me to do His work. Honestly, I was scared at first to do His work.

He recalled a moment where he felt that he was able to put into practice the things he learned from his courses:

> During my first service, I saw all the people, like 100 or 80, and I saw that most of them paid attention to me and what I was saying. Some of them were crying and so I thought to myself, “I think God sent me here so I can practice what He’s given to me.”

It was evident that Pio took pride in being educated in his faith. He shared how he did not receive a formal education after third grade in Mexico. Therefore, he attributes his knowledge and wisdom to God who has been his teacher. Pio’s reliance on God and his understanding of his faith were apparent throughout our conversations. He expressed his joy and sense of fulfillment in being able to serve in detention ministry. Pio currently volunteers in both the adult and juvenile facilities, conducting communion services and sacramental preparation for his participants.

**An Instrument for Christ**

My faith sharings with Pio focused much more on the faith and spiritual aspects of being a detention ministry volunteer compared to my conversations with the other collaborators. Each of Pio’s responses was tied to his faith and understanding of God’s presence in his life. A prominent individual theme that arose from our conversations was Pio’s assertion that he was an instrument of God. He
would tell his participants that he was merely a tool for God’s works: “I like to serve you guys because when I do that, I can see that Jesus is using me to talk to you. It’s not me. I’m only an instrument.” The metaphor of being an instrument for God is a popular Catholic image that comes from St. Francis of Assisi. Pio was clearly well-versed in his faith and used the vocabulary of his religion to describe his experiences as a volunteer. His mentioning of being an instrument wove throughout his sharings:

When you are prepared to be an instrument, the Holy Spirit will answer for you. It is mentioned in the scriptures. “Do not worry how you will answer. I will answer for you.” I believe that God answers for me...When you prepare yourself enough to be a good instrument, He’s going to do the job for you.

He equated being a volunteer with being God’s tool to do His work. This image framed how he approached his services with his participants.

Pio consciously reminded himself to not lean on his own knowledge and to attempt to see as God sees. When describing the population he served, he acknowledged that he did not fully understand their needs, but that his role was to simply allow God to use him:

Not everyone needs the same advice. They need a different way of doing things. We don’t know their needs, but the Holy Spirit knows. It’s not what we think, it’s what He knows they need.

If you prepare yourself, your 1%, He will do the rest. You just prepare and get ready to be a good instrument, practicing the way that He’s telling us.

Over Pio’s years of serving in detention ministry and his other ministries, he developed a greater reliance on God that was pronounced through our dialogue. Pio sought to attribute all his works to God, with God, and for God.
By sharing his specific experiences and memories with the individuals he has met over the years, Pio pointed to how his approach has been fruitful. He shared a conversation he had with the ministry coordinator:

The coordinator asked me once, “How do you do it? You’re the only one who a lot of people want to come to.” I think it’s because I let myself be guided by the Holy Spirit and that is my focus. When I’m there, I’m only an instrument. It’s not Pio, it’s the Holy Spirit talking. I believe that if it was me, then maybe nothing good would come out.

Because Pio consistently used the word “instrument” to describe himself and his experiences in the context of detention ministry, this became an individual theme unique to Pio. His efforts to be an instrument for God closely ties to the overarching theme of humility that will be further explained in the next chapter.

“I thank God because He gave me the gift of preaching.” Another noteworthy theme that came from my faith sharings with Pio was how preaching was prevalent in his experiences. Not only did Pio mention “preaching” multiple times throughout our conversations, the nature of our dialogue felt like a sermon where I was a listener. Pio shared with me his wisdoms regarding his understanding and belief of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and Virgin Mary. The following quote was an example of Pio’s wisdom shared with me in regards to volunteering for God:

If human work is hard, can you imagine spiritual work? It’s harder. That’s why we need to pray first. I recommend you one thing. Pray the rosary. Pray the rosary and talk to our Mother [Mary]. When Jesus was dying on the cross, he looked at his disciples and said, “There is your mom.” And when he was looking at her [Mary], he said, “There is your son.” And if you are a
disciple of Jesus, she is your mom too. So talk to her and she will intercede for you and ask Jesus for what you need.

In this case, Pio shared a common Catholic devotion of praying with the Virgin Mary. Pio discussed how his ability to preach was essential to being a Christian who spreads the love and presence of God to others.

Pio shared a memory of one of his first experiences conducting communion services to a large group of adults:

As soon as they saw me, they started clapping. Then I started preaching to them. I saw that some of them were crying. During the service, some were telling me a little bit about their lives in the facilities. I remember praying really hard and telling myself, “They need this. They need us to come and bring them the good news. Not because it is us, but because it is the Word of God.”

Although the notion of preaching may give an aura of being proselytizing, Pio grounded himself in humility. Pio truly believed that his services were not only tied to God’s desire, but that God’s inspiration spoke through him. He aimed to remove himself and any personal ego from his volunteering: “When I go to serve, I don’t expect to change people. I just go in to give the good news and the rest is up to them. I say that I did my job, I planted the seed, and the rest is Yours.” Moreover, in addition to volunteering for others, Pio reflected on how his service mutually served him as well:

When I go to communion service on Sunday to preach, I am the first one to be touched. When I read the scripture passage, I realize that it’s for me first. So I tell my attendees that when I read the scriptures, I get healed because I am trying to live out the message myself.
Again, this individual theme can be possibly viewed as being coercive, but by listening to Pio's testimony, I truly felt his genuine intentions of bringing God to his attendees.

During his services, Pio focused on explaining and understanding his personal experiences of God. He differentiated preaching about God with knowing God:

When we go and preach, it’s easy to talk about God, but talking about God is different than knowing God. When you talk to Him, encounter Him, and listen to Him, you can know Him.

We love the miracles of the Lord, but we don’t know the Lord who does the miracles. So when you know Him and when you preach, you can say that Jesus is here.

For Pio, the experience of God was so great and he strived to bring God to all those around him. He frequently discussed how God loved all people and how God heals all kinds of pain and suffering. Overall, he shared that being a detention ministry volunteer was meaningful. He has continued to encourage others to use their abilities to serve God. Pio was asked by the coordinator to talk to others who were interested in becoming a volunteer. Pio offered,

I have been a volunteer in the juvenile and adult facilities for many years. It’s a good experience.

If God is telling you to do this, and you receive the gift of preaching, then you need to listen to Him. In my case, I was invited five times. On the fifth time, I knew that it was serious. He wanted me to go. So if you have any talents, you have to share them with others.

From my conversations with Pio, I felt his unwavering faith and immense love for all those around him. Not only did he talk about the ways in which he helped others, he graciously offered me his wisdom and prayers for my own endeavors.
Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a 66-year-old Caucasian woman who has been volunteering in Catholic detention ministry for the past seven years. When asked about her life prior to becoming a volunteer, she shared how she worked as a high school teacher for 35 years in a struggling neighborhood. Elizabeth felt that her experiences of teaching students helped prepare her for detention ministry:

I worked and lived in a difficult area. There would be gang fights all the time. I heard and knew the difficulties of my students. I had some very successful students and I'm always proud of them. I never hesitated to take in a kid who was getting thrown out of other classes, because there was always something to do to interest them...Students would come into my classroom, and I listened to their stories. That was ministry if you will, without being religious. I was just listening...Being a high school teacher was a precursor and God had a plan for me.

Elizabeth’s prior experiences of teaching in a marginalized community help ease her into detention ministry. She shared about how she would hear difficult stories of suffering or harsh realities that her participants experienced, but she would not be shocked or too bothered. Rather, she found the importance of offering a space where she simply listened.

Elizabeth is currently a chaplain within the adult detention facilities. She received her certification as a chaplain through the county sheriff department as well as through her diocese. When asked about her faith, Elizabeth shared how she was raised Protestant and converted to Catholicism in her 20s. She was first introduced to Catholicism during her adolescent years when her parents would host foreign exchange students who practiced Catholicism. Elizabeth was tasked with taking these students to Sunday Mass. Over the years, her interest in Catholicism grew and she began attending
Catholic Mass prior to her conversion. It was not until she met her husband when she officially became Catholic:

I started going to a Catholic Church, but I never knew how to “become Catholic.” I kept going to Mass for years. Then, I met my husband and he was Catholic, and I asked him how to become one. So I went through the process and his mom actually became my sponsor.

Years later, Elizabeth’s husband began the process to become a religious deacon. It took five years and as part of that process, the wives of the deacon aspirants would attend classes with their husbands as well. Elizabeth recalled her assignments, presentations, and studies that formed her understanding of the Catholic faith. Afterwards, Elizabeth decided to pursue a Ph.D. in Theology and took classes through an online format. Through her religious formation with the diaconate classes and her Ph.D. courses, Elizabeth felt competent when discussing and sharing about the Catholic faith to the adult participants within detention ministry.

Elizabeth was first introduced to Catholic detention ministry through the diaconate program with her husband. Following the completion of that program, she decided to continue being a volunteer through her chaplaincy. Elizabeth has experience serving in both the juvenile and adult facilities. She shared that she initially volunteered with the ministry by helping facilitate a restorative program with the ministry director. This program involved teaching weekly catechism classes to adult students within the detention facilities. After the program ended, Elizabeth continued her volunteering through facilitating communion services and sacramental preparation within the adult facilities. Beyond being a chaplain for the detention ministry, Elizabeth has also been a hospital chaplain as well as a volunteer at her local parish helping with various church events as a deacon’s wife.
Knowing and Spreading the Faith

“After visiting for a while, I hope they know that church is important in their life, that God is important. That’s always my encouragement.” Throughout our faith sharings, Elizabeth described how a significant aspect of her volunteer work was related to teaching and spreading the faith to those she served. Over the years, she saw that many attendees at her services were not knowledgeable of their faith. “A lot of them are Catholic but they don’t know the religion...Just knowing the religion helps them clarify when they go to other services or when they talk amongst themselves.” Elizabeth believed that many were not exposed or educated properly about their religion. As a volunteer, she saw the value of her position in sharing the faith with those who attended her services:

There’s this one man who is possibly looking at a life sentence and he wanted to do confirmation. I feel that’s important. I feel honored to be able to help him and guide him through that process—to bring him into his religion more because he hasn’t really explored it for several years.

With her own formation and knowledge of the Catholic faith, Elizabeth found it important to teach and clarify any misunderstanding that participants had about the religion. Elizabeth gave a specific example regarding the topic of capital punishment:

A lot of them say they’re Catholic, but they don’t know the religion. When we talk about the death penalty, Catholics are against the death penalty. We were on the subject of how some guys spent 30 years in prison and then later found not guilty. I said, “That’s why our church is against capital punishment because what if they look at guys who are in here for life and they find some other kind of evidence?” We are completely against the death penalty and they don’t
know that. I also said, “That’s one of the things about your faith, that it doesn’t always compare with some of the other faiths.”

When looking closely at Elizabeth’s stories, many of her conversations with her attendees revolved around topics directly or indirectly related to the justice system. From the death penalty, to understanding how crime is related to sin, Elizabeth’s experiences as a volunteer were filled with opportunities to teach or clarify any topics relating to the Catholic faith.

Elizabeth recalled a memory of when she was teaching catechism to a classroom of adult students. During this instance, Elizabeth was teaching about forgiveness and reconciliation and the student expressed his anger on the topic. She shared,

One of the guys, probably around 45-years-old said, “When I was 15, my dad died. I told God I hated Him and didn’t want Him in my life.” He went on to share why he was so angry. I said, “You were 15. Your dad died. God is going to forgive you. All you have to do is ask.” He goes, “He’ll forgive me? With that attitude?” “Yes, He will forgive you. Just have to ask Him for forgiveness.” And he just started crying and crying. He then said, “My life could have been different. I had no idea. I thought I was going to hell. So why did I need to worry?”...The Catholic Church sends people in to clarify these misconceptions and how they impact some of the guys, that was pretty amazing.

In this case, clarifying the understanding of faith served as a means to spread hope and peace. For this individual, the negative understanding of God’s forgiveness brought years of turmoil. Oftentimes, the conversations regarding crime and punishment are tied to the spiritual notions of sin and redemption.
In relation to the context of incarceration, Elizabeth found it meaningful to discuss the concept of forgiveness with her adults. When asked about her perceptions of the impact of the ministry on those who attend the services, Elizabeth talked about the joy she felt when she was able to remind her participants of the opportunity to be forgiven:

They don’t realize they can be forgiven. They think that because of what they’ve done, they’re doomed to hell. The one thing I can bring to them is to let them know that they can be forgiven if they choose to be…I try to remind them, every time I see them, that they are made in God’s image and that they can be forgiven.

For Elizabeth, her services allowed her to share the power of faith and God’s redeeming capabilities with those impacted by the justice system. The possibility to spread faith in this capacity was key to her role as a volunteer. Elizabeth believed that faith helped alleviate suffering and that it was her calling to share it with the incarcerated population amidst all the difficulties they encountered.

Pragmatically Supporting Those Impacted by Incarceration

Another individual theme that arose from my faith sharings with Elizabeth was how she sought to help her participants in a more concrete way. Several times, she expressed the usefulness of providing and connecting her adults to the available resources and information. For Elizabeth, this was a practical way the ministry was able to support and help its attendees. When asked about how the ministry contributes to healing or restoration, Elizabeth talked about the importance of encouraging the participants to access the available resources: “If they take advantage of the resources that we offer, if they truly want healing whether it’s for addiction or whatever it is, then they can do it. That’s why I tell
them that it’s up to them.” Elizabeth felt that being able to offer resources that could connect them to material needs was a way her services benefited her participants:

Being able to pass on information and resources allows me to help them more. Most of them can’t remember the resources, so if I am able to give them something now, whether it’s the prayers or whatever information, then it keeps them going to more services.

Additionally, by helping them this way, Elizabeth found that it fostered a positive relationship where the adults continued attending her services.

Elizabeth reflected pragmatically how there are many resources readily available and the only obstacle was connecting this population to them. Her ability to help with this linkage became an integral part of her experience as a volunteer:

The diocese has so many resources, so whenever I tell them about the resources, they ask for the papers and I pass it to them, which makes a huge difference for some of them...If they ask for resources on the outside, I see if we have them, then I will take the information to them.

Elizabeth made an effort to listen to the interests of her attendees and would provide the resource even if it was simply more information about a desired topic:

Sometimes they want to know how to pray the rosary, so I will bring them that pamphlet, or they want to know the St. Michael the Archangel prayer, so I will pass them that. The individual that I have been seeing is getting more into his religion and has been asking for these things, so I pass him those resources and we go over them.

As a volunteer, Elizabeth saw the opportunity to share more knowledge and support in the ways she could despite the rules and restrictions on what volunteers are able to share with the participants.
Moreover, Elizabeth highlighted the value of being able to visit those impacted by incarceration. When reflecting on her role as a detention ministry volunteer, Elizabeth shared,

“Everybody needs somebody to talk to and some of these people never have visitors. I’m not a therapist. I don’t tell them how they can overcome. I just listen to them. If they ask me questions, I can bring them resources, but everybody needs somebody. I’ll probably never see them again once they’re released, but at least I can be there for them, supplying them with resources that are through the diocese.

Although volunteers are not able to keep in touch with their attendees after their services or following their release, it brought Elizabeth a sense of fulfillment to know that she was able to at least give concrete ways of support. Whether it was teaching about the faith or connecting her participants to resources, these themes revealed Elizabeth’s desire to dedicate her life to helping others.

John

“As the years go by, I realize that God has been giving me a lot of blessings in my life,” shared John, a Vietnamese 57-year-old man who has been volunteering in Catholic detention ministry for the past seven years. “The only way I wish to do well for Him is to be His instrument, to be His hands to all people.” John described himself as a father to two children and a husband in his 26th year of marriage. John works as an engineer and spends much of his time participating in prayer groups or volunteering at his local parish and diocese. John is primarily involved with the Vietnamese Catholic community at his parish; he previously served on the Vietnamese council. He currently serves as a Eucharistic minister, a lector for mass, a catechist for religious education, and a board member of the
Vietnamese council. Additionally, he is actively part of a Catholic organization and prayer group where he finds fellowship and community.

John described how being part of his organization influenced and formed his personal spirituality:

If I draw out my faith and formation, this organization has helped my spirituality formation and faith formation a lot...The group is mainly fellowship. Starting with fellowship, we regain our strength, our resources, and spirituality. There are three pillars that form the spirituality of the group: piety, study, and action. Piety is the worship of God; study is how you study God, scripture, and learning from your brothers and sisters; and action is mainly how you carry out your faith and having good peers in life...these three really resonate in my life. If I have faith, I have to show it...It’s very practical in a sense.

John further described how he receives personal and social support from this group:

We focus on the three pillars, but the group does not require you to come and pray. It sounds strange, but when we come together, we come mainly for fellowship and meeting. We don’t have to pray. We don’t have to read the scriptures. The group assumes that those are things you do outside on your own. So during the meeting, you’re mainly sharing what you’ve been praying about, what you’ve accomplished, and the things you need to improve...If something is burdening me and I can’t talk to my wife or kids, I can share with the group. It’s where we encourage each other. We share and we laugh together, which is important. I also find out about various service projects of what the other members are doing.
John’s continual involvement and formation through his membership in his organization as well as his volunteering positions at his parish influenced his service in Catholic detention ministry. When describing how his various engagements have supported him, he discussed how having a support group functioned as a source of personal strength for his everyday difficulties as well as his various activities.

John was first introduced to Catholic detention ministry from some of the members in his organization. These members invited him to participate in the detention ministry’s Christmas caroling event. Through this, he met other volunteers and learned more about the ministry and its mission. He described the journey of becoming a volunteer as a “chain of events.” From his prayer group, he branched out to serve in multiple ministries, helping others in need. “As a mature Christian, I should be willing to roll up my sleeves and step up, stepping beyond my circle and seeing where there’s a need, where there’s something I can help.” Specifically regarding his time with detention ministry, John first began by giving communion to the adult inmates. After a few years, there was a need for more one-on-one volunteers, so he ventured to do that.

John explained his rationale for serving in adult facilities by comparing the needs of the adult population to the needs of the juvenile population:

There were more people becoming volunteers to serve the juveniles. I saw that the adult population has more needs. The mentality and the needs of the adults are totally different. It’s a different environment. It’s more challenging and it can drag you down a bit more. You need to have compassion, empathy, and sympathy with people during their trials. The challenge of life is more complex for adults than kids. With adults, they have to worry about their spouse, their kids, having a job, and not being homeless.
With John’s belief of serving where there is greater need, he chose to serve the adult populations. John shared an instance how one of the adults at his service divulged about their difficulties and suffering. John responded with an assured conviction,

This is where I need to be. This is where this person needs more of my time. This is where I think my presence and my words are comforting. I will do whatever I can to help this person. I will have a shoulder so this person can lean their head on.

For John, it was important that he served in a capacity where he witnessed a great need. He found this through volunteering with the incarcerated population.

John explained that through a combination of the participants’ needs and his calling, he continues to be a volunteer today:

As long as there is a need, as long as there are people who come to the service, even one, it’s enough. Sometimes I only have one person coming for Communion service. As long as I can help one person, I think that it is worth my time, a couple of hours of my time. It means a lot for that one person, to be able to hear something about God, about the gospel. I think that’s rewarding.

John shared that part of his desire to participate in the current study involves his recognition that there is a need for more volunteers. He hopes that in sharing his experiences, he may be able to encourage others to become volunteers in Catholic detention/prison ministry. John currently volunteers in the adult facilities conducting Communion services and one-on-one visits. Throughout the interview sessions, it was clear that John was wholly inspired by his rich faith, which has been formed over the years through his experiences in his parish community as well as his interior reflections.
**A Greater Calling, a Higher Purpose**

“Whatever I do, whatever my association, whatever my thought or action,” explained John, “I want to bring goodness for His kingdom through the people right around me, starting with my family, the church, and any organization or group that I come across in my life.” Throughout the faith sharings, John often referenced his *calling from God*, which stemmed from his faith as well as the praxis of his spirituality. His conceptualization of this greater calling ultimately came from his continued prayer, reflection, and participation in his various faith-based organizations. During each conversation, John posed multiple reflective questions that highlighted his attunement with God and the higher purpose his actions served:

The more I realize my spiritual formation, I keep thinking, “What can I do? What does God want me to do?” Maybe it is to walk outside and help homeless people. Or maybe someone is asking me a question or asking for help. If people ask me for help, how do I respond? How would I step up? How would I do so in a way that would confess my faith? That is my calling, my urge. The bible verse from James 2:17, “So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead,” is a quote that resonates in my heart, inspiring my call to action.

For John, it was important to express his faith through his actions and service to others. Moreover, he found the “urge” to please and satisfy God not just through his service, but through his life.

John recognized how serving God required self-sacrifice. In order for John to live out his spiritual calling, he accepted the material sacrifices he needed to make. His reflections pointed to his belief that God was constantly calling. John needed to be conscious whether or not he was truly attuned to God’s will:
I can do a lot of things, but God may ask me to do more. I may have the idea of doing this or that is enough, but how do I know if it’s truly enough? How do I know that God doesn’t want me to do something more with my capabilities, my time, my resources, and with all that I have?

Again, John’s discussion of his detention ministry experiences was framed by his understanding of his faith and the calling of God to live out his faith. This required more than simply praying for others. He described that the best measurement of faith was the extent of how much one served others. For him, praying and attending church services were not enough to truly express one’s belief:

How do I measure my faith? If I go to church, is that enough? I don’t think so... We worship God and we love God and that’s great. But how am I able to go beyond that to show my faith?

To show my faith is the measure of my faith. Spending my time when I could be sleeping, feeling sympathy for my brother and sister who are struggling, and serving the incarcerated is how I can measure my faith. What else can I give? What can I take from myself—my time, my materials, my life—to give to those in need?... It requires a lot. It requires me to take my possessions, my time, my sacrifices, my fears, and my securities and to give it out.

Not only does John’s calling require him to help those in need, John also reflected on how his services were ultimately efforts to share God with others.

Moreover, John saw that God was the source of peace and joy. Therefore, John’s activities sought to bring God to the incarcerated, to those who he felt needed comfort and solace:

Is this something I’m doing right? Do I make an impact on others when I say something? Do I help him or her feel the presence of God? Through my presence, do others feel joy in their life or something meaningful in their life? I feel that this is important for us to reflect on.
Lastly, in regards to this individual theme, John shared the importance for volunteers to take the time to reflect on their service as well as their purpose for volunteering. Through John’s own reflections, he began to see more how God points people of faith to actively help others. And through John’s deeper pondering of God’s continual calling, he found that God slowly transformed his desire to specifically help those who are suffering—the marginalized, vulnerable, and oppressed:

It is very meaningful for us volunteers to reflect on our own call and to improve ourselves. We ultimately want to learn and improve ourselves to be better volunteers. Not just in this ministry, but in all of our human interactions. The next day, or next year, God may be calling us elsewhere. There are people in the hospital, the elderly, or somewhere else. There is a great calling to serve the poor, the homeless, the marginalized in society in general.

John acknowledged that his service and prayers overtime fed his desire to do more for others.

Today, John continues to serve in Catholic detention ministry as well as in his other faith-based organizations and community. Each of our faith sharings took place at John’s home parish. John made sure to dedicate time to review the reflection questions before each session. After his work hours and prior to meeting with me for our sessions, John attended mass as part of his daily routine. I believe that this also allowed him to be in a focused and more spiritual mindset as he entered the faith sharing. It was clear that beyond his service within detention ministry, John’s life wholly centered around his faith and devotion to God.

**Bernadette**

Bernadette is a 62-year-old woman who has been a volunteer in Catholic detention ministry for six years. She identifies as half white and Mexican and is a wife and mother of two sons. She currently
works temporary positions as a school secretary for a public school district. Bernadette was raised in the Catholic faith by her mother, while her father was not Catholic. Bernadette’s mother was a devout Mexican Catholic while her father came from a wealthy white family who did not practice religion.

Bernadette recalled how her childhood was not the easiest:

I grew up in a middle class family, but my mom was violent and abusive. My dad was of the era where he worked and didn’t have much involvement with us. I could have been in jail because of how I was treated at home and I constantly sought other places to be so that I wouldn’t have to go home. I could have easily been like [an incarcerated youth].

Bernadette also shared how she was not always a practicing Catholic. It was not until the birth of her children when she and her husband began regularly attending mass and participating in their faith:

I left the church. My husband and I got married in the Catholic Church because that was something both of our parents wanted. It’s not necessarily what we wanted, it’s what they wanted. But shortly after getting married, my husband always worked on Sundays, so we didn’t go to mass. It was having kids. Once we decided we’re going to have kids, what do you do? You have to be baptized because that’s what we were taught. So let’s get them baptized. Let’s join a parish and get back into it...You want to make your life and your family part of the church. You want to have your kids be part of that parish experience and know what it’s like.

Bernadette acknowledged how her faith and upbringing was not always a smooth journey.

Currently, Bernadette is a parishioner at a church located in a working class community. Her involvement in her parish previously included working as an office secretary, serving in the youth ministry, teaching confirmation classes, and teaching adult catechism classes. She is currently teaching
first holy Communion classes with elementary aged children. Most of her experiences serving marginalized youth come from her time serving in different capacities at her parish. Bernadette described how the families in her parish community struggled with poverty, housing, and had a gang presence in the nearby neighborhoods:

I had teens in youth ministry and in confirmation who had chaotic households. They had multigenerational people living in one tiny apartment. They had one parent because a lot of times, dad was still in Mexico working, sending money, or unfortunately, dad was in jail in a couple of instances. So that’s where I was exposed to this different type of lifestyle and that is actually a real lifestyle…this is real life. The way some of these families were living, that’s real life. And their undying devotion to their parish and their Catholic faith was just; it was just a gift.

Despite the hardships these families experienced, Bernadette recognized their immense faith:

They have a love for their faith. They don’t understand a lot about it. A lot of times they are blindly following the Catholic faith and following God, but I’m telling you, they are dedicated to it. I have seen parents literally drag their kids on a Saturday to confession because they know that whatever their kid did, if you confess it to God, God will forgive you. They understand a lot more than the privileged parents. They are a lot more dedicated.

Bernadette felt that she connected to these families because her mother possessed the same culture and a similar understanding of faith. Bernadette’s background helped her better relate to this community and share her faith.
I understood that culture a lot more because my mother was Mexican...I understand that God is fire and brimstone, and He will strike you down when you sin, and He will punish you. I got that from my mom. So I understand what they’re saying, but I also want them to know, “You are loved and you are worthy.”

Bernadette’s approach to serving the families at her parish was grounded in a tender love and gentle faith, a stark contrast to the image of a punishing god.

Bernadette was first introduced to Catholic detention ministry six years ago through her good friend who was also the juvenile coordinator for the ministry. The coordinator asked Bernadette if she would be interested in visiting one-on-one with a young man who listed himself as a member of her parish. Bernadette did not hesitate to become a volunteer in probation:

I said, “Yes, absolutely! What do I do?” So I trained, went to workshops and classes. Finally, it took almost a year from the sheriff’s department to get fingerprinted and get the badge and get okayed. So finally, I went in and started visiting him, and it just changed me. I went in once a week and saw him. He was finally released about two years ago.

Bernadette’s immediate “yes” to the invitation indicated her selflessness to help her community in any capacity she could. From that acceptance, she grew to help other youth who were impacted by the justice system. Today, Bernadette currently volunteers in the ministry conducting one-on-one visits in the juvenile facilities.

A Critical Advocate for Youth

Throughout the faith sharing sessions, I felt Bernadette’s warmth, kindness, and hospitality. She welcomed me into her home for our conversations and took the time to review the reflection
questions I sent to her prior. She also shared with me her thoughts on the importance of this study in hopes that it would spread awareness and help gather more volunteers to the ministry. What I admired about Bernadette was her commitment and advocacy for youth. Listening to her experiences of serving the youth in her parish and the detention ministry, it was clear that Bernadette loved working with children and advocating for them. She explained:

I loved working with teens at the parish level. That’s why I work with teens who are incarcerated instead of the adults because teens have so much to give. They want to be independent. They question everything. They’re curious. They’re smart. And you just got to give them the time to listen to them.

From Bernadette’s breadth of experiences serving youth, she saw more potential for children to improve their futures. She believed that children needed to be supported and guided in a different manner than adults.

Bernadette also shared how adults need to give youth more respect, especially to those who were incarcerated:

These are teens who have had difficult childhoods. They need to be handled differently. You just got to listen to them... Teens deserve respect. They don’t deserve: “Just shut up. Just listen to me. Do what I say. I told you that you need to do that, so just do it.” I think there is nothing wrong with being respectful to a teen. Just listen to them. Give them a few minutes to tell you why they don’t want to do that or why this isn’t the right choice for them.
Throughout our meetings, Bernadette identified how there was a need for more programs and services as well as a need for more attention to focus on serving children. She saw this need not only present in the justice and school systems, but also in the Church:

I think young people in the system as well as in the churches are not given the respect and the attention, money, and resources that they deserve. They’re not. You can tell by the salaries of the youth ministers and confirmation coordinators in the parishes. They expect you to come in and teach the youth about the Catholic faith, keep them on the right track, and they don’t give you enough pay to eat. The first people who are let go whenever anything happens is the youth minister and confirmation coordinator. They rely on the family to give the faith and that’s not what’s happening. So I think that there is a disservice done to youth people who are incarcerated and released.

During our faith sharings, I saw that Bernadette’s passion for youth advocacy also revealed her frustrations with the systems she has been exposed to. While expressing her frustrations, she offered a critical viewpoint that was grounded in improving the outlook for marginalized youth.

In addition to her advocacy and commitment to the youth, Bernadette made it very clear in our conversations that the Catholic Church had areas for improvement in regards to its priorities. She asserted her critiques of the Church needing to focus more on people who needed help. Bernadette recalled one of her early childhood memories of the Church:

I had a different background of what God was and what the church was. It was all very dark and scary. Our priests were horrible. The homilies. The pastor would stop his homily and point at a parent with a crying baby and yell at them to get out of this church. They were horrible
priests. They were not nice. They were unfriendly and this wasn’t just because my mom told me. I experienced this and they weren’t happy people.

Her memory conveyed an early impression of people in the Church who were not always kind, loving, or inclusive. As an older adult, Bernadette critiqued the Church based on her experiences working and volunteering within the diocese through different capacities. She shared a specific example about her diocese’s cathedral building:

I don’t think the poor are welcomed in the cathedral. The diocese may say they are, but I don’t.

No, I don’t think the marginalized population is necessarily welcome at the cathedral. Because when you look at the grandeur, and you think, “Wow, am I really in the right place? My goodness, the bathrooms. The bathrooms are just so extravagant.” Yeah, the money is not necessarily going to where it needs to go.

She saw that through the embrace of grandeur, the diocese unconsciously excluded certain groups of people, particularly those who are outcasted.

Bernadette also critiqued the financial decisions of her diocese and how it did not prioritize the needs of its youth population:

The diocese says, “The cost. We can’t afford it. Where are you putting your money? Let’s build another statue. Let’s build another this. Put money into that.” But why can’t you put money into your teens? They always say the teens are the church of the future. No, they’re now. They are the church of today. If you don’t get them in the pews today, they’re not going to be here tomorrow. So you need to put money and back these teens now, or they’re not going to be there.
Specifically for the detention ministry, Bernadette believed, “You need to put in more money. You need to back this ministry and the teens and put more money into it so there are more [people serving].” Bernadette’s conversations highlighted her critical awareness of how the systems around her needed to change in order to improve the lives of those who are struggling. Her previous and current positions within her parish and work have influenced her perspectives of detention ministry. Although she communicated her dissatisfactions regarding the larger systems, she seemed to find hope when serving and supporting children.

**Carlo**

Carlo is a 59-year-old Caucasian man who has been volunteering in Catholic detention ministry for the past 15 years. Prior to being more involved with his faith, he shared about how he did not possess a deeper spirituality when he was younger:

> When I was young, I didn’t have any exposure to the faith. I didn’t want to do anything with God or church. I just wanted to have fun and do my own thing…I didn’t get exposed to a deep spirituality until I was around 27. I felt like I missed out on a lot of my life and I wasted a lot of my life making bad decisions.

His reflections on his early life influenced his service in detention ministry. Volunteering with the juvenile facilities, Carlo sought to expose and share the faith with the youth—something he did not have as a child. He hoped that by doing so, it would help them avoid making the same mistakes he did when he was younger.

When asked to describe his detention ministry experience, Carlo talked about both himself and his wife because they volunteer together. He described how they jointly participate in various activities
and ministries at their local parish. One of those activities include being part of the parish music ministry, where Carlo plays the guitar for various prayer services. Another activity Carlo and his wife do together include taking classes with a dance ministry that incorporates theology with dance movement. In regards to their personal faith, Carlo shared how he and his wife are both “lay order members” of a Norbertine abbey. This means that they received spiritual formation under the Norbertine religious order as non-ordained members. This spirituality is characterized by communal life and dedication to prayer, which “blends with your parish life and your spiritual life.” Individually, Carlo hosts a “Catholic sportsman” podcast as well as writes original Catholic music.

Carlo was first introduced to Catholic detention ministry through another couple who was already involved. He shared about his unique marital situation that pushed him to become a volunteer:

My wife and I have been involved with the Catholic detention ministry since 2008. A big part of our journey revolved around our marriage. We got married in 1998. When we first got married, like most couples, we were open to having children. So we tried to have our own children. We were not able to, for various reasons, including both biological and through adoption. Our adoption efforts fell through and we knew a married couple who was involved in the Catholic detention ministry. They did not have children either. They told us about it, and we’re like, “Oh, this is great.” So that is how we got involved. Effectively now, these are our kids.

For Carlo, being able to serve alongside his wife shaped his experiences of being a volunteer. During Carlo’s early years of being in the ministry, he and his wife conducted one-on-one visits, bible studies,
sacramental preparation, as well as playing music for Sunday services in the juvenile facilities.

Currently, they only do bible studies and sacramental preparation for the juvenile populations.

**Serving as a Couple and Being Spiritual Parents**

“When looking at marriage, you might have interests that you don’t do with your spouse, but if you have something that you can do together, it’s pretty cool,” stated Carlo. A unique theme that arose from my faith sharings with Carlo was how *serving as a couple* influenced his experiences of being a detention ministry volunteer. When Carlo and his wife first began volunteering, they did not conduct services together until it was suggested. Afterwards, Carlo realized how much he learned from his wife as well as how much joy he received from volunteering in this ministry with her:

I did bible studies for a year without my wife because we were assigned to two different groups. Then someone asked, “Why don’t you guys do it together?” Since then, it’s been fun to bounce off each other. My wife had good techniques that she did in her bible studies that I didn’t incorporate myself.

Carlo described how the dynamic between him and his wife contributed to more thoughtful services with the youth. Rather than serving alone with his singular expertise and wisdom, Carlo was able to listen to his wife’s thoughts and witness her interactions.

Having another person serve alongside Carlo allowed for richer dialogue and broader perspectives to the conversations at hand.

It’s unique in the sense that sometimes I have something to say or she’ll have something to say, but it’s a different angle...It’s cool because we’re tag-teaming. I may have an insight and she might have one. So we can both just be us there. The youth in different ways almost expect a
different response from me as the man versus my wife, the woman. So there’s always that
dynamic which is good.

Carlo also reflected on his own marital life and how being able to serve with his wife allowed for them
to feel like parental figures to the youth who they served. Serving in the juvenile facilities in this capacity
allowed for Carlo and his wife to make peace and meaning with their inability to have their own
children. Despite his circumstances, Carlo shared how he still felt a joy and fulfillment in life:

Since we didn’t have our own family, we felt more comfortable serving in detention ministry
than going to a parish surrounded by a bunch of families. So [detention ministry] was like our
family and we went to Mass there and played music...it was really fulfilling.

Carlo and his wife possessed a desire to love and support children and had the opportunity to uniquely
experience a sense of parenthood through their volunteering:

With my faith, I felt like I needed to try to give back what I missed. But through my wife too, I
think there was a little bit more in the sense that you can be a father or mother figure to these
children within the ministry, which is awesome. It’s an awesome gift and an awesome
opportunity.

Carlo also mentioned about a conversation he once had in regards to his “kids”:

One time, I told this woman, “We have 300 kids and they’re all in jail.” I didn’t mean to say it
to impress her, but she really got it from what I was saying. God didn’t bless us with biological
children or adoption, but we have these kids we minister to, and she really appreciated hearing
that.
Moreover, Carlo’s experience of detention ministry also included his experience of witnessing the motherly attributes of his wife, which he found to be a blessing for him as a husband.

Although Carlo acknowledged that he and his wife are not actual parents, there was a meaningful connection with the youth that felt like a spiritual parent-child relationship:

When we serve, I get to watch my wife. It’s a chance for her to mother those kids. You can see the motherly instincts flowing from her. That’s why she really likes this ministry. She’s there and she’s present, but not in a way of like trying to tell them to take their vitamins or something.

Carlo’s testimony of his services uniquely framed his experience through the lens of serving as a married couple. For Carlo, this ministry was integral to his marriage because it helped him gain a sense of family. His viewpoint allowed for a different perspective that stood out from the other collaborators in this study who typically conducted services individually.

**Journeying Through the Sacraments**

“What’s interesting as Catholics is that we have the sacraments,” asserted Carlo. The last prominent individual theme that arose from my faith sharings with Carlo was the value of journeying through the sacraments with the attendees. As one of the services he conducts for the ministry, sacramental preparation involves a process that spans over several months where the volunteer meets with the participants on a weekly basis, teaching and sharing about Catholic doctrine and faith. This learning process ultimately prepares the participant to receive their first Catholic sacrament—in this case, specifically Baptism, Reconciliation, Communion, and/or Confirmation—which culminates into
a religious ceremony and celebration. Before beginning the sacramental preparation process, the participants must express a desire to receive the sacraments with intentions to grow in their faith.

Within the context of faith, Carlo believed that helping youths receive their sacraments was a way the ministry directly contributed to healing and restoration in a meaningful way:

Attending bible study is not necessarily a sacrament, but it always leads the youth to either going to church, confession, or to confirmation. I think in that regard, you can certainly talk to them, be with them, hear them and pray for them to receive that grace. But if we can steer them towards the sacraments, you can receive grace whether you’re even fully aware of it or not. I think that’s the most powerful aspect of our healing.

Experiencing and participating in the sacraments is a way to experience God, which is considered by some Catholics as a direct means for spiritual healing. For youth who have faced difficulties and personal suffering, Carlo believed that it was important to introduce them to faith. Carlo had the opportunity to journey with many youths to receive their sacraments over the years:

We had a lot of kids go through their sacramental preparation...Some of the kids that we met, I’ll never forget because I’ve gotten to know them a little bit more during the sacramental preparation journey, which was pretty impressive. You always wonder what happened to these youths. You never know.

Carlo reflected on how his accompaniment through the sacraments allowed him to form relationships with his youths. He further recalled about his participants who have passed and the hope he was able to offer through helping them receive their sacraments:
Some of the kids that I met were killed. They were shot and killed in the streets. I look back during the times I met them and that’s something I’ll never forget. These kids lost their lives at a really young age, but were able to at least receive their sacraments.

During the faith sharing, Carlo noted the deeper spiritual relationships he was able to build over the years through detention ministry.

Sacramental preparation served as a means for Carlo to accompany his youths through their personal journeys of faith. These were the most meaningful experiences for Carlo and his wife:

Some of the most memorable moments from the ministry were the days we helped with sacramental preparation. That was pretty awesome because we spent all this time with the youth. Then the celebrations would take place and their families could come. So we would be there, and the parents and adult siblings would be sitting next to the kid. We got to take pictures and have cake and cookies. That was so great.

He shared one instance where he journeyed with a participant from the beginning of the process all the way to the ceremonial celebrations:

There was a specific journey with one of the kids who we ended up helping receive all three sacraments... We watched him get baptized, receive his first Confession, Communion, and Confirmation. It’s really beautiful... After the pandemic, he asked the coordinator for [me and my wife] to see if we were around and that’s how we got back into the ministry.

The influence of faith and its role in facilitating the relationships between the participants and the volunteers were inevitable themes that intertwined through all the collaborators of this study. For Carlo, he notably expressed his belief that sacramental preparation held the most value when
considering how this ministry can support its attendees. This prominent individual theme further added to Carlo’s unique experience as a volunteer.

Teresita

“It’s not me,” asserted Teresita, a 59-year-old Mexican woman who has been volunteering with Catholic detention ministry for the past 15 years. “It’s God who is in me.” Prior to the faith sharing sessions, Teresita informed me that she was more fluent in Spanish, but was fluent enough in English to have our interviews conducted entirely in English. She asked me to review and correct any grammatical errors as needed when transcribing her responses. As part of the member-checking process, I collaborated with Teresita to review her quotes used in this chapter in efforts to honor her experiences.

Teresita was born in Mexico and came to the United States 42 years ago. She has been married for 40 years and has three children. When asked to describe herself, Teresita immediately talked about her faith and childhood. She shared,

Since I was a little girl, I always had a lot of faith. I am Catholic and I was never exposed to any other religion. My grandparents and parents were Catholic. When I was a little girl, I liked going to church and praying the rosary. In Mexico, during May, the whole month was dedicated to Virgin Mary. All the little girls and I would go to church, offer flowers, and pray the rosary. I grew up with faith.

Teresita expressed her great love for God and how she even desired to become a religious nun:
I asked the Lord, “I would like to serve with you. I would like to be a nun.” But the Lord said, “No, I would like you to get married.” Even when I was married—thanks to God and to my husband—I always served the Lord. I always helped in the church and in different ministries. Teresita’s faith and serving God was an important value she held. Teresita has been a member of her local parish for 42 years and she currently volunteers in multiple capacities. In addition to serving in detention ministry, Teresita also brings communion to those who are too sick to physically attend church services. She also helps with religious education for families who are having their children baptized as well as for teenagers who are preparing for their quinceanera. Teresita discussed how her initial invitation to become a detention ministry volunteer came after she attended a weekend retreat through her parish. Teresita experienced a mystical moment during the retreat where she felt God tugging at her heart. Teresita recalled that weekend:

There were some workshops about the Holy Spirit, Jesus, and Virgin Mary. There was a moment where we reflected and my eyes were closed. I remember seeing Jesus and I started to pray. It was the first time I truly prayed because before, I didn’t know how to truly pray. I would just say the rosary or the Our Father, but at that moment, I felt something in my heart. I started to pray for all the people in jail and for all those who were sick in the hospital. I didn’t understand what this feeling meant. The people leading the retreat explained to me, “Teresita, you need to prepare yourself because God wants to give you something.” I said, “Okay, I will prepare. What do You want me to do?” One of the priests then invited me to volunteer with the detention ministry.
After her invitation from her parish priest, Teresita, along with 11 others, attended the initial orientation and began the application process. Out of everyone who began the application process, Teresita was the only one who completed the required training and officially became a volunteer. She described how God gave her a special calling to serve in detention ministry:

Of the 12 people, only I became a volunteer. That’s why I feel that God gave me something special. Everytime I serve, I try to go with all my heart and with all my love. I always say, “It’s not me who goes, it is God who goes through me.” I still sin and I’m a human being, but when you serve, you let the Holy Spirit come with you. That’s what I feel. This ministry is what I enjoy. It gives me peace. I like to serve the Lord through this ministry.

Teresita currently volunteers in the adult facilities across the county conducting bible studies and communion services.

When Teresita first began volunteering, she conducted her services entirely in Spanish, but now facilitates her services in both English and Spanish if necessary. She shared how she will often apologize to her attendees that her English is not the best, but that she will try. Despite her difficulties, Teresita attributed this challenge to God:

I usually have my services in Spanish, but one time, the staff sent people who only spoke English and I said, “Oh my God, what am I going to do?” So I told them, “Here are the readings in English. I don’t know how to read English well, so if you can read out loud for me, then I will explain the reading.” That worked. I said, “Thank you Jesus. Thank you because you helped me to do the English service.” God probably wanted me to help more people. That’s why He sent me English speakers.
When Teresita knew that she would be conducting bilingual services, she would practice the English portions beforehand. Even with her perceived limited English, Teresita described how her volunteering experiences have always been filled with joy.

Teresita mentioned how she enjoyed serving in detention ministry so much that she first began volunteering four times a week. Due to her other obligations, she now serves only twice a week on Saturday and Sunday.

People ask me, “Don’t you get tired?” I tell them, “No. If I had more time, I would go every single day.” I enjoy what I do. I feel happy when I can see them. I thank God for letting me do this. I say, “Thank you God,” because everything comes from the Lord.

Teresita pointed her desire to God. She exemplified what it means to embrace and exude joy when authentically living out one’s faith and calling. Teresita stated that she hopes to continue serving in this capacity until she cannot anymore:

If God lets me, I would like to continue serving for many more years. I am almost 60 years old, but if I stay in good shape, I would like to continue serving God...I go because I love my brothers and sisters and they really need help...this ministry is my priority.

From listening to Teresita’s stories and experiences, I immediately noticed that she possessed an assured faith and an intimate relationship with God. Over the years, she allowed her spirituality to move her to the constant service of others and the spreading of love and joy to those who suffer.

Possessing and Sharing a Personal Friendship with God

“Jesus, come with me,” expressed Teresita. Hearing about Teresita’s experiences and stories, I felt a warmth akin to that of a loving mother or grandmother. Moreover, what resonated with me from
Teresita’s background was her depiction of faith when she was a child. Her child-like friendship with God was a motif that wove throughout her responses. She would speak to God as though He were a best friend. To Teresita, God was not just a distant deity, rather He was an intimate confidant that stood beside her every step of the way. There were multiple instances during our faith sharings when Teresita mentioned her conversations with God. In one instance, Teresita recalled one of the first times she entered the women’s facility to conduct a bible study:

   I remember an impactful moment when I went to the women’s facility. I saw two ladies who were very old. I almost wanted to cry. I asked the Holy Spirit, “Oh my God. Please, I don’t want to cry in front of them, but why are these two old ladies here?”

In the midst of her shock, she internally conversed with God and asked for strength. This was prevalent throughout her descriptions of her detention ministry experiences.

   On multiple occasions, Teresita would reference her inner dialogue with God. Another example was when Teresita first applied to become a volunteer. She remembered reading all the precautions and warnings about serving in this position. In particular, she remembered a section where it was mentioned that volunteers may get harmed or taken as hostage:

   When I read that statement, I said, “Oh my God. Maybe I am not meant to be in this ministry.” But in that moment, my mind told me, “No, it’s not about me, it’s You.” And immediately, I responded, “I am not afraid.”

Through her personal conversations with God, Teresita found strength whenever she encountered a difficulty. Moreover, Teresita professed how she prayed everyday. Her daily prayer served not only as a
constant form of communication between her and God, but a reminder of her greater purpose for serving:

I pray everyday. In my work, I always communicate with God. I always tell Him, “You know, I’m here to do what you want.” And He would continue to tell me, “I would like you to serve here or there.” So I go there and I always share my faith.

Pronounced through her interior conversations, Teresita’s faith exemplified her deeper trust and reliance on God when navigating her day-to-day activities.

Furthermore, Teresita’s close relationship with God helped foster feelings of peace during her service:

When I serve, I receive and feel at peace. I feel peace because I always ask, “God, can you go with me?” I never go by myself. I tell the adults that God is the only one who knows exactly who you are...I feel peace when we do closing prayer. I tell them, “Thank you for coming. Have a blessed week. I’ll see you next week.” We pray for each other and we ask the Lord to hear our prayers.

Teresita’s life exemplified how her friendship with God was steadfast and unceasing. In all her ways, she chose to be mindful of God. Therefore, whenever she came to the detention facilities, she automatically brought God with her:

Whenever I go, I feel so happy and at peace. I tell God, “Thank you for this service, because you were there and I felt it.” From the moment I get ready for the service to the end of it, I pray the entire way and I say, “Thank you, thank you.”
What makes Teresita’s faith distinctly unique from the other volunteers in this study was how she described it—personable, relatable, and almost as if God were another human always by her side.

Connected to this individual theme, Teresita’s reflections highlighted how she sought to promote others to enter into a personal friendship with God as well. When sharing the different examples of her detention ministry experience, Teresita mentioned how she encouraged the participants to be attuned to God’s voice:

I ask them, “What did you understand from the Gospel? Did you feel like God told you something?” They will say, “yes,” and that is when they start sharing with me. Sometimes they cry when we share about the Gospel and about what God may say.

Her personal friendship with God was what brought her purpose, peace, and security. She desired to let others know that God is wholly there for them like He is there for her. Her narratives communicated her conviction: God loves all and will tend to all people if they are open.

Whenever the inmates tell me, “God is with you,” I say, “He’s also with you. God is in everybody, right?...You need to trust in God because He can do anything for you. He can help if you have faith and you ask...Everybody has the body of Jesus Christ.”

Moreover, by sharing her deep connection with God to her participants, Teresita believed that it would help their lives.

This conviction was made clearer through a specific story of an interaction Teresita had with one man who was going through trial and fighting a life sentence. She encouraged him to pray and converse with God, and to trust in God:
I had an experience seven years ago with one man. He was 18 and I remembered that he was so quiet. Then he said to me, “You know, I’m already dead…I’m fighting for life, so I’m dead already.” I said, “No, you are still alive. It is God’s decision whether you stay here for life. You just need to pray and put your case in God’s hands.”...The next time I saw him, I noticed his face was different. He was so happy. He told me, “You know, I pray every night. Thank you very much. I say thank you because I am very happy. They gave me my time. Can you guess how many years I got?...Only 7.” I said, “Thank God everyday. Don’t thank me. Give thanks to God and thanks to you, because of your faith.”

Although this particular outcome may not always be the reality for those facing trial, this case helped Teresita believe in the goodness and power of trusting God. From Teresita’s perspective, possessing a friendship with God has been a source of peace, hope, and love. Through her life and service, she has reiterated the importance of sharing this deeper joy and fullness to others, particularly those who have suffered greatly. Teresita desires to continually serve in detention ministry for the rest of her life as long as she is able to, in hopes of helping others to also experience the companionship of God.

Francis

“I am not a very rich man, but I have a very rich and colorful life,” stated Francis, a Filipino-American 75-year-old retired businessman who has been volunteering in Catholic detention ministry for over 12 years. Upon getting to know Francis, I learned that he is a husband, father, and grandfather. He is currently retired, but prior, he worked as a CPA for many years. When asked to describe himself, Francis claimed, “I would rather be known as an author and writer, who has retained
my idealism and sustained my Catholic faith that I was born into, rather than a CPA.” Francis has published a book that includes his life story as well as stories from other individuals.

Francis further shared about his early life: He was born in a poor, rural and small village in the Philippines and came to the United States 50 years ago. He talked about how he came from humble beginnings:

Life in the Philippines was very hard and my family was very poor. I am the first from my village to go to Manila to study and graduate college, which was exclusive for boys then...I got my bachelor’s degree and I became a CPA, which was my “passport” to come to America with the sponsorship of my accounting professor from college. My professor saw my good work: while I worked during the day, I was still at the top of my accounting classes. I never had any dream to come to the United States before receiving an offer to work for my professor.

I saw how proud Francis was when he shared about where he came from and his many accomplishments throughout his life. Although Francis exuded joy and a sense of achievement, he also recalled the difficulties he faced when he first arrived in the United States:

God had a plan for me because I had a hard and challenging start. I came here with nobody except my professor. In less than a year, I escaped his employment because I was being exploited. At the time, you didn’t know anything, but decades later, I realized my precarious situation was a part of human trafficking. Now that I have lived 50 years in America, I look back on how I had nowhere to go, but my faith.

Despite his early adversities in a new county, Francis was able to assimilate by joining multiple organizations and networking with colleagues. Some of these groups revolved around the Filipino
Community and business related ventures, while others were professional associations and faith-based organizations that advocated for peace and justice.

At his church, Francis became a Eucharistic minister, joined a peace and justice ministry, and joined a men’s bible study group. Through his numerous connections, he was able to learn about the Catholic detention ministry in his diocese. Francis eventually decided to become a volunteer in detention ministry due to an invitation from his bible study friends as well as encouragement from his sister who is a nun:

My bible study classmates, all men, have been preaching in different ministries, so they were inviting me for at least two to three years to serve. I always said that I was too busy and maybe when I retire. My sister, who is a Dominican nun, was always asking me, “Why don’t you get involved with other ministries and the detention ministry? You never know when you will ever retire.” I always had the excuse of when I would retire. Her words, “You can never be sure of what you plan. Do what you can do now while you are still alive and strong,” hit me like a brick. So the following week, I told my bible study classmates who have been volunteering in detention for years, “Okay, let me come with you.” and that’s how I got involved.

Francis noted how the majority of his experiences volunteering in with detention ministry have predominantly been in facilities for adult women. He has been at the same facility for more than a decade and enjoys the weekly routine he has built as a volunteer.

My faith sharings with Francis were an opportunity for Francis to share his life story and the wisdom he has acquired over the course of his life journey. Acknowledging his old age, Francis shared
about the need for more detention ministry volunteers. Knowing that he may retire soon, his hopes are that newer volunteers would take his place:

There should be more compassionate people doing what we are doing. Because I am 75 years old, in another five or 10 years, I may be gone. Who will replace me? Not that I am egotistical to think I am indispensable, but there should be a continuation of goodness and good to be done to others.

Part of Francis’ desire to participate in the current study was to share the lessons he has learned from being a volunteer. From his reflections on his spiritual and personal growth, Francis truly longed to make the world a better place. Currently, Francis conducts weekly bible studies and communion services within the adult detention facilities and hopes to continue this ministry until he cannot any longer.

A Businessman Making a Difference

My conversations with Francis were enjoyable as his spirit and charisma radiated throughout our sessions. He shared many thoughts about changing the world for the better and leaving a positive legacy. Conversing over coffee and in his home, I immediately noticed Francis’ generosity and his care for others through an economic lens. He gifted me his published book, which chronicles his personal journey as well as the story of 25 other successful men and women from diverse professions, nationalities, and beliefs. During our interviews, Francis admittedly possessed a businessman lens that he embraced from his years of being a CPA-turned-entrepreneur. This lens framed how he described his detention ministry experiences. Additionally, another individual theme that stemmed from this personal lens was the importance of knowing that he was doing something meaningful or that he was
making a difference. Throughout his stories, Francis made statement like, “What I have deep in my heart is touching other people’s lives,” “These small instances made me realize that I’m doing something good for others,” and “Because I value my time, my prayer now to God is to put me where I am needed most.” This unique mindset wove through Francis’ sharings of his volunteering experiences. Francis even used economical terms when discussing his volunteering experience:

I, as a businessman, rightly or wrongly, believe in what is called “ROI” or return on investment. When serving in the women’s facility, I always have around six or more attendees and I noticed that they were more attentive than the men from other facilities. I can feel the effect of the service from the women. When I am in this other adult facility, sometimes there is only one, if any, attendee. So I don’t feel the depth of the effect of my time. I also know that one is enough, but if you can make it 10, then why not?

For Francis, it was important for him to feel that the time he dedicated was worthy, and he felt that way when there were more participants attending his services.

Francis shared a story of a meaningful interaction he had with a Filipino woman who was incarcerated. He described his reflections through this economical lens:

I don’t know if feeling affected is the right word, but to me, that is what I call ROI. It is like an invisible, intangible satisfaction or emotional dividend. These may be small instances, but I find it meaningful. There is a purpose. As a human being, when you do something, you want something that would tell you that you have an effect and that you are actually doing something.
Francis honed in on the effect or impact he perceived to have on those he served. This was how he sensed meaning within his experience of detention ministry. When asked about what he believes those he serves thinks about him, Francis shared:

I would love to believe that they would think, “Hey, he taught me and shared with me something that I will never forget.” Out of the hundreds of adults I have seen [in detention ministry], I am hoping and praying that at least one would remember that. That alone is a good emotional dividend of what I’ve done, in my opinion. I don’t want to expect that everybody gets converted, but at least one soul. I had some impact. That’s my prayer.

Across the faith sharings, Francis would use business-related terminology, but also acknowledged the faults of only focusing on profits or dividends.

Francis was aware of his specific lens, and it seemed that over the course of our dialogue, his reflections began to shift. Francis discussed how serving in detention ministry has allowed him to reflect on his business mindset and transform his values:

Before, I lived my life as a business, for a lack of a better term. The bottom line, money, or how much you make was the number one criteria. But now as I grow much older, I believe and I honestly realize now that money is very important, but it’s not the most important thing in your life once you have fulfilled the basic needs of your life: food, clothing, shelter, education, personal well-being, and your family needs. So as my materialism in me goes down, my spirituality moves up, and I feel more fulfillment. My volunteering and service to others grant me purpose and meaning in my life.
Beyond his beliefs of whether he made an impact or produced anything worthwhile, Francis wholly trusted in God.

Francis offered a reflection of how dedicating his service to God brought about humility, steering away from his business mindset:

Being a businessman, I always try to measure my effectiveness with the profits, but in detention ministry, it has molded me to think that if I save one person or influence one person, that is change. Sometimes, I wish there are always a dozen people or more listening to me, but that perception—in my self reflection—is more egotistical and I am giving myself a lot of credit. But God controls the situation, so if there are only two or three or four people, then that is what God wants.

Although Francis had a unique way of conceptualizing his understanding of his volunteering experiences, he made sure to direct the conversations back to God. Francis not only expressed his gratitude of being part of the Catholic detention ministry, he was also thankful for the entirety of his life. Coupled with his desire to see change and transformation in those he served, Francis acknowledged the ways in which he changed as well.

**Philomena**

Philomena is a 65-year-old Vietnamese woman who is “living the retiree life.” She has a husband and is a mother to two sons. Prior to retiring over 20 years ago, Philomena operated an engineering company. Now, she runs a side business that involves managing property as a source of income. Philomena has various experiences relating to philanthropic work. She shared about how she would visit religious convents in poor areas of Africa and fundraise money for those communities. She
also sends money every year to organizations in Vietnam. Prior to volunteering in detention ministry, Philomena volunteered in hospice facilities for over 20 years. She shared how her time volunteering in hospice has helped make her stronger and better able to serve in detention ministry:

I have been a volunteer for hospice for a long time and I saw suffering for more than 10 years before I started volunteering for the youth in prison. What’s more suffering than dying? You have to leave your family and leave things unfinished. That is very painful for them. So I’ve been through that and I think I’m pretty strong. I have seen death in front of me and have felt those bad feelings. To me, the juvenile detention ministry is nothing compared to those I have seen through my hospice volunteering.

When asked about why she began volunteering with the detention ministry, Philomena shared about her values as a child to protect those who were vulnerable:

I always wanted to do this. I waited until I retired so I could do this. When I was young and little, kids got bullied a lot in my neighborhood in Vietnam. I would be the leader of the kids in my neighborhood and beat up those bullies...I would protect those who were being bullied. So I got into a lot of fist fights with bullies...I guess I was always being a hero in my neighborhood in Vietnam.

In addition to her childhood desire, Philomena also discussed her spiritual calling to specifically serve the incarcerated population:

The reason why I chose detention ministry is because we have the Works of Mercy. There are 14. I said, “Oh God, I can’t do all 14, so I better pick one or two that I can focus on and do it well.” So I picked “visit the sick” and “ransom the captive.”
Philomena’s desire to volunteer in detention ministry drew from multiple sources.

In addition to her spiritual influences, Philomena was also inspired by a community member who volunteered in prison. Despite having the desire to serve in this capacity, Philomena struggled to find the opportunity to become a volunteer and had to ask around. She shared how the process to become a volunteer was not easy for her:

When I was younger, I went to this church and there was a lady who my mom told me was visiting the prisons. I admired her a lot even though I didn’t know her and only heard about her. She was the only Vietnamese lady I knew who was visiting prisons at the time and she kept doing that until she died...So I thought, “Oh, maybe I can be the second Vietnamese lady in the community who can do that.” So I pursued this ministry because of her. I had to ask around to see how I could get in. Because she died, I didn’t get to ask her and I didn’t know how she got into the ministry. I didn’t even know if it was through the Catholic Church. All I knew was that she visited the prisons. So I went to my church and I asked the priest there. He said if I really wanted to do this, he could write me a reference letter. I asked around more, and then I submitted my application to the Catholic diocese.

Philomena has been a volunteer in the Catholic prison ministry for 11 years and currently volunteers in the juvenile facilities doing one-on-one visits with youth. She previously facilitated bible studies out of request by the ministry coordinator, but chooses to only do one-on-one visits due to her self-perceived lack of knowledge and spirituality. When asked about her interest in participating in the current study, Philomena discussed her hopes that this study would help open the eyes and hearts of more people to understanding the suffering and difficulties of youth who are impacted by the justice system.
More Than Just a Volunteer

Philomena’s experiences of being a volunteer has been unique compared to the other volunteers in this study. Most volunteers, particularly those in the adult facilities usually see participants at most two or three times, while juvenile volunteers have the potential to regularly see the youth over a longer period of time. Philomena has been able to maintain close relationships with two of her youth for approximately seven years. She has been able to regularly visit her youth on a weekly basis over the years of her service. Her experiences and stories reflected how her relationship with these youth were more than just a volunteer-participant dynamic. She talked about the early encounters with her youths:

They requested for me. At the time, I visited other kids who were mostly Hispanic. When I walked past the unit, this half Black and Vietnamese kid saw me. I did not know he was Vietnamese. He was asking for me to see him. That’s how I started meeting with him. For the other youth, because I was visiting this half Vietnamese kid, the other Vietnamese kid in the unit wanted me to see him too. So those two have been the longest I have been visiting.

Because Philomena possessed the same racial identities, her youths requested to meet with her. From that initial meeting sparked a relationship that lasted over years, defining Philomena’s detention ministry experiences.

Philomena mentioned how there was a brief period of time during the COVID-19 pandemic when she quit being a volunteer. She also discussed how her connections with the youth brought her back to the ministry:
“Did you know I quit and came back?” I quit during the pandemic when we were not allowed to go in. I did not want to go back because my husband had retired. He is home all the time and he isn’t well because he had a heart problem, so I wanted to spend more time with him. I did not want to go back to the ministry anymore. One day, the coordinator called me and said, “This kid asked about you. He asked, ‘How are you doing?’”...He asked for me. He was still there and he asked, “Is [Philomena] still visiting?” And because of him, I came back as a volunteer. He really touched me and he thinks of me like I am one of his family members...The youth were doing the same thing I was doing: thinking about them. Then I thought, “Maybe I should come back.” I went through all the training and certification again. I went through all of that and then continued visiting my youths. They know that and really appreciate it.

Philomena’s close relationships with her youth ultimately inspired her to continue volunteering in this ministry. Her relationships even led her to briefly volunteer in the adult facilities.

Although Philomena generally enjoyed her volunteering experiences, she reflected on carrying some of the emotional burden of visiting her youth:

I went to the adult facilities because my one kid, the half Vietnamese kid, was sent to the adult facility. He was so distressed. So I came and visited him a couple of times when he was in the adult system. He’s now back in the juvenile facility. When I visited this kid in the adult facility, his attitude was totally different from when he was in the juvenile facility. I heard it in his stories. It was rough for him. He was so depressed and it looked like he lost his soul. He was not himself anymore. I felt so bad when I visited him at the adult facility. I would come home so depressed and that was the only time I got very depressed when I visited.
During our faith sharings, Philomena shared several memories with her youths. Because of her distinct relationships, she had a wealth of stories to share. She offered a touching story that truly described the deeper relationship she possessed:

This kid, he can’t even write. He’s been incarcerated so long that he finally graduated high school in there. He struggled, but was still able to graduate. On the day of his graduation, nobody from his family was there. I showed up and I was there for him on his graduation day. I even bought him clothes to wear for graduation: a white shirt and black pants. He felt so proud that he could achieve something big. He did not have anybody to share that with, but I was there, of course. After the ceremony, each kid was given a bouquet of flowers to give to someone. I sat way in the back. He walked all the way to the back to give it to me. It was the best experience I ever had. I was so touched. It was so rewarding for me. That is a meaningful relationship, an experience that I’ll never forget.

Unlike the other collaborators who do not have the ability to maintain consistent relationships with their participants, Philomena’s experiences presented a more intimate aspect of being a volunteer.

When asked more about her relationship with her two youths, Philomena shared how it has grown into a state full of love and comfort:

I see how comfortable they are with me and how they love me too. We joke around and are able to say things to each other that we were unable to years ago. At the beginning, they were really polite and were careful of saying or doing anything wrong. They would always apologize, “Oh I’m sorry. I may be out of line,” or “sorry ma’am, sorry miss.” But now, we are at a point where they say, “Philomena! I love you!”...I feel like getting to that point was not easy. At the
beginning, they did not talk much. It took a long time for them to open up to me. At the beginning, they would mostly look down at the floor. They would even tell me, “I was just a kid and I was full of guilt.” But now, they have opened up and are comfortable. If you ask me how I feel about their love, I feel like I’m one of their grandmas.

For Philomena, her experiences exemplified how her relationships were much deeper than just a volunteer-participant dynamic. She was considered like a family member to her youths. When asked about how she felt her services influenced her youth, she stated how the consistency of her visits most likely had some form of impact:

I’m not sure if I see any impact that I can recognize. I’m sure there would be some individual impact, but they don’t really show it. I have visited youths for two, seven, eight years, so I can see the change: from first being afraid, scared, and quiet, to the point where they’re comfortable, trusting, and happy when I am there. I also think they feel some kind of validation. Because of my consistent visits with them for many years, they now trust and believe that there’s love. It’s from a stranger who’s consistently there, so that would give them some sort of emotional impact.

Philomena did not pay much attention to her impact, rather, she focused on visiting consistently, which was more worthwhile to her. To this day, Philomena still meets regularly with her two youths.

**Not Necessarily Spiritual**

“I have to tell you the truth. I am not religious. I usually go to church and am half asleep,” stated Philomena. Another individual theme that was unique to Philomena’s experience of ministry was how she felt that faith and spirituality are not pertinent aspects of her service. When asked about
how her spirituality influenced her volunteering, Philomena discussed how she does not explicitly talk about faith or God during her visits:

I don’t [talk about God] much because my faith is not that good. I let them feel through me, but I do not preach at them or anything. I never bring up God and I don’t pray either. I tell them they can pray but if they don’t pray, then I say, “Okay, we can just talk.” I show them my faith in a different way: not through the bible or saying good things about God, but I try to lead by example by doing good things...I don’t think about [spirituality] like that. I don’t think I serve God. I just think, “Okay, I do some good deeds for others and good deeds for me at the same time. God is the one who guides me to do that.” I don’t know, maybe I am just a rebellious person. I ask Him to help me, but I don’t do this because of God, I do this because of the kids and because of me. And it makes me feel good...They know I am a good Catholic, but not a very religious one.

Although it was surprising for Philomena to not credit her faith in her service, she made it clear that she still sought to live out good values and to be a good example to her participants.

Philomena talked about how she used to conduct bible studies for the ministry, but prefers doing one-on-one visits:

I do bible study too, but I prefer one-on-one visits because I initially only did one-on-one visits. Because of the lack of volunteers, I was asked to do bible studies. I am not really religious or into the bible. So I don’t feel qualified to lead. Every time I had to lead, I had to really look into the bible story or listen to a sermon or something to see the meaning. I need to learn it myself first.
While the other volunteers in this study expressed the importance of their faith and spirituality when sharing their experiences of being a prison ministry volunteer, Philomena initially did not share that it was an important aspect of her services. Over the course of our interviews, Philomena did acknowledge how God is part of her calling, but faith was not something explicitly expressed in her services: “I don’t know if I can impact them in any spiritual way, but they know I believe in God and I do it because I love God.”

**Ephrem**

Ephrem is a 59-year-old Caucasian man who has been volunteering with Catholic prison ministry for nine years. He is married with three adult children. Ephrem currently works as a high school independent studies teacher. During his years of being a teacher, Ephrem pursued a counseling credential to possibly switch careers and become a counselor. He found that his work as an independent studies teacher allowed him to teach students with various backgrounds and issues. He typically meets with students individually and sees aspects of counseling inadvertently incorporated into his teaching.

Despite Ephrem’s dedication to detention ministry, I was surprised when I asked him about his faith. Ephrem shared that he was raised Protestant:

I grew up Protestant in the Baptist Church. I fell in love with Jesus, understood his sacrifice, forgiveness of sins, and had a real conversion during late elementary school age and through high school and college. I went to the seminary...The seminary education was really informative, but it also led me to be very critical of sermons when I was listening to them...I was just super critical and it bothered me because I was not benefiting.
Ephrem’s further exploration of his faith brought about a self-critique of it as well. This led to what he called a “spiritual dryness” and he talked about his desolation: “I got married and had kids and it was so overwhelming... We were so busy with kids and raising them and church became like a once-every-two-weeks thing. It just wasn’t spiritually fulfilling me. I was dead, spiritually dead.” Ephrem felt that his faith at this time was stagnant and he yearned for a richer faith. As he continued attending weekend church services, Ephrem became more discontent with the spiritual discourse he was hearing.

Through his critiques of the pastors’ sermons and his personal dissatisfaction, Ephrem eventually came to the Catholic faith:

I’ve been a Christian since childhood, but it was always about the new people in the church.

“You may be here today and you’ve never given your life to Jesus,” which is super important. I don’t deny that. But, the pastor wasn’t talking to me. He was talking to the new people... So I needed a change and I didn’t know who to trust because pastors say all sorts of things and they’re all so different and there’s so many different denominations. I had my own opinions and even though I’m seminary educated, I realized that I don’t always have the right answers either... I came up with some really weird doctrinal beliefs of my own that I believed. But maybe they’re anti-orthodox, and I could be wrong. And I probably am wrong. Once I had admitted that, then it was like, “Well, who do I trust?” There was an organization that has history and is global and doesn’t rely on one person, but has a group of people—people who work together to create the doctrine. That was the Catholic Church.
Upon Ephrem’s landing on Catholicism, he experienced a rejuvenation with his personal faith. Once he starting engaging with the Catholic faith, he found a much richer spiritual connection:

I went to a Roman Catholic church. My gosh, it was such a great experience. I just grew spiritually so much from just visiting the Stations of the Cross. That was so moving the first time I did that. There was nothing like that in my Protestant background. It was a spiritual dryness that needed to be healed, and that’s what the Catholic Church offered me.

Ephrem framed his conversion from a lens of healing. What he found in the Catholic faith brought him to wholeness.

Ephrem converted to Catholicism nine years ago and has been a practicing Catholic since.

With his new faith identity, Ephrem sought to volunteer in a prison ministry:

2014 was when I went through RCIA and became Catholic. As soon as that was done, I was an official Catholic. I could participate in the ministries and I looked around and found the prison ministry. Why the prison ministry was interesting to me was because I loved picking the thing that was different: I ride a motorcycle instead of driving a car. I studied Japanese instead of Spanish. I tend to do the different things that are unusual because they seem more interesting.

Ephrem discovered the Catholic detention ministry in his diocese at a ministry fair, where he found the contact information and began the process to become a volunteer. He acknowledged that this was not the typical ministry that people sought after, yet its uniqueness was also what drew Ephrem. He also expressed another reason for why he chose the prison ministry:

When I was a classroom teacher, I had a student. He was just off the wall. He had attention issues. He was angry. He was a foster kid. He was just a handful. I did my best and tried to be
compassionate. Then he disappeared and he stopped coming. When I asked the attendance office, they said, “Oh, he’s in juvenile hall.” And I immediately thought, “What if I could go and visit him?” I didn’t try because I didn’t know what the rules were and if it was possible. I wasn’t super close to him. He hadn’t been in my class for maybe a few weeks, but I just started wondering, “What’s it like for a kid to go to juvenile hall? That was way before my conversion, but it made me think about things.”

Prior to becoming a volunteer, Ephrem already had exposure to serving students from marginalized backgrounds. This was a precursor that led him to serving this vulnerable population. Today, Ephrem volunteers in the juvenile facilities conducting bible studies and one-on-one visits. At his home parish, Ephrem is an usher and helps open the church doors on the weekends.

**Comparisons from a Protestant Background**

When I met Ephrem, I was surprised to learn that his years of volunteering in Catholic detention ministry was the same amount of years he was Catholic. All of my other collaborators have been Catholic for the majority of their life and their volunteering occurred years after they became Catholic. Because he was previously Protestant and also educated from that frame, Ephrem described some of his volunteering experiences with the consideration of a Catholic-Protestant comparison. For instance, when he reflected on the youths’ faith and spirituality, Ephrem noted differences between Catholic and Protestant viewpoints:

I’ve noticed with the kids who do sacramental preparation, it’s to make grandma happy. It’s what mom wants. “Grandma will be happy if I do that.” It’s like a religion. It’s a formality. It’s ritual. The faith part, the relationship with God, trusting in God, is different than going
through First Holy Communion. It’s easy for kids growing up in the Catholic Church to separate those two, because there are so many rituals like sacraments and all. But in the Protestant church, they don’t do all that stuff and it’s just a relationship with God. That’s what they focus on. In a sense, it makes more sense to the kids.

Ephrem also noted:

When [the kids] hear “Catholic,” then it’s about rules. It’s about the signs, you know like making the sign of the cross. It’s the rosary they want to hang around their neck. It’s not about prayer, it’s about the decoration. I mean, I love the Catholic Church because it has things you can touch, things you can see, and things you can hear. In the Protestant church, it’s devoid of that. It’s just sitting and contemplating your faith. I appreciate the sacramentals, but I think for the kids, they get confused. “Oh, if I do this, then I’m saved, okay, got it.” They don’t go deeper than the surface level.

Ephrem provided a unique perspective to his volunteering experiences that my other collaborators did not have.

Specifically regarding the Catholic faith, Ephrem felt that the ministry gave a more palatable pathway for the youth to connect with their spirituality. This frame of reference influenced his volunteering service as he sought for the youth to possess a deeper connection and understanding of faith, rather than a superficial relationship:

It’s what I’m battling against. To be honest, I don’t like giving kids rosaries because it means nothing to them. I doubt they actually pray with it. It’s just something to wear. So that’s the battle. Or they want to know about rules. “Can I do this? Can I do that?” Why can’t I do this?
What’s the Catholic rule about this?” And it’s not about the rules. Yeah, we have rules, but I try to get them to look deeper.

In addition to having his youth foster a more intimate connection with God, Ephrem also recognized the difficulties of the ministry.

Again, Ephrem described his challenges in reference to his Protestant understanding. Ephrem shared an instance during one of his bible study sessions where the youth attendees seemed to not pay attention, and he reflected deeply:

I had the weirdest experience once. It was about the parable of the sowing of the seeds on the road and in the thorns. The kids were just not there that night. And it feels like I’m just throwing seeds on the path and the birds are just eating them up. I’m telling them this parable and I’m trying to get through to them. But I don’t know if I am. I come from a Protestant background. In the reformed tradition, there’s predestination and God has already chosen people, which means there are people He hasn’t chosen. It’s a weird theology to think carefully on, because then, you throw your hands up. But sometimes, I just really wonder, “Do these kids even have a chance for a spiritual life?” It’s not for me to answer, but sometimes you feel like it’s such a wall.

Because Ephrem has been educated in both the Protestant and Catholic faith, I found our interview conversations to be very rich with topics of spirituality and theology. I was able to clearly hear Ephrem’s experience of his detention ministry service alongside the juxtaposition of his interior reflections.
An Awareness of Privilege and a Preference for the Poor

Throughout the interview conversations, I noticed that Ephrem was very aware and reflective of his positionality in relation to those whom he served. I believe that his awareness stemmed from his years of teaching non-traditional populations of students. He took time to understand the difficult realities that his students possessed. Moreover, Ephrem acknowledged his privileges and chose to live in a way that did not disregard those who experienced great suffering or those who were marginalized:

I continue [to volunteer] because if I didn’t, I’d be comfortable in my middle class house with my fairly normal family, in my normal job, going to my normal church, and I’d be insulated from the world. I know that I could easily turn a blind eye to people who are suffering and I don’t want that. That’s why I keep going. I don’t want to see the pain in the world, but I want to be connected to people who are suffering.

Ephrem expressed how he could not disregard or forget about those who suffered. He recognized his social responsibility as a human being to help and uplift those who were struggling.

By choosing to spend time with poor and vulnerable populations, Ephrem exemplified what he believed was God’s call to those who have more than enough:

I don’t want to get isolated in my suburban world and not be aware of the reality of pain and trauma and what’s going on in their lives. As hard as it is to hear some of this stuff and not be able to fix it, obviously I don’t want to fool myself to think that Sunday morning with nice clothes and smiles with everyone being happy is what life is about. It’s not. And I think Jesus might go to church on Sunday, but he would spend most of his time going out and doing things with people in need.
Ephrem grew into his current understanding through his continued life experiences of serving others in precarious situations along with his reflections on his life. This praxis ultimately shaped his heart to have an orientation or preference for the poor and marginalized. With the inspiration and calling of his faith, Ephrem grew to offer more of his life in a way that helped those who he saw really needed it. He shared, “Over the years, I started to become less concerned about teaching content as much as helping the students in my room who were struggling.” He met his students and youths wherever they were and chose to not judge them based on their difficult circumstances.

“My heart was always towards the people who have less blessings and fortunate situations in life,” shared Ephrem. He accepted his calling as a permanent mark on his heart, which continues to inspire him to keep volunteering. Although most people may have an inclination to care for others and help when they can, Ephrem explicitly spent time reflecting and acknowledging this aspect of his personhood:

I’ve always been drawn to people who are struggling with life. I struggled with life when I was a kid too, but nothing like prison or juvenile hall or drugs or anything. I’ve always had compassion for the ones who struggle. So I’m going to help.

By listening about Ephrem’s continual service, prayer, and reflection, I felt the authenticity of Ephrem’s calling as well as the generosity of his heart. He undoubtedly was a man inspired by God and he sought to imitate the love of God in all his works. He affirmed, “I try to look at it through God’s eyes, and I think He has more compassion for these kids who suffer than we do. I hope, really hope I’m not wrong.”
Saints in Detention

I was truly inspired by each collaborator in this study. Despite living ordinary lives and being ordinary people, each volunteer possessed a testimony that eventually moved me to see them as modern-day saints. Their narratives encompassed the complexity of the volunteering experience within detention ministry. Although united under the same faith and belief in God, each collaborator offered a unique point of view to who they were and how they served those impacted by the justice system.

Oftentimes, volunteers are unheard, unknown, or undervalued as important stakeholders within the prison system. Therefore, I sought to honor and uplift their voices and experiences in hopes to spread their wisdom to whomever seeks a more humanizing perspective of the incarcerated population.

Although the collaborators’ positionalities uniquely shaped their approach to volunteering in detention ministry, they still possessed some commonalities. In the next chapter, I present the collective themes that were shared across the volunteers.
Chapter 6—Seeing

“I hope for my eyes to become more like the eyes of Christ,” professed Francis. Each collaborator in this study possessed a rich experience of volunteering within detention ministry. Across my faith sharings with each of the volunteers, I came across recurring themes which I synthesize in this chapter. Each collaborator possessed their own sight of humanity, truth, and God within the confines of detention, but collectively, they offered a composite depiction of the volunteering experience. As I combed through the amplitude of dialogue within my faith sharings, I ultimately stumbled upon extraordinary, robust insights in regards to this topic of inquiry. Moreover, I found that although the experience of volunteering in detention ministry was a niche phenomenon, it proved to be truly complex, nuanced, and abundant with great wisdom.

In this chapter, I present the shared ideas across all of the collaborators. After the final analysis, four main themes arose from the collective experiences of volunteering: (1) Within detention ministry, volunteers experience and understand God through love, faith, humility, and hope. (2) Detention ministry serves as a pedagogical space for listening, learning, and greater awareness. (3) Volunteers continually foster a critical consciousness of the injustices surrounding incarceration. (4) Through humanizing and being in solidarity with those impacted by the justice system, volunteers experience and witness a mutual transformation. These themes are reiterated in italics throughout the text of this chapter. Within each theme, there were three to four related subthemes. To better understand the essence of this phenomenon, I organized the themes in this chapter to align the reflective journey of serving and seeing as the volunteers did—an attempt and effort of living and seeing like God.
With God in Detention

The first notable theme that emerged from the volunteers’ experiences pointed to God: *Within detention ministry, volunteers experience and understand God through love, faith, humility, and hope.* When asked to share their experiences, each collaborator acknowledged their Catholic faith and the notion of God being actively present throughout their thoughts and services. For this chapter, I am aware that the understanding, knowledge, and conversation of God extends beyond the parameters of this current study, yet I truly believe that the discussion of ministry experience cannot be fully grasped outside the context of God. I acknowledge that God as a divine concept and transcendent entity means that it is impossible to fully grasp the notion of God. This section specifically focuses on this theme within the context of detention ministry and the experiences of the volunteers. When listening to the conversations with my collaborators, I equated, “God,” “Jesus,” and “Holy Spirit,” as the same when considering the Catholic understanding of the trinity (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 1994, para. 264).

The initial encounter for each volunteer came from their personal inspiration from God. Most of the volunteers discussed their calling or vocation from God to serve within this capacity. Rooted within scripture, Teresita shared her reason for volunteering when encountering inquiry from others:

> When people ask me, “Why do you volunteer?” I tell them, “Do you know why? It’s because in the bible, Jesus says, ‘When I was sick, when I was in prison, when I was naked, you visited me.’” I do this ministry because I love God and I love Jesus.
Her reason for serving stemmed from a great love for God. Similarly, Ephrem discussed how his understanding of Jesus’ model served as an example for him to dedicate his life to volunteering in this capacity:

Jesus’ example was to reach out to the poor and sick and “sinners.” I mean, if there were juvenile halls, He would have visited juvenile hall. I believe so. He’s my role model and example.

So if I can be forgiven and shown God’s mercy, then I need to tell others too.

For most of the volunteers, their calling from God was not static, rather it involved a continual reflection and discernment. Their intimate connection with God exemplified a flourishing relationship where God continued to inspire their work. Bernadette gave an example of her daily prayer and conversation:

“God, You called me into this. Can you just use me and let me make a difference in somebody’s life?” That’s what I pray for every morning. I always say, “Thank you, Jesus for another day on this earth and help me make a difference in someone’s life today, whatever that difference is.”

These volunteers’ distinct experience of God drew them to this niche ministry. They represent a small anomaly of people who desire to encounter those who are incarcerated because this is not a common experience.

The collaborators believed that the motivation to volunteer in this capacity was truly special. Philomena emphasized how being a detention ministry volunteer was not a common blessing:

We should thank God and the Holy Spirit for giving us the chance to open our minds and hearts to do things like this. Not everyone has this blessing. We are blessed and chosen for this kind of ministry. I think this is a mission that God has sent me here to do.
God’s consolation and inner workings within the hearts of the volunteers sustained their years of service. Given his old age, Joseph asked God for the vitality to continue serving in detention ministry:

I pray to God to give me strength so that I can continue with this ministry because I believe that I understand the teachings of Jesus literally and spiritually. He calls people to visit the imprisoned and that is why I want to continue serving until God doesn’t want me to anymore.

Additionally, Joseph discussed how God’s calling is not just limited to the volunteers, but also permeated the hearts of those who attend the services:

When they come to my bible study, I tell them, “God called you to come here. I came here by God’s order and you came here by God’s miracle. I don’t know who you are and you don’t know me, so it was God who brought us together.”

Joseph’s description of God’s calling highlighted the idea that God’s presence within the ministry was not just within the volunteer, but with the spaces and people who were connected to making the ministry possible.

Although I do not believe anyone can fully grasp the expansiveness and magnanimity of God, the volunteers’ experiences gave insight to God’s activity within the ministry. From their perspectives, God was a fundamental reality that grounded their experiences. When understanding the essence of God and how God concretely influenced the volunteers and their service, they used anthropomorphic terms to emphasize God’s actions. For instance, both Pio and Mary talked about how “the Holy Spirit touches” the hearts of their participants. Pio further discussed how God “teaches” and “works” during each of his services. Monica described how God “pushes” her and “influences” her participants to attend services. John used the image of God as a powerful “mediator” between conversations. Pio
shared a story where he metaphorically described Jesus as a lawyer to a man facing a possible life sentence:

I told him, “Get Jesus as your lawyer. He knows everything and no one can defeat him. If you have faith, let Him know that you need him.” Later on, the man told me, “You were right. I put my case in Jesus’ hands and I told Him how I didn’t do the things I was going to be charged for. When I was given my sentence, instead of getting life, I only got three years.”

It was important to note that the volunteers’ faith and belief in God were very real to them. They ultimately saw God as the change agent within their lives and service.

Throughout the faith sharings, the volunteers often credited God for any influence or impact on themselves as well as on the participants. Teresita mentioned, “I can only share love and faith with them. Only God can change their hearts and minds.” Uniquely within detention ministry, God also was the source for any sort of healing and restoration, if any. Mary posited:

Everytime I’m lucky enough to be there, we’re all restored and healed in some way just by being in the presence of the Holy Spirit. It’s not because of me, but they are restored because I get restored and healed. I don’t think you can be in the presence of the Holy Spirit and not get restorative healing.

An essential understanding the volunteers possessed was that they were not responsible for determining whether their service made any positive impact, rather they believed that through God, they were helping those they served. Teresita let her participants know that, “God comes to see you and help you.” A vital aspect of being a volunteer within the ministry included how God was actively
involved in multiple ways: through the inner reflections and thoughts of the volunteers as well as the
outward experiences of encountering their participants.

To further elucidate this theme of experiencing God, there were four subthemes that garnered
greater understanding of God’s reality and activity within this phenomenon: (1) God as great love, (2)
Personal faith and prayer, (3) Humbled by God and ministry, and (4) Sustaining hope. Even though
this theme specifically highlighted the experience of God, the notion of God and faith both subtly and
unsubtly wove throughout the rest of the themes presented in this chapter as well.

**God as Great Love**

“I try to look through God’s eyes and I think He has more compassion for these kids than we
do,” claimed Ephrem. It would be remiss to discuss God and not discuss love. For the collaborators,
their belief in God was the force that magnetized their being to engage in selfless service. Although the
concept of love is abstract and understood in a variety of ways, this study sought to describe God’s love
through the specific experiences of the volunteers. There was an illustriousness to God’s love that some
of the volunteers even acknowledged cannot be fully understood. Mary shared how she describes God’s
love to her participants:

There is no love like God’s love. It doesn’t require anything except for them to accept it. When
I share that, I always see this look on their faces like, “This seems a little too good to be true.” I
believe that is what keeps people from it because it just seems too simple. He doesn’t need
anything from you. He wants you to accept all His gifts and they’re not used to hearing that.

Mary’s reflection encompassed a contradicting dialectic: the volunteers understood love through their
human senses, which seemed limiting compared to both the complexity, yet simplicity of God’s love. A
facet of their experience of God was how He loved them. Paul shared, “I thank God for giving me a
taste of what unconditional love is. He has it for every single one of us and he wants us to have it for
each other.” Francis also commented that through the ministry, he felt a “real love.” Moreover, it was
essential for these volunteers to spread the love they’ve received in whatever ways they can.

The volunteers found it important to have their participants understand that God loved them
despite their circumstances. They did this by either reminding them about God’s love, loving them
themselves, or encouraging them to love others. For instance, Monica shared, “Sometimes, you need to
give them a sense of God’s love. I remind them of God’s love and I hope that they can feel better.” Both
Joseph and Mary discussed how they possessed a genuine love for who they served. They also saw that
their participants suffered and needed more love. Joseph mentioned:

I share my experiences with them, anything I have that can help them. Truly, at the bottom of
my heart, I love them. I feel great pity for them because of what they lived through. I feel sorry
for them. I don’t want them to lose more opportunities.

Mary elaborated on how being in detention ministry has helped her to become even more loving:

This ministry has really helped me to love people unconditionally. It’s easy to say, “Don’t judge
anybody.” But when you put yourself in a situation where you really get to know people, you
realize, “Wow, I shouldn’t do this, because I actually feel love for these people.”

For the collaborators, understanding love through the entity of God gave love a transformative power.
They believed that God’s love was essential to the impact of the ministry on its participants.

Their desire to share love stemmed from their awareness that many of the individuals who were
impacted by the justice system lacked love in their lives. Philomena believed that her participants “don’t
have any love,” while Francis claimed that love “is quite missing” for those whom he serves.

Additionally, Pio mentioned, “All they need is love. People change when they feel like somebody is
loving them.” Similarly, Teresita asserted, “They need more love. Love is the most important thing.
Love also needs to be in the minister...If you say, ‘I love God,’ but you don’t love your brother and
sister, then you are lying.” For some of the volunteers, they focused on the power of love in their
ministry, which pointed to the power of God. For them, embracing love was synonymous to
embracing God, therefore it was important to share God’s love to those who particularly needed it.

Mary testified:

   It’s an incredible feeling to bring the love of God to people. That’s all I’m trying to do. People
   need to know how much they’re loved and it’s hard to articulate. It matters because they don’t
   get a lot of positive affirmation or any love in there. If we can spend an hour sharing the love of
   God, then that’s really important.

Lastly, God’s love served as a sustenance for many of the volunteers. Without the love for God and the
call to loving others, the volunteers did not believe that they would have continued serving to the
extent that they did.

**Personal Faith and Prayer**

   “In this ministry, I 100% trust in God. When I serve, I don’t think that I receive any earthly or
worldly benefit. I do this spiritually for myself and for them, under the guidance of God,” proclaimed
Joseph. Another essential aspect of experiencing God came through the personal faith and prayers of
the volunteers. Faith in this sense was specifically tied to their Catholic understanding of spirituality.

When discussing faith in this section, I did not refer to theology or doctrine, rather the intimate beliefs
and experiences of the collaborators. Their faith provided a lens in how they framed their understanding of this phenomenon. Teresita shared, “If I didn’t have faith, I would not go serve. With faith, everything is possible. In the past 16 years of doing this, I have read more of the bible, learned more, and I listened more.” Teresita’s words highlighted the possibility for faith to provide a wider and more expansive view of her ministry experience.

Although the approach and experience of their faith was not exactly the same across the collaborators, there was a versatility to how they utilized their faith or how God permeated throughout their lives. For Dymphna, when she encountered difficulty or despair during her services, she grounded herself in her faith: “At the end of the day, [this ministry] requires another level of surrender and trust in God. I have to trust that things will be okay. They will be taken care of.” Lastly, some of the volunteers discussed how volunteering in detention ministry has helped their faith. Ephrem stated how “this ministry made me more reliant upon daily Mass.” For John, his faith allowed him to acknowledge that it was an “honor and privilege” to “bring God to people.” When asked to describe the ministry to others, Monica noted, “I think this ministry is good for anybody who is looking for God and wanting to know Him more. This ministry will shape you and bring you closer to understanding God.” Not only did their personal faith inspire the volunteers to serve, but there was a reciprocal effect where their service impacted their personal faith.

The collaborators also talked about their acts of prayer as another way of incorporating faith into their experience. When describing prayer, I referred to the instances whenever the volunteers directly communicated or offered their hearts and minds to God. When asked to share words of wisdom to those interested in the ministry, Bernadette advised:
Pray before you go. Pray after. Pray with the person you’re visiting. Always include prayer because these are not social visits. They’re ministry visits. So always start with God, end with God, and bring up God in your conversations...It’s extremely rewarding if you choose to do it, but really, is it your choice? It’s where God is leading you.

Throughout the faith sharings, many of the collaborators relied on prayer as an integral part of their services as well as their lives. Many talked about how they prayed for their participants beyond their service times. Elizabeth shared, “I pray for the inmates more often. They need guidance and I pray for their guidance...It just gives them a little bit of peace.” John let his participants know that they were being prayed for: “Most of the time during my visit, we pray. We pray for them. When I talk to them, I say, ‘You know what? I’m praying for you.’ Whether it helps or not, I hope it touches their heart.” The volunteers directed their prayers to God and there was a trust that God listened. Their prayers served as a form of reflection and meditation. Prayer had the potential for leading the volunteers to a greater understanding of God’s desire for them. Pio shared, “In my prayer, I said, ‘They need this. They need us to come and bring them the Good News. Not because of us, but because of God.” For all the collaborators, the incorporation of prayer and their faith was essential throughout their experience of volunteering. Their stories revealed how their faith in God expanded beyond the ministry and flowed through all areas of their lives.

Humbled by God and Ministry

“I’m reminded that it’s perfectly okay to be helpless in this ministry. It’s where we humble ourselves,” stated John. The next subtheme that most of the volunteers expressed was the concept of humility. Specifically within the context of detention ministry, the volunteers shared sentiments related
to being humbled by God as well as being humble for God. Most talked about how their service was wholly inspired by God, therefore, it required them to set aside their personal egos in order to fruitfully serve. Mary shared, “I do a lot of talking to God before they come into the room. I try to empty myself and say, ‘Okay, it’s Your words, not mine.’” Along the same vein, Francis reflected on his humility over the years:

I believe that whatever I speak should come from the Holy Spirit, and not me. I’m just an instrument. My ego has lessened while my spirit has heightened. God must increase and I must decrease.

Part of the humility the volunteers experienced stemmed from their conviction that God’s ways are best.

The volunteers shared how there were moments where they encountered individuals or witnessed situations they did not have control over. During these moments, they simply offered their thoughts and intentions to God. Pio used a metaphor of God being a writer and himself being the pencil: “Please help me prepare myself. You know what they need, so You can talk to them. I am only the pencil, and You’re the writer.” Similarly, Monica discussed how God fully guided her:

Whatever I say is on God’s behalf, not mine. Sometimes, I go in and I simply pray to the Holy Spirit, “I don’t know his background, but I trust You to guide me in what to say the right thing.” Whether it impacts them, only God will understand.

Most of the volunteers who conducted bible studies mentioned how they would try to prepare content for their services. Despite their prepared agenda, some recalled how many of their conversations ended
up moving in different directions. Rather than upholding what they prepared, they saw that this incongruence may have been God’s way to take charge. Paul described,

> Even though I have prepared for my service, sometimes, I will go totally off base of what I prepared. I think that maybe it was the Holy Spirit taking over because someone needed something special that I didn’t know about.

For the volunteers, humility was one of the ways in which they were reminded of God’s activity within the ministry. The context of detention ministry presented unique challenges where volunteers did not necessarily have the answers or abilities to address. Therefore, by striving to be humble during these moments, they allowed the capabilities of God to handle what they could not.

Another nuance of humility within this setting included how several volunteers talked about being humbled by the ministry and their service. Over the years of volunteering, the collaborators experienced humility to various degrees. Ultimately, they acknowledged that God continually humbled them through detention ministry. Carlo affirmed,

> We’re going to make mistakes in the ministry: we may not say the right thing all the time, or not do the right things or disappoint someone. We will be humbled in any ministry. God uses that humility to jump in and say, “You’re ready now.”

Again, this ministry presented various challenges and difficulties that were not easily solvable. The realities of those impacted by the justice system were beyond fixing, and the volunteers recognized that. Dymphna emphasized:
I really appreciate the whole premise of detention ministry. We are not converting, we’re not changing, we’re not fixing, because honestly, we can’t. That in itself is humbling. It’s not our responsibility because we are so limited. It really is up to the youth and God.

Emotionally, the volunteers expressed how it was not always easy to listen to the struggles and suffering of their participants.

The collaborators sought for meaning and healing in their faith and reliance on God. This required greater prayer and humility. Elizabeth shared a conversation she had with her pastor regarding her need for humility:

I asked a pastor once who had done a lot of detention ministry, “How do you not take what you hear with you?” He said, “You gotta let it go. It’s not your responsibility. You just need to pray about it.” And I hear that all the time. There’s really nothing I can do but to say a prayer.

Humility seemed to be a requirement for the volunteers in order to continue their service. They saw more and more that the issues surrounding incarceration were complex, multifaceted, and oftentimes discouraging. The volunteers would frequently remind themselves that they were not there to fix, nor were their goals to heal or change. Serving with these intentions would lead to disappointment, rather than hope.

**Sustaining Hope**

“I’m always looking for hope. I’m always looking for reasons to give them hope...I just do my part and tell them there’s a way out. There’s hope,” proclaimed Ephrem. Hope was an influential force that helped the collaborators sustain the years of volunteering for so long. Many of the participants the volunteers encountered possessed troubling realities where their outcomes seemed dim. The
individuals struggling with incarceration carry an insurmountable burden of doubt and despair. Therefore, holding on to hope was an integral part of believing that things will get better for the participants. Hope pointed to believing in God who promised healing and salvation. Dymphna discussed the reality of hope for this ministry: “There’s a fine line in offering hope. They need hope. Yes. Their reality is such that their hope comes with a myriad of challenges.” Even though the situations of these individuals seemed bleak, it was common for volunteers to encourage their participants to maintain hope amidst their situations.

Francis discussed in his bible studies, “I tell them that there is still hope, so please accept that and pray.” Similarly, Teresita shared an example of what she encouraged during her services:

I feel compassion and I feel sorry for them when they tell me they already have their sentence. I tell them, “You know what? Believe in God and have hope. It’s never too late. Maybe things will change and you will be released soon”

Many of the collaborators accepted that they might not make the biggest impact or change to their participants. Despite this, they held onto hope that their actions and service made some sort of difference. John reflected,

Sometimes we feel like we can’t do a lot. Whatever we do is so little. It is like the tip of the iceberg for this population that needs help. Their needs are overwhelming. But we still do whatever we can, even the smallest act. Hopefully it will make a difference.

Likewise, Carlo commented on the importance of continually bringing hope to his participants during their difficulties: “I think about how we try to be ambassadors of hope for them...You’re just accompanying them and sometimes, you can’t guarantee anything. You just say, ‘Let’s hope and pray
for you to get out.’” Furthermore, hope was not only a concept encouraged or experienced during their services—the volunteers discussed how hope was an essential part of their prayers beyond their volunteering hours. Bernadette shared,

I hope and I pray for them. I hold them with me. I will always remember our time together...You keep them in your heart and you pray for them. You think of the time you spent with them and that you hopefully influenced them for the good.

Within the context of detention ministry, hope tied to humility. The volunteers needed to trust in God’s ways and not their own to take care of their participants.

Both John and Bernadette used the metaphor of planting seeds as a representation of their service and hope. John talked about his perspectives during some of his bible study sessions:

“Sometimes they have so much going on in their mind. They probably don’t hear much from the session. You just hope something will click—a smile, a word. Something will stick and the seed will one day grow.” Bernadette compared her time spent serving to...

...planting a seed. Somewhere, one of them is going to remember that tiny bit of information you gave them and they’re going to run with it. It’s be nice if we could see it in our lifetime, but it’s not always going to happen that way. It’s hope.

Lastly, a motivator in sharing hope to the participants came from a perceived lack of hope. Many of the volunteers talked about how those who end up incarcerated did not have many trusting or loving adults in their lives. They lacked hope that their situations could improve. The volunteers heard stories about parents, teachers, and other adults abandoning hope or giving up on their youth.
The collaborators saw that part of their role was to simply show up and give hope in whatever way they can. Ephrem elaborated on this concept:

I don’t ever want to give up on the kids. One time, because it was a messy bible study and they were goofing around and it seemed like a waste of time, a kid asked me, “Why do you keep coming each week?” I had to be honest. It was because there’s always hope. “You know, you guys are just 16-17 years old. There’s so much in front of you. Maybe you’re not going to make a life changing decision tonight, or next week, or next month, but when you’re 30 years old, you’re not going to be acting like how you’re now.”...They’re going to bow out eventually.

They’re going to do something different, so I’m kind of planting seeds for those times.

Ephrem highlighted how hope allowed him to persevere despite the difficulties he faced serving in this capacity. The volunteers’ faith in God along with their enduring hope helped sustain their ministry and motivation to keep serving.

**Detention Ministry as a Classroom**

“Even after 16 years of volunteering, I’m still learning,” acknowledged John. The second theme that surfaced from my faith sharings involved the great potential for learning: *Detention ministry serves as a pedagogical space for listening, learning, and greater awareness*. Most of the volunteers admitted to learning a lot: about their participants, the realities of those impacted by incarceration, the prison system, and about themselves. John evidenced, “I found out that there’s a lot of things I can learn from them. I learn about the justice system, the jail population, and about the cycle of incarceration. So this ministry is a learning experience for me.” Therefore, detention ministry was essentially a pedagogical space for these volunteers. There existed an active learning that was constantly reflective. Through the
conversations with my collaborators, I heard much about their learning and gaining through engaging in this ministry. Some even talked about how they have witnessed their participants learn and gain from attending the services as well.

Within the context of detention ministry, the notion of teaching, educating, and other depictions related to learning were prevalent among the volunteers. Philomena stated multiple times, “I learned a lot from them.” She would say this when talking about the experiences of her youths as well as the wisdom she has gained from them over her years of visiting and serving. Francis also acknowledged, “Doing bible studies for the last 15 years has taught me to share. It is only by sharing can others learn. If the Holy Spirit touches the listener or student, then there can be a bigger impact.”

Francis specifically discussed how God was embedded within this pedagogical space. Through the nature of their religious involvement, most of the volunteers believed that God had a role in the learning as well: whether faith was a content of the conversations or whether God actively facilitated the learning. Mary described her pedagogy when conducting bible studies:

I don’t go in like a teacher. I just go in to share the Word and they share so much back. If that didn’t happen, I would probably question whether I was called for this...It’s a very collective learning and I get so much out of it if not more.

Oftentimes, the realization of how much was learned through serving in this capacity surprised the volunteers.

When entering this ministry, many did not expect that they would be learning from the population they served. Pio shared, “We think that we’re going to give something to them, but on the contrary, we receive.” In the same way, Francis commented, “Doing this ministry, I didn’t realize that I
am also learning.” Most mentioned how they entered with preconceptions to teach or give, but their experiences actually highlighted the antithesis. Ephrem reflected,

This ministry keeps me humble and I need that. I want that. Some of their wisdom, their spirituality, their pure honesty are profound too. The way they see the world is very perceptive. You ask a question and you think you’re going to get a certain answer, but they give you a completely different answer that makes sense. I’m always learning from these experiences.

Like Ephrem, most collaborators discussed how their learning was not static or stagnant within the ministry. Some considered their learning as life changing. Philomena attested, “I’ve learned a lot from them and it’s impacted me in how I live my life and how I treat people.” The outcome of authentic learning and reflection yielded personal transformation, which is a concept that will be further elaborated later in this chapter.

To further understand the nuances within this theme of learning, there were three subthemes that arose in relation to what the volunteers learned, or gained from detention ministry: (1) Listening as the entrance, (2) Learning about the difficult realities, and (3) Raised awareness–fostering criticality. In sum, detention ministry provided a space where the volunteers continually gained wisdom and insight over the years of their service.

**Listening as the Entrance**

“When you listen, you begin to understand,” shared Philomena. In this sense, listening was the entry point in which the volunteers learned. Learning primarily took the form of authentically listening to the stories, trials, and narratives of the ministry participants. Mary affirmed, “I found that when we listened more instead of preaching at them, I was able to learn too and it was just wonderful.”
The collaborators stressed the importance of prioritizing listening when serving this vulnerable population. Philomena further added, “You don’t have to understand everything before you go in there. But if you just keep listening, you will begin to understand their experiences.” The word, “listen” was mentioned by multiple volunteers. When asked what advice Elizabeth would give someone who was interested in becoming a volunteer, she shared,

The most important thing is to listen. Listening is a skill that not a lot of people have, but I think it’s really important. It’s really important to listen to not just just their words, but the underlying meaning that someone is trying to tell you.

The idea of listening reinforced the volunteers’ need to be humble and to not bring coercive agendas to their services.

Most of the collaborators discussed how those within the prison system lacked spaces where they were able to talk and lacked people who would genuinely hear their trials. Bernadette asserted, “These are teens who have had difficult childhoods. They need to be handled differently. You basically have to listen. You go to listen to them. They will tell you everything. Just listen.” By listening, the volunteers began to start knowing and realizing more of the difficulties that their participants faced. Ephrem emphasized,

Listen, listen, and listen. You have to know who you’re talking to before you talk. They get talked to a lot, so if you want to be heard and if you want them to listen to what you have to say, you have to listen to them first. They have to know that you are there and that you seriously care about them. You’re not there to clock hours or get paid.
In order to have fruitful interactions or services, the volunteers needed to listen first. By doing so, they conveyed a genuine care for whomever they encountered. Philomena highlighted this sentiment:

When we listen to them, they feel that somebody values them in some way. That’s why we listen. In their homes, the adults don’t listen to them. They don’t have a chance to tell them what they think. Here, we give them a chance to express who they are.

Having someone who listened to their stories was meaningful for the participants and it enabled them to form trusting relationships with the volunteers.

More than just learning and forming relationships, the collaborators expressed how listening was a means to help their participants. Pio and Teresita talked about how listening during their services were cathartic for their participants. Pio explained:

I listen to them. Even though we have a “conversation,” they’re the only ones talking. I don’t interrupt and I let them talk because that’s what they need. They need to let go of a lot of the things they carry and it helps them.

Teresita described how she makes time during her Communion services to let her participants share:

When I finish the Communion service and we still have time, I let them talk. They like to talk because they aren’t given time to talk. I tell them, “If you have something you would like to share, I will listen to you.”

These instances touched on how listening can potentially be a means for healing considering that most of the participants have experienced harm or suffering in some way. Ephrem focused on this point:

I ask open-ended questions and think about what they said. I tell them how it impacted me. I try to just be honest and give them the opportunity to talk. Whether it’s about the passage or
not, I don’t care. These are kids who have a lot of problems and trauma and I can only help
heal a small portion.

Ephrem’s quote also encompassed how listening can lead to many things such as learning,
transformation, and healing. Listening not only was the entrance for the collaborators to learn about
their participants, but it created a space for genuine connection and growth.

Learning About the Difficult Realities

During my faith sharings, it was common to hear about the difficult realities of those impacted
by incarceration. One of the notable topics discussed during my conversations were the trials, barriers,
and challenges that the majority of the incarcerated population faced. Joseph shared a personal proverb
that emphasized the importance of considering one’s environment:

There is a Vietnamese proverb that goes like this: If you plant a tangerine tree in a good area,
the fruit will become sweet. If you plant the seed in a location that isn’t good, it can be sour. So
this helps me think about those I serve.

Joseph depicted how one’s environment was important in creating positive trajectories, yet oftentimes,
the environments of those suffering incarceration were not adequate or loving. Many of the
participants faced poverty and the effects that stemmed from it. Dymphna discussed,

Unfortunately, those are the people we see. Those are the youth. That’s mostly what they come
from. In my experience, it’s very rare to find middle class youth in juvenile hall. I’m sure there
are a number of young middle-class people who have gotten into trouble and have serious
issues, but it’s interesting how the majority in the facilities are of lower income areas and are
less educated.
It was common for the volunteers to learn and accept that the individuals they served came from entirely different worlds when listening about their life experiences, or lack thereof. Carlo recalled a conversation and realization he had during one of his bible studies:

I said, “Heaven is like when you have a family party. You just have the greatest time and you’re all having fun: eating, laughing, joking. When the party’s over you either have to go to school or work the next day.” It felt like a downer when one of the boys said to me how he never had a family party in his life like the one I described. Once he said that, it seemed like all the air just came out of my bible study, and I thought, “What the heck? Have these kids never had a family party?” I was just startled, but I got it. It was humbling.

Learning about the harsh realities that their participants endured was perplexing for many of the volunteers to hear at first because many did not experience the same struggles. For the rest of this section, I broke down what the collaborators learned about the population they have been serving: most lacked a stable and supportive family, many have experienced some form of trauma, drugs and poor mental health plagued this population, and some found that living incarcerated was more bearable than being released.

Through the volunteers’ testimonies, it was not uncommon to hear about the complicated family dynamics of those who were incarcerated. Many children and adults lacked supportive and loving family members. Pio described his experiences with the youth population:

Most of the kids there don’t live with their parents. They live with their single mom or dad or grandma. Or they live on the streets. Most of them have no guidance and nobody to care for...
them, so they don’t know what to do. A lot of times, they hang out with the wrong crowd—gangs.

Likewise, Philomena noted, “Very few kids in the facility have a family to go back to. Most of them don’t have anybody to call family because when they were outside, they were on the streets. Their parents aren’t there for them.” For children, having supportive parents and a stable home heavily influenced their development. Oftentimes, children who are incarcerated lack those supports in the home. Similarly, for the adult population, Joseph shared,

Some adults tell me that they don’t have a house to live in or a family to live with. Some say, “I lived with my grandmother, but she is too old now and can’t have me. I live in the streets.” In that case, it’s very difficult for them to do good.

By learning about the difficult circumstances that their participants faced in their homes and families, the volunteers better understood why these individuals were incarcerated and why it was easier to recidivate.

The collaborators shared how their participants possessed strained family dynamics that perpetuated a distrust or hate for family members. In this sense, family was not always seen as a source of love or support. Bernadette shared a story of a youth she frequently visited:

I had a teen who I saw extensively. Both of his parents deserted him and his siblings. They left them with their grandparents and just deserted. The mother eventually came back and wanted to visit the teen. He was incarcerated and he didn’t want anything to do with her. He would say, “I told her she’s not on the list. I don’t want to talk to her. I don’t want anything to do with her.”
Learning about the familial struggles highlighted issues beyond the prison system that perpetuated poor outcomes. The collaborators acknowledged that the problems many of these individuals faced were deeply rooted in neglect and abuse and extended beyond just their crimes.

Another facet of adversity that the volunteers learned included how their participants experienced various forms of trauma. Through listening to their stories, the volunteers were introduced to the suffering and affliction experienced by their participants. Moreover, they learned that those who possessed more traumas were more likely to struggle with being released and reintegrated into society. Monica explained how trauma perpetuated recidivism and poor trajectories:

I’ve taken classes on what trauma means and how to recognize it in people. Sure enough, most of the people I serve carry a baggage of trauma one way or another. They have a family history of being abused or neglected. So many don’t know how to get out of their situations. They get into trouble now because of their pasts and that’s all they know.

Philomena gave an example of verbal abuse one of her youths experienced: “Before they were incarcerated, they had family members, like mom, dad, and grandparents who have called them stupid or that they’re not worth it. They need validation and it’s important that they are validated in a good way.” She found the need in her visits to speak against the negative words her youth heard from the adults in their lives. Elizabeth shared an example of how parental neglect has impacted the adult males she served:

A lot of the younger males have suffered some kind of trauma: their mothers mistreating them and their dads not always being in the picture. We hear about males abusing females, but I have never really heard about mothers psychologically and physically beating their sons.
In general, the volunteers learned about trauma and abuse directly from the stories of those they encountered. Moreover, their services offered a space for a richer learning experience from firsthand accounts.

From either observing their participants or directly from their participants’ stories, the collaborators learned about the prevalence of drug abuse and poor mental health that existed within this population. When asked to describe the population the ministry served, Dymphna attested,

I would describe the population broken like the rest of us—unfortunately without the tools and resources needed to thrive in a healthy manner. They haven’t had the opportunities like so many of us... Many challenges such as ADHD, special needs, drug and alcohol addictions and mental illness play a huge part as to why they are part of the correctional system.

Pio further explained that the issue of drug use stemmed from broken family relationships: “The juveniles come from broken families, which then can lead them into later abusing drugs and alcohol. They use those substances thinking it will help them, but on the contrary, it makes their problems worse.” The collaborators witnessed how substance abuse and mental health conditions perpetuated the cycle of crime and recidivism as well as deteriorated the well-being of their participants. Elizabeth discussed her concern for drug abuse within the prison system:

Everybody knows there is a drug problem, but I see these inmates and hear their stories about how drugs were their downfall. For a lot of them, it led to their poor mental state. They will say, “I’m a mental mess.” These drugs are killing their brain cells. I feel really bad for them.

Across the faith sharings, the volunteers conveyed how they learned a lot about the proliferation of drugs in the system and its effects on mental health and society. With their knowledge regarding drug
abuse and poor mental health, many of them, like Elizabeth, also expressed pity for what seemed like an inescapable trap.

Reflecting on the hellish realities of the many participants, some of the volunteers believed that being in detention brought more stability and comfort for some of the individuals. Considering the ways the prison system harmed those it incarcerated, this concept was not easy to grasp. Philomena came to understand this notion because her youth would directly tell her how being incarcerated was better than their outside life:

Some kids tell me how they have a good life [in the facility] compared to their life outside.

Some of the kids tell me, “I am safe in here. God blessed me by putting me in here because He wanted to save my life.”

Philomena touched on the dangers some of these individuals faced in their neighborhoods. Based on his observations and experiences, Carlo rationalized how...

...in some cases, the prison system gives these kids the gift of time to grow up and mature, especially if they’ve been there for a while. They grow up physically and become more mature.

If they’re on the streets, they would be still doing crazy things.

Similarly, Ephrem mentioned how being incarcerated sometimes gave these individuals more resources and supports than their communities:

A concern I have is that some of the kids seem to be more comfortable in juvenile hall than on the outs. They get a lot of support. They get free medical care and they get all the services like bible studies and church. It’s all there. But when they’re out, I don’t know.
Unfortunately, some individuals were simply more comfortable because incarceration provided more routines, consistent meals, education, health services, and other opportunities.

For some participants, living back in their homes and neighborhoods, or lack thereof, was more difficult than being incarcerated. John recognized that people who did not know the difficult realities of the prison population would struggle to understand this:

Most of us have a pretty good life. Rarely do we have a chance to encounter people on the margins, or those who are unfortunate in society...Especially for the homeless, it’s better for them to stay in prison. They can get food and have a place to stay overnight. Outside, they can get hurt. Some people have shared with me how places that provide housing are actually dangerous. So for them, prison is actually safer.

Across the faith sharings with my collaborators, I heard more and more about the unfathomable realities of this population. The collaborators seemed to have endless stories of individuals who shared their struggles during the services. Continually learning about human suffering that was perpetuated by larger systems eventually drew many of the collaborators to foster a critical awareness of the injustices related to detention ministry.

**Raised Awareness—Fostering Criticality**

“My service in this ministry certainly inspired me. I learn from the kids. I think it’s good because it pushes you out of your bubble and exposes you to another world. It’s good for your faith,” shared Carlo. The final aspect of learning within the context of detention ministry revolved around the concept of possessing a raised awareness. Many of the collaborators shared about how their service in this ministry has allowed them to gain insight and criticality in regards to incarceration as well as their
own lives. I use “criticality” broadly to encompass a spectrum: from simply noticing, to a deeper conscientização described by Freire (2018). Mary mentioned how her participants “really impact me every time. That’s the power of God. I feel blessed, so blessed. I’ve been given so much because they share insights, light bulbs for me go off. They’ll share something that I haven’t thought of.” The volunteers were not only able to learn more, but reflect and notice. Ephrem gave a specific example of how the youth in his bible studies have allowed him to notice his own attitudes and change his style:

I remember a few times I had [bible study] all laid out and what I wanted to do. When the youth started to sidetrack me with other questions, I actually got annoyed... They were very honest and it woke me up. I’m not supposed to be preaching at them. I need to be with them and be present for them.

The collaborators expressed how volunteering in the ministry inspired constant self reflection.

Joseph described how he would self-evaluate to see how he can improve his services. He also recognized that his self evaluation helped him reflect on his desire to continue serving: “After I finish my service, I evaluate myself. I try to think about how I can improve myself. Doing this helped me continue this ministry for a long time. If I don’t improve myself, then I can’t serve well.” Part of the criticality for volunteers included a change in their own ways of thinking. Ephrem described how volunteering led him to think critically about his faith, or think in a way that embraced the complexity of this context, rather than merely having a basic understanding:

For some people, the bible is just black and white. It’s the sheep and the goats and you’re gonna be divided. Judgment day is going to come and it’s going to be really simple. Having been in this ministry, I don’t think it can be that simple. It’s a reality check that it’s not simple.
In this sense, learning was not simply gaining new knowledge, but learning in this context also included epiphanic moments, or greater realizations that one did not have before.

One of the ways the volunteers conveyed their raised awareness was through acknowledging their own blessings after their conversations and services with those impacted by incarceration. Elizabeth reflected:

This ministry brings more awareness. My sister and I had a home, a mom, a dad, and we had food and clothes. Maybe these adults didn’t have all that...My parents always emphasized college so we were always studying. Maybe those who were incarcerated didn’t have that going for them.

Through this realization, the volunteers demonstrated a deeper understanding of how various factors and contexts influenced the lives of their participants. Dymphna explained:

I’ve been very blessed all of my life. I now have the clear understanding that no one is all good and no one is all bad. Outside forces play a tremendously critical role in behavior...I can honestly say that we can’t possibly understand the circumstances for the choices that people make. Volunteering with detention ministry awakened me to that fact.

By recognizing their own blessings and privileges, the volunteers were also inspired to further help others. Paul highlighted this point: “Doing this ministry really makes you reflect on how blessed you’ve been. And If we’ve been so blessed, then what’s more important than helping other people and blessing others?” The volunteers’ reflections emphasized how continually serving fostered a greater social responsibility for helping others. Dymphna further elaborated,
So many of us have been blessed with so much and with that comes great responsibility in giving of ourselves to others...We’ve all been given opportunities. I don’t know why, but many times, I think, “How was it that I was born into this family and have what I have? What can I give now? Where do You want me serving, God?

Grounded in their awareness, the volunteers recognized their personal blessings, which then moved them to give their time and help to those who were less fortunate.

One of the collaborators talked about his critical consciousness in relation to his own actions as a response to what he felt was unjust within the systems. Throughout my faith sharings with John, he expressed how his services influenced the way he would vote in future local elections:

By doing this ministry, I felt my eyes opened. I can see as a voter that I should be aware and conscious about where all the taxpayer money is going—whether it goes to the right place or whether people in power are abusing it. This can help me be on these adults’ side at least.

John’s awareness from serving in detention ministry shifted his beliefs, which influenced his actions to help in a way he felt was more pragmatic. For him, this involved his civil duty of voting. He further shared,

I learned that there is a dark side to the justice system. No systems are perfect. From talking to these people, I can see the reality. I don’t know, but maybe I can do something. Maybe I can be more vigilant next time like when I vote for a sheriff or District Attorney...this ministry has made me more aware of the people who serve our society and whether they want to truly bring change to the system.
John’s words encompassed the potential of criticality. Not only did it yield greater knowledge, but a deeper wisdom. Through this wisdom, John was inspired to act.

I conclude this section with Ephrem’s words. I appreciated the depth of Ephrem’s analysis of his experiences. He articulately discussed what he learned, his thought process, and how he was moved from his service as a volunteer to critical insight and discourse:

This ministry has definitely challenged my thinking to see the whole person and to see where they came from. The idea of choice: you made a bad choice, therefore you’re being punished. It’s not that simple in my mind because the extreme cases are that the kid grows up in a home where mom and dad are part of the gang. That’s just the lifestyle. Mom and dad yell at each other. Dad uses violence to fix things and the kid grows up in that environment. It’s not like they chose to be raised in that kind of home. The kid had no choice in this...I don’t excuse the kids because there is an inner right and wrong conscience, but I don’t know. You made a bad choice and therefore, you’re done. It’s not that simple. I don’t think God looks at it that way either. I mean, I hope not, because we’re telling them you can be forgiven. If God can forgive, then why can’t society forgive?

Ephrem’s words highlighted how he was not a passive listener or learner, rather he engaged with his insights. Detention ministry allowed him and the other volunteers to embrace a much deeper awareness and analysis of the complexity of those impacted by the system.

**Critiques of Justice**

“We don’t need a punitive penal system. We need the opposite,” declared Mary. The next theme that emerged from the experiences of volunteering focused on the collaborators’ critical
awareness: Volunteers continually foster a critical consciousness of the injustices surrounding incarceration.

During my faith sharings with each collaborator, I listened to their thoughts and experiences with the prison system. Across each volunteer, it was clear that most had critiques surrounding the issue of incarceration. They not only spoke about the prison system, but also about their experiences with facility staff, the negative opinions and attitudes of friends and family members, and issues with larger societal systems connected to incarceration. I saw that each volunteer possessed a different level of criticality: some merely noticed or witnessed things they disagreed with, while others deeply reflected on their position within the dehumanizing structure of the prison system. For instance, John exhibited a deeper criticality: he reflected on how continually engaging with his ministry ultimately pointed him to witness the injustices and deficiencies within the prison system:

> We’re usually naive. We trust our justice system and our government in general. But the more we look into them, the more we’re involved, and the more we encounter, we gain more insight that there are things that need to be improved. We need more transparency in every agency and organization. That’s one of the things that I learned from this ministry.

John’s sentiment highlighted the difficult realizations that the collaborators experienced when trying to grasp the existing injustices with every visit or service conducted.

In this section, I differentiate the main types of critiques the collaborators shared across their encounters with the system. Four subthemes arose in relation to what the volunteers critiqued after reflecting on their experiences of detention ministry: (1) Critiques of detention facilities, (2) Critiques of facility staff, (3) Critiques of systems that perpetuate incarceration, and (4) Encountering demonizing attitudes. Although not all collaborators possessed the same beliefs, or held sentiments to
varying degrees, this section presented the overarching commonalities among all the volunteers in this study.

**Critiques of Detention Facilities**

“I don’t know if the facility is restoring them back into society. I don’t know that they’re giving them the right skills to integrate them back into society,” commented Bernadette. The first layer of critique that the collaborators witnessed and expressed was about the function of detention and prison facilities. Bernadette commented on how these facilities seemed to lack prosocial programs or support for those who were incarcerated. Joseph also mentioned how the system lacked opportunities to educate and teach: “I wish there were more educational opportunities for them instead of just locking them away and then releasing them. I think the system needs to educate them better.” The volunteers’ perspectives came from not only their conversations with their participants, but what they noticed over the years of their volunteering.

Several of the collaborators discussed how the prison system needed a more rehabilitative approach. Whether it was supporting mental health or other issues, the volunteers noticed how this was not the case for the facilities they visited. Most critiqued how the system was more punitive, rather than rehabilitative or restorative. Mary reckoned,

We need to find a more restorative system. I hate that it is the “criminal” system. It should truly be the justice system. I always hoped that they would close a bunch of the prisons and revamp them to open them as centers for rehabilitation and access to services.
Many saw the need for more services that benefited those who were incarcerated. Joseph also shared insight into understanding the function of detention facilities. He discussed how these facilities served to merely lock up or keep people away:

When I think about the prison system, I think about how people are locked away physically. They’re kept away from the outside world for a while, but the focus is on physicality. They do not try to change their thinking. We need to influence their thinking. Not brainwashing them, but we need to help their minds. They need counseling, not just being locked up.

Most of the collaborators acknowledged that poor mental health needed to be adequately addressed and supported in order for these individuals to make substantial change. Again, Dymphna emphasized the need for rehabilitation, rather than retribution:

Prison serves a purpose for people who aren’t well. Unfortunately, it’s a mental institution and they don’t provide what these inmates need. Our society and the system are not serving them well. I think a big part of the issues are mental illness and drug and alcohol addictions. It reiterates the fact that prison and locking them up is not effective. There has to be more rehabilitation. Our system has very little rehabilitation.

The volunteers possessed an awareness of the ineffectiveness and harm committed by the prison system. Because of their personal hope and desire for better outcomes for their participants, they recognized that the system required improvements.

Some of the volunteers specifically mentioned how the adult participants they served expressed inadequate meals and food in the facilities. Monica shared how the adults she visited reported struggling with hunger while being incarcerated:
When I visit the adult facilities, the adults tell me how they are always hungry. The facilities don’t give enough food. If they don’t have family members who send them money to buy food, they’re going to be hungry all the time.

Part of the issue of inadequate food was related to the quality of the food served within the facilities. Elizabeth described how some adults in the facilities did not trust the food given to them:

One guy said how he found a piece of plastic in his oatmeal. Another guy said he found a piece of wrapper in his food. So they don’t feel like they can eat. The guy said he was on a peaceful hunger strike because people were afraid of what they could eat. He said when he gets hungry, he will chop everything up and look carefully at his food. That didn’t seem right.

Through their observations and by listening to the stories of their participants, the volunteers gained insight into the functions of the facilities. Many of them pointed out the injustices—what did not seem right—and how these systems dehumanized those who were incarcerated.

**Critiques of Facility Staff**

Another area of critiques that the collaborators discussed across their faith sharings were in regards to the facility staff they observed or encountered during their services. Francis talked about a disturbing situation he witnessed during one of his services:

I have seen some dehumanizing things in the facilities. One time, the second half of my bible study was canceled because there was a commotion. There was a fight among the inmates and the guards and deputies were shouting as well as putting the inmates against the wall...There is a police culture within the prisons and it’s really militaristic.
Although this was a more intense example of witnessing a staff response, most of the collaborators recognized that their experiences with staff members were wholly dependent on who the staff was. Paul mentioned, “I get disappointed in some of the staff. Some are very good and conscientious about caring for people. Others are very negative and are very hard on the kids.” Ephrem offered some insight to the function of the facility staff and how their actions were influenced: “For some staff, incarceration is supposed to be painful. ‘Why should we be nice to you? You’re being punished.’ So they treat the kids roughly. But there are some who are like mothers and are different.” Not all of their experiences with staff were negative, but some volunteers expressed how some facility staff have not been the most pleasant or kind to them or to the participants.

Monica and Bernadette shared experiences about how some of the staff they encountered were not the friendliest towards them. Bernadette described:

I have had some staff be unfriendly to me and unkind to me because I am there and interrupting them. I’ve had eye rolls where they’re like, “Oh God, you’re interrupting.” I’ve had staff treat me badly and who are not appreciative of why I’m there, but I’ve also had staff who have said, “Thank you.”

Monica noted, “The system is not there to protect the people. Even when I came to visit, I was treated badly as well.” It was common for the collaborators to talk about some negative interactions with staff. Their services, according to Dymphna, felt unpredictable and “very subjective, depending on the individual staff member, their mood, and what they want to do.”

One of the ways the volunteers critiqued the facility staff was in regards to the lack of care for those who were incarcerated. Mary asserted, “The staff who go into this system for whatever reasons
aren’t there to make society a better place. It’s terrible and it’s counterproductive, especially with kids.” Additionally, Dymphna explained how this was merely a job and there was no desire to help others:

The people who work there, these are their jobs. That’s it. They get a paycheck at the end of the week. They don’t necessarily have the natural compassion or desire to even help them. It’s very rare that I have felt welcomed by the staff.

The volunteers believed that in order to help those impacted by incarceration, the facilities required staff who cared more. Pio claimed that “of about 50 staff members, maybe three or five really care for the kids.” Because the incarcerated population possessed a unique background with a plethora of needs, the volunteers felt that the facility staff, in general, required more training in order to adequately support these individuals. Bernadette shared, “I think the staff need more training. They should be trained psychologically to deal with the type of people who are incarcerated. I have not seen a staff member try to truly engage with an inmate.” The volunteers collectively centered their critiques on their belief that the system required a more restorative culture.

**Critiques of Systems that Perpetuate Incarceration**

The last layer of critiques on the prison system included the other social structures that were connected to incarceration. Most of the volunteers discussed the issues of recidivism, court trials and long sentencing, economic injustices of the prison-industrial complex, and intolerable poverty in struggling communities. Their understanding of these issues came from the stories they heard and the time they spent reflecting on their experiences within this setting.
One of the biggest critiques of the justice system included the issue of recidivism. Children and adults who have had contact with the justice system tended to be incarcerated more than once.

Bernadette recognized how this seemed to be like an unending cycle for the youths she visited:

For some of them, being incarcerated is part of their life. They would say, “I was in before I got out. I’m in now. I’m going to get out, so I’m going to go back to what I was doing. I may end up here again, and I know how to work the system. I know how to live when I’m incarcerated. I know how to follow the rules if I need to. Then, I’m going to get out again.” It’s just a cycle for them and they don’t know how to break that cycle.

More often than not, adults who have been incarcerated possessed a history of juvenile incarceration.

Pio described how these individuals have spent the majority of their life in detention:

I hear from some of the adults how they have been in jail since they were kids. They say how the facilities have been their home. I can’t believe that they’ve spent most of their life in jail. Because the jail is their home, they’re used to it and they keep coming back.

Due to the endless recidivism, many volunteers discussed how they would see the same people attending their services over the span of months, even years. Dymphna offered an account of this reality for those who attended ministry services:

Unfortunately, the “revolving door” of recidivism in juvenile hall is all too familiar. The youth is keenly aware of his release date and is excited for freedom. Shortly thereafter, he sadly returns. Strangely, I am happy to see them again and their willingness to participate in our bible study session, but there is the realization that this was not supposed to happen again!
Dymphna expressed a discomforting feeling of seeing her youth attendees again even after they have been released. Knowing that her youths desired freedom, it seemed too easy for them to recidivate and end up incarcerated. The volunteers saw that recidivism and perpetual incarceration functioned to keep these individuals away from improving their lives.

Another aspect of the justice system that was critiqued by the collaborators involved the procedural components of the court system and the long sentences that many of the youths and adults received. Ephrem discussed how long sentences for juveniles stripped children away from pivotal developmental years of their lives. He emphasized how incarceration upheld a punitive response to crime, rather than helping the individual:

I don’t think long sentences help the kid at all...For a teenager to be incarcerated for 4-5 years, those are formative years in their life. They’re deciding who they are. They’re creating their identity and incarceration gives them that identity: you’re a criminal. Some of them grab it and hold onto it. I don’t know if there’s an answer. Less incarceration would help. Our country is way too focused on putting them away as if it’ll solve the problem. It doesn’t.

Part of the problem with long sentencing was the fact that the system seemed to require a conviction. John saw that there was an overemphasis on finding guilt. Given the flaws in the justice system, John recognized that this meant someone who was possibly innocent could be a victim to false justice. “The criminal system is horrendous. There is a dark side to it. There must be a conviction. There must be someone guilty for the crime. Unfortunately somebody had to pay for the crime and it could be someone innocent.” Some of the volunteers recognized that serving within the detention facilities sparked a skepticism of the justice system.
Monica expressed a sentiment of distrust in regards to whether court proceedings were truly just. “It’s hard to say if the justice system is fair. I doubt it. When they’re looking at the person who committed the crime, it’s never going to be as straight as you would hope.” Not only did the procedures surrounding incarceration seem unjust, John critiqued how lengthy trials and court hearings contributed to harming the mental well-being of those who faced incarceration:

I think the biggest problem of the system is the wait time of the hearing. I don’t know why there is a bottleneck, but it takes some adults two to three years for the judge to see their case. What happens is that these people are in a prolonged state of waiting. Their state of mind is full of depression and anxiety and it really brings a person down.

Considering the long time it took for court hearings to finish, John also asserted how some of these people could possibly be innocent. He criticized this process to unfairly hold people for long periods of time due to a poor system in place. The volunteers highlighted how long sentencing and unjust court proceedings were pervasive and harmful issues connected to incarceration.

“There is no real justice without economic justice,” claimed Francis. One of the critiques that the collaborators harbored were in regards to the money and finances involved with incarcerating people. Both Mary and Monica shared their concerns for how taxpayer dollars were being used to perpetuate a system that was not beneficial. Mary stated,

I believe in jails for the very dangerous and I believe in rehabilitation centers for everybody else. If we’re going to spend the kind of money we spend on prisoners just to lock them in a cell, then I think we could do way better with the money. It’s our money. We pay those taxes.
Monica also specifically commented on the cost of the death penalty for adults. Through her detention ministry experiences, she sought to share insight to others:

I’ve talked to guys in jail who tell me to fight against the death penalty. I try to let others know to not vote for the death penalty because it actually costs more tax money to have someone go through that compared to just staying in prison.

Across the faith sharings, most of the collaborators identified how the circulation of money behind the prison system was corrupt.

Francis saw the issue of prison as a business venture: “The prison-industrial complex is a big business, a privatization of business. It’s billions of dollars. There’s always a selfish motive. It’s bad considering how much money is made from implementing the justice system.” Through this economic critique, it was difficult to locate good intentions underlying a harmful system. Pio found it atrocious for people to make money off of incarcerating others. He particularly referred to the staff he encountered during his services:

The staff think that what they’re doing is the best. But I don’t agree with a lot of the things in the system. When more people are incarcerated, there are more jobs for staff. This system makes money and it’s good business to keep people in jail. They see it as money and that’s why they don’t really care about people.

The collaborators questioned the finances behind the prison system. Some articulated broader perspectives of the whole system as a business. When financial profit was considered, it led to greater doubts whether the system truly sought to help those impacted by incarceration.
The last area that was critiqued by the collaborators involved the larger systemic issue of poverty. In particular, the collaborators shared their understanding on how the poor environments and neighborhoods of their participants also contributed to incarceration. Despite hearing about the desires of these individuals to improve or change their ways, the volunteers recognized that their endeavors seemed futile if the participants were being released back to the same environments that led them to crime. Philomena explained,

They can’t change even though they want to change. They can’t change because they can’t get out of their neighborhoods. If there needs to change, it should be their neighborhoods because they come back to the same problems. No matter how much training they get in prison, they’re still coming back out to the same environment.

Highlighting the complexity of the issue, the volunteers acknowledged that solving incarceration required more than just reforming the prison system.

The collaborators identified that other social structures needed attention as well. Bernadette discussed how providing resources and prosocial programs to struggling communities could possibly prevent further incarceration in these areas:

What if something were done in these neighborhoods where these gangs are forming and where you know it’s low income, one-parent households? Can’t there be programs? Because you can guarantee there’s going to be an inmate in that neighborhood or someone is going to end up incarcerated. Can there not be a better program?...How about more work or more places that are funded to catch these kids before they’re incarcerated?
Bernadette emphasized the importance of prevention and intervention efforts within the community before relying on the justice system to be involved. Philomena shared the same sentiment. She observed how there were some opportunities within the detention facilities, but that those programs would be more beneficial if it were embedded within struggling communities:

Whatever programs are in the detention facilities to help these kids, there should be those programs outside in the community. These kids come from broken families and poverty. If the programs in here are effective, then it should be used outside, in the schools or neighborhoods.

The collaborators reiterated the importance of prioritizing people and not perpetuating harm. They recognized that the current systems related to incarceration required improvements and transformation. The volunteers believed that whatever efforts are funded, they needed to embody a culture of rehabilitation and restoration.

**Encountering Demonizing Attitudes**

“My co-workers tell me, ‘You’re wasting your time, why do you go visit them? They are bad people,’” shared Teresita. Many of the collaborators discussed hearing negative comments made in regards to detention ministry, particularly about those they served. This came from family members, friends, and others in the community. In their personal and public lives, they encountered people who exemplified a demonizing attitude towards those who were incarcerated. What was difficult for many of the volunteers was how their experiences within detention ministry reflected an antithetical narrative of the larger majority. Throughout the faith sharings, many collaborators shared how most people believed this population to be simply “bad.”
When faced with these dehumanizing narratives, most of the volunteers stood up or defended the population. Bernadette talked about the attitudes of some of her parishioners: “There is judgment from other parishioners that talk about what I do. ‘You do jail ministry? But why? Those are bad kids. Those are bad people. They’re there for a reason.’ I hear that a lot.” Similarly, Pio felt the need to remind others to not quickly judge this population:

People used to tell me, “Why do you go to the jails? You know the people in there are bad people. They deserve to be there.” I told them, “We are all sinners...Why are we trying to call everybody else a sinner? We are all sinners and Jesus came to call all sinners.”

Because the volunteers had direct experience with those impacted by incarceration, they felt the responsibility to bring awareness to others. In the midst of the negative narratives, they sought to bring understanding. Philomena explained,

A lot of my friends ask me, “Why do you go in there? They deserve it. They’re bad kids. They’re this and that.” I tell them, “But, you don’t know. You don’t know until you are in there with them and you get to understand what they’ve been through. Then you won’t say that they deserved it and that they need to be punished.”

Like Philomena, Mary claimed that if people took the time to get to know this population, they would not be quick to judge:

There are people who judge them as criminals...It makes me want those people to be dropped in the ministry for a little while so they can experience these human beings that are referred to as criminals. They’ve committed crimes, but that’s not all they are.
Moreover, the volunteers’ words highlighted how learning about their participants helped them foster a criticality against the unfavorable opinions of those not exposed to the ministry or to this population.

The volunteers recognized the broader dehumanizing narratives within the dominant culture. When addressing these harsh depictions, Carlo shared,

These kids got dealt a bad hand that we didn’t get. You hear from people on TV or you hear from others how these kids are bad people. We could all be like them too if we were dealt a really difficult hand with our family and childhood.

Through the multiple examples shared by the collaborators, their consciousness of the difficulties these individuals faced clearly influenced their approach to be more understanding and less judgmental. They also spoke against the harmful rhetoric when given the chance.

Another facet of this subtheme included how many of the negative comments about the incarcerated population embodied an overarching punitive attitude and belief. Bernadette discussed how some people felt that detention ministry was a waste of time and that these individuals deserved punishment:

Some people think that there isn’t a purpose to the ministry. “What’s the point of doing this? These are bad people who made bad choices. They’re never going to change. They need to be punished, so why are you even wasting your time there?” I can’t say it’s a majority, but many people feel that way.

Mary and Monica also discussed similar sentiments. Mary shared, “I wish there was a way that people didn’t have an ‘eye for an eye’ attitude. Nothing gets better with that attitude.” Monica described, “It’s sad when you talk about your experiences to other people because they don’t care for the inmates
enough to treat them with dignity. They say, ‘He deserves it. That’s the way it is.’” Despite the volunteers’ efforts to stand up for these individuals, they acknowledged that it was not always easy to influence the mindsets of others. Dymphna expressed,

I think about my own sphere of influence, when people talk about being punitive, wanting to put people away, and to “throw away the key.”...There are people who only know the punitive side of things. It’s hard to change people’s opinions about that.

The volunteers recognized that it was through their direct experiences that they were able to hold a more tender and nonjudgmental view of those they served. Those who did not have these experiences were more likely to resist a disparate way of viewing incarceration.

“A lot of people are scared to do this ministry,” claimed Paul. The last aspect of this subtheme was how other’s demonizing attitudes revealed a general fear of the incarcerated population. Ephrem shared an experience he had at church and his thoughts on how parishioners would receive these individuals:

I’m fearful that if they do show up at a church that people will react in horror. “Look at this guy. He’s here to rob us.” I’m an usher and one time this church staff came by and said, “There’s a guy with a tattoo on his neck in the third row from the back on the right side. Watch him.” Yeah, I saw him. He’s fine. He’s here for church. But sometimes they’re so protective and scared.

It seemed that feelings of fear upheld and reinforced the punitive attitudes. When Bernadette first began this ministry, she mentioned, “I was scared to death.” Additionally, her husband was worried for her safety after she shared with him the different stories about the youths she visited. Bernadette’s
example was common amongst most of the collaborators’ experiences. Close family, friends, and community members expressed concern regarding the volunteers’ service. Despite these worries, all of the volunteers discussed how they generally did not have bad experiences. Teresita described a conversation she had with one of the facility staff:

The staff said, “Are you here by yourself? Are you not afraid to be with them?” I said, “No, I have never had a bad experience.” The staff then said, “I’ll be right here with you because they are very dangerous.”

The volunteers acknowledged that having more time, conversations, and direct experience dissipated any feelings of fear or hesitation when serving in detention ministry. Moreover, an essential part of the collaborators’ experiences involved fostering a greater awareness of the injustices surrounding incarceration. This included recognizing and combating the dominant attitudes of a punitive culture. Through this awareness, the collaborators embraced a more humanizing stance when serving those impacted by the justice system.

**From Solidarity to Transformation**

“We have kinship as people. I have so much, but I am responsible for those who don’t. Anything I can do to help others, I’m going for it... We all must do our part. We all find our mission,” reckoned Dymphna. The last theme that surfaced across the faith sharings highlighted the transformative power of serving those in situations of oppression: *Through humanizing and being in solidarity with those impacted by the justice system, volunteers experience and witness a mutual transformation*. After spending years of service with those impacted by incarceration, the volunteers came to see their participants for their humanity. This led the collaborators to form deeper connections
and relationships that extended beyond just simply being a volunteer. Spiritually and emotionally, the
volunteers embraced each individual they encountered and they believed that it was their responsibility
to continually uplift this marginalized population through their solidarity. Despite the hardships and
injustices surrounding incarceration, the collaborators seemed to cut across the margins of separation
in order to be in authentic solidarity. John purported,

We have to remove all the barriers. It doesn’t matter who I’m seeing. That person is like my
brother or sister...we all share something in common. That’s how we can build solidarity
because at the end of the day, our differences don’t matter.

The more time the collaborators spent volunteering, the more they noticed the differences subsiding as
they looked deeply into the hearts and souls of whomever they visited. Mary proclaimed,

When we’re together, it’s like we’re all just people...By the time I’m out of there in an hour and
a half, I feel so connected...I love that feeling of going out to the edges and being with them. I
don’t feel like I’m walking along somebody who I don’t relate to. I don’t think that their being
incarcerated should define them. So I don’t look at them like that.

Through accompaniment and holding spaces for listening, learning, and connection, the volunteers
began to see differently.

The collaborators’ previous lens of judgment faded into a more expansive, yet singular view of
humanity. Philomena explained,

I listened to them and I learned that we have different lives. I was raised in a good loving family
while they were not. Then, I found that we are not too different emotionally. They still need
love and they can give love. So in that regard, we’re not different because I need love too. When
I go in there, they love me and I love them. Now, I don’t see the differences between us anymore.

Moreover, through their deep embrace of those who were once so different, the collaborators experienced a personal transformation. Francis shared, “My service has strengthened my faith to see them as my own brothers and sisters and I am grateful for the opportunity.” They expressed gratitude for the ways they have personally grown. Not only did they receive from their service, but they also received the blessing of witnessing the growth and transformation in those they served. Philomena reflected, “By giving many years to serving, I see that they have changed me, and I think my presence has changed them too.”

In this theme, I sought to highlight the ideas related to solidarity and its potential to spark transformation. Further elucidating this notion, four subthemes arose from my dialogue with the collaborators: (1) Reaffirming dignity and embracing humanity, (2) Through visiting, a greater solidarity, (3) Forming deeper relationships, and (4) Mutual transformation. This final theme should not be viewed as all too separate from the previous themes in this chapter, but rather, it embodied the culmination of the comprehensive experiences of what it meant to volunteer in detention ministry.

**Reaffirming Dignity and Embracing Humanity**

“Give them a chance. Deep down, they’re all good people. They’re not all bad once you get to know them. You can help bring out the goodness from them,” claimed Monica. One of the ways the volunteers began to engage in solidarity was first acknowledging and affirming the dignity of their participants. I understood dignity through the descriptions of the inherent goodness of the participants. The volunteers saw how the demonizing narrative of those impacted by the justice system
influenced the perceptions of society as a whole. Part of Ephrem’s motivation to continue volunteering was to resist that narrative:

> The reason why I volunteer is because they need to know that they’re valued. They’re not a throwaway. I think the message of society is, “You’re so dangerous. We have to lock you up. You can’t be with the rest of society because you’re not good enough or you’re different”...I want to combat that message...They assume that they’re on the wrong side of God, which we all relate to. I’m a sinner too, but I know it’s hard for them.

Like Ephrem, most of the volunteers found that an essential part of their service was to continually reaffirm the goodness within their participants. Joseph shared, “When I serve, I tell them, ‘Even though nobody tells you that you’re good, I know that you are good. I want to remind you to do good and to improve yourselves.’” The volunteers stood firm in their belief of the unshakable goodness of all people: this stemmed from their faith and belief in a kind God.

> Bernadette emphasized with her youth, “Yes, you are good enough because you are here on this earth. Because God chose you to be here, you are good enough. You are worth it.” The volunteers’ constant affirmation of goodness within each individual indicated how human dignity has been oppressed by the dehumanizing structure of incarceration. Referencing a biblical parable, Joseph compared the goodness of each person to that of a seed:

> I believe that every human being is good. When I think about these adults, I think about Jesus’ parable of the sower. They are the good seeds that we need to nourish. If they are planted in a good environment, then they will grow up to be good. I believe that their environments affect
them a lot. A seed without rain, water, sun, or good soil cannot grow. But the bottom line is that the seeds are good.

In this reference, it could be understood that the poor environments of the seeds symbolized these oppressive structures. Ultimately, the volunteers’ perception of the goodness of their participants stood against the constant demonizing of their character and personhood.

“I think that human dignity is for every human. No matter if people are in jail, they have dignity because they are from God,” commented Teresita. Through their faith sharings, I found it evident that the volunteers’ understanding of dignity stemmed from their belief that each person was a child of God. This terminology was used among most of the collaborators and it highlighted their shared faith. Mary reflected,

Maybe they haven’t chosen to actually be children of God, but they were created by God.

That’s my common denominator. I don’t spend any time thinking about how they’re different from me. I just think that they were created by God.

Similarly, Bernadette used this notion to promote respect for all peoples: “Just because they made a bad choice and they’re in the situation they’re in, you still need to have respect for them. They’re human beings. They’re children of God...Everyone deserves dignity.” To the collaborators, God was the source of human dignity.

Especially within the context of incarceration, human dignity was oftentimes forgotten or excluded from procedural and judicial considerations. Some volunteers uniquely witnessed undignified treatment and injustices within the system. When witnessing dehumanizing practices, Francis reminded himself of human dignity: “I have observed how the prisoners are treated without dignity. I
feel really sad because that’s not how I see them. I see them as human beings: they still have dignity as our brothers and sisters in Christ.” Furthermore, the volunteers found themselves reminding their participants that they were children of God. Pio exemplified this point:

I always remind them that Jesus is on their side. I never tell them, “You are the worst. You are second class.” On the contrary, I see myself as a bigger sinner than them, so I always try to tell them that they have dignity being children of God.

Grounded in their stance that every person possessed goodness and dignity, the collaborators sought to share God’s affirming presence to all they encountered by uplifting the dignity of this marginalized population. At a deeper spiritual level, Pio directly identified God in each of his participants: “I tell them, ‘I enjoy coming to visit you to see the face of Jesus in each of you.’” In the eyes of the volunteers, this identification of God’s presence within each individual was the source of goodness and dignity.

“You think that the criminal is the one perpetrating something, but actually, I saw that many of these incarcerated people are victims themselves. They’re victims of their family. They’re victims of their situation,” declared John. In addition to reaffirming the dignity of those they served, the collaborators embraced their humanity. One of the ways they did so was through recognizing that many of their participants carried heavy burdens filled with trauma and systemic injustices. John discussed the notion that those who committed crimes were actually victims first to their situations. Ephrem emphasized this concept when he described the youth he visited:

These kids are kids. They’re just normal kids at heart. They have caked on trauma over their hearts, but they’re really just regular kids. They’re just injured—severely injured and some of them know it. Some of them know it and ignore it. They’re just injured teenagers.
In the same way, Philomena shared,

‘They often say, ‘I was young and made mistakes especially because I had no guidance.’ I can see their sad faces, expressing regret. They are kids. Their life situations brought them here. It’s not like they wanted it, but they were born and raised poorly. They are young and deserve a second chance.”

The volunteers began to see more of their participants: their backgrounds, histories, and trauma. In addition to seeing the whole person of each participant, John further believed that most people he visited were innocent—they lived in conditions that led to their incarceration: “Based on my conversations with them, a majority of them are innocent, truly innocent. Unfortunately, because of their situation, they end up locked up receiving some form of punishment, which I see as unjust punishment.” Part of embracing humanity and rehumanizing this population required the collaborators to see beyond the crimes and into the fullness of each person.

“I try to humanize them. I believe that when you treat a person nicely, they will be nice back,” stated Francis. The collaborators did not simply define the participants by their difficult realities—their traumas, poor circumstances, and difficult choices—rather they saw and experienced positive interactions, qualities, and insights over the years of their service. The collaborators noticed the kindness, openness, and deep respect that many of the participants shared with them. Joseph commented, “I try to be very sincere with them. I share about my life experiences and I noticed that they are very nice and open minded.” Monica believed that her participants were “actually much nicer than people outside that you normally deal with.” Additionally, Philomena expressed how she did not feel a fear or danger when coming to volunteer, rather she felt the opposite: “I feel safe with them and
they’re protective of me. They would never hurt me.” When asked to describe the adult population, Teresita shared, “It’s not bad going in there because they will respect you. They’re good during the services. It’s as if you’re going to see someone who is visiting your house.” Despite the negative connotations surrounding the incarcerated population, the collaborators generally experienced positive and heartfelt interactions with their participants.

Beyond the physical and intangible barriers that seek to separate, the volunteers’ efforts to push past differences allowed them to learn about the richer insights that each participant possessed. Mary explained,

I sometimes feel like I’m talking to a higher quality of a human being in respect that they are focused and quiet. Generally speaking, these people have more insightful things to say. They’re captive, but they’re also calmer. They’ve had a lot of time to think and they come up with the most profound things.

Sometimes, to their surprise, the collaborators witnessed the profundity of their participants. This reiterated how giving this population a chance yielded greater wisdom and insight. Ephrem shared a conversation he had with a youth during one of his bible study sessions:

They have a profound honesty. Last week, there was a picture on the bible study sheet of a person on the ledge and God on the other side and sin was in the middle. I asked, “What do you think this means?” I was expecting to hear, “Oh, sin keeps us from God.” This girl said, “Sin takes us to God.” And it was so profound because she’s going through confession and she’s dealing with her sin and guilt that she has. She’s not sure she wants to completely turn
around, but she realizes that if she didn’t recognize the sin in her life, then she wouldn’t have faith. It’s just so true. Her answer really made me think and it humbled me.

The volunteers practiced a nonjudgmental openness during their services. They were not passive volunteers, rather they intentionally uplifted all those they served. By remaining firm in their belief that all people possessed goodness and dignity, the volunteers were able to move past any barriers that shielded them from truly embracing the wholeness of each participant.

**Through Visiting, a Greater Solidarity**

“By visiting them, they feel that they have somebody who believes in them, who believes in their innocence and their side of the story,” shared John. One of the essential aspects of detention ministry was simply the value of visiting. The volunteers acknowledged that their simple act was very meaningful to their participants. “They never question why I’m there. They’re just happy that I’m there,” claimed Monica. Visiting had the power and potential for many of the things already mentioned in this chapter: love, faith, hope, humility, learning, healing, and so on. Mary talked about how her mindset of simply visiting led to a much richer experience:

I’m just going to visit. That’s the attitude I come with. We talk about the readings for the week, but we always end up just talking a lot, sharing about our lives, and about faith, which is why it’s so lovely. It’s so real.

The collaborators highlighted how visiting was an essential value that needed to be shared particularly with those impacted by incarceration. Joseph reflected back on the time he spent incarcerated in Vietnam:
Jesus said, “For I was in prison, and you visited me.” I meditated on that and I thought about the time I was in jail. I wish somebody came to visit or say, “hello.” Now, I have the opportunity to visit those in prison and I see that they are happy to have someone visiting. Incarceration stripped the participants of human connection and relationships and the volunteers’ service helped alleviate this void.

By visiting, the volunteers ultimately brought back a sense of humanness, despite the oppressive reality. Elizabeth reckoned,

Some of the adults don’t have any visitors. I think that everybody needs somebody to talk to. They say they can’t trust each other. A lot of them tell me, “I’m so glad you’re here. There’s nobody I can talk to. I can’t trust anybody. But I can talk to you.”

For the most part, the participants are truly grateful for anyone who was willing to freely visit them. Pio discussed, “They pray for us, ‘God bless you people who come and give us what we need. Here, nobody comes to visit us.’ I see their needs.” Similarly, John shared, “The fact that we just show up, they deeply appreciate it. They realize that we put in our own time.” To the participants, simply visiting held great significance. Visiting served to rehumanize and to recognize the worth in every person. Those facing incarceration often possessed a low sense of self-worth and a toxic shame.

Elizabeth shared a conversation she had with an adult,

One guy asked, “Why do you want to come see us?” I said, “You asked. You asked for Communion services, and you’re here, so if you keep coming, then we'll keep coming too.” He couldn’t believe it. Some of the guys would start crying when they heard that. “Why would you come to see me?”

262
The volunteers understood that the participants cherished their time and presence. Their experiences brought a more profound meaning to the concept of visiting.

“The number one purpose of this ministry is presence. It really is about being present,” commented Paul. Being truly present brought value to visiting. Genuine presence was a key component in order for the volunteers to be in an authentic solidarity with those they served. Like Paul, Carlo iterated, “Being present matters. When you’re there, it matters. If you bring your heart, mind, and soul, that’s what matters. If you’re there and you’re distracted, that’s not good.” The collaborators agreed that being present was the main purpose of detention ministry. Through an intentional presence, the volunteers were able to exemplify the potential and power of the ministry.

Dymphna discussed how being present conveyed a respect to those she visited:

I don’t have to have the catechism memorized. I don’t have to have every answer, but I can be present, encouraging them and meeting them where they’re at. I actively listen to them with compassion and understanding...Anytime you have somebody willing to listen, to make eye to eye contact, to be in close proximity, it can make a difference in another person’s life...Every person deserves that respect and dignity.

Moreover, by being present, the volunteers essentially shared the gift of themselves—the gift of time, relationship, and solidarity.

In a previous subtheme, I discussed how listening was the entrance to learning within the context of detention ministry. When exploring the subtheme of solidarity, being present and listening were also mentioned across the collaborators. Ephrem explained,
I’m only a listener, and I pray for them and encourage them...If I show them respect and show them that I value their experiences, then I get some back...I’m always aware and keep in mind the fact that I really don’t know what it’s like for them...I’m unified with them as much as they allow me to be.

In the same way, Bernadette offered, “I don’t understand exactly where they came from because it’s not my story. I wouldn’t expect them to understand me, but I try to meet them halfway. ‘Tell me about yourself. I’ll listen.’ I’m a very good listener.” Through exploring their experiences of connection, I saw that listening was a nuance to the multifaceted experience of solidarity. Although the collaborators visited through a faith-based entity, Dymphna emphasized how listening and presence were a fundamental components in solidarity that fostered connection:

For me, it goes beyond religious spirituality. We meet them where they’re at. That’s what we’re called to do. Sometimes just sitting and listening to them share whatever they need to share is part of restoration as well. If they can depend on us to be there for them, that’s impactful.

Although the purpose of this study was not to measure an impact or outcome, the volunteers’ sharings touched on how solidarity carried the potential to make a difference.

The last facet of solidarity that the collaborators experienced was the notion of deeply feeling for their participants. The volunteers felt a union with those they served. It was a deeper connection that bridged the distance between them and their attendees. Mary further elaborated,

What’s interesting is that once I am in there, it’s very hard to describe, but I feel part of them. I don’t feel different from them. It’s a strange feeling. It’s another reason I know I’m supposed
to be in there. I just look at everybody. I look at all those people and I think we’re all children of God.

Although not easily communicated, there was an emotional component to volunteering within detention ministry. When hearing the difficulties their participants faced, the collaborators could not help but feel sympathy or sorrow with and for them. Philomena acknowledged,

These kids suffer. They suffer mentally, emotionally, and in their hearts. It’s more difficult to deal with and I don’t know how. I feel bad for them and I’m not good with words to comfort them. I feel the pain with them.

The collaborators accepted their limitations of what they can and cannot do to help their participants. This was not always easy. During these moments, the collaborators leaned into prayer and their faith.

The volunteers embraced the hurt and suffering of those impacted by the justice system. They ultimately held onto the power of sustaining solidarity. John reflected,

We can’t save or fix their situation. We can feel for them. We can sympathize with them. We keep them in our hearts. We acknowledge them and we pray for them. It speaks volumes to them. The fact that we’re there with them, we’re showing our support and solidarity with them.

By humanizing and being in solidarity with those they served, the collaborators inevitably recognized their own humanity and the interconnectedness of what it meant to be human. Their visitations fostered more than what meets the eye. A deeper exploration of this phenomenon yielded the essence that these volunteers formed genuine relationships with those they served.
Forming Deeper Relationships

Through the collaborators’ ministry experience, it was evident that many of them formed deeper connections and relationships with those whom they served. When discussing deeper relationships, I refer to the relationships formed within their scope as a volunteer. The volunteers were restricted from having any outside or personal communication with those who were incarcerated or released as part of the volunteering policies with the probation department. Despite this, many experienced a spiritually and relationally intimate connection with those whom they served. The nature of the volunteers’ consistent visitations allowed for relationships to form: “By revisiting and conversing, we develop our relationship,” shared John. Some volunteers were astonished to learn how much they meant to their participants and vice versa. Paul talked about his realization of how much his relationship meant to his youth:

If I wasn’t able to make it one week, I had to make sure they knew that I wouldn’t be there. The reason is because one time I didn’t show up and the next time I saw my youth, he said, “You didn’t come last week and I kept waiting for you.” I didn’t realize they needed me that much.

Forming positive relationships was what many of the participants lacked while being incarcerated.

Due to the nature of being incarcerated, the participants were not able to adequately maintain their relationships outside, especially if they recidivated multiple times or had long stints in detention. Carlo acknowledged how volunteers were in a unique position to form these deeper relationships:
I can go in and give a side hug with these youth and I can even do what they can’t do with their families. It’s like this different connection where you have the honor of serving them. You have this ability to actually create a special connection within the ministry.

Because detention ministry provided a consistent space for conversing, praying, and sharing, the collaborators were able to create meaningful relationships. Dymphna reflected on her bible study sessions and talked about how each one ended with everyone praying for each other:

I am moved by the youths’ sharing their heartfelt concerns for family, fellow detainees, and court outcomes. They also care for me, my family and my safety in returning home. It’s a realization that within the short amount of time we have together, they experience trust and openness.

The volunteers who had the ability to meet with their participants over longer periods of time shared richer testimonies of this subtheme compared to those who only met with individuals once or twice.

“I’m not good at remembering names, but they remember my name all the time. They tell me, ‘I haven’t seen you in awhile. I’m glad to see you here,’” stated John. One of the ways that the collaborators exemplified the deeper connections they made in the ministry was through their mentioning of “remembering” or “missing” each other. Monica noted, “Regardless if they had a good day or a bad day, whenever I came, they always appreciated it. They sometimes missed me too.”

Dymphna also highlighted this point when describing her relationship with her youth:

They’re happy to see us again. It’s an ironic situation. They’re glad to see me and they’ll say, “Do you remember me?” in hopes that I remember them as well. I believe it’s that somebody
from the outside—someone they don’t know, somebody who’s not being paid to do this—is there for them.

In the same way, Bernadette talked about how her participants thought about her when she was not there:

I do feel that when you’re with the same person every time, they do actually look forward to seeing you. They get into the habit of knowing, “Oh my gosh, there you are. You’re here and we can talk.” That’s always a good feeling for me—having them say, “Hi, I asked about you and wondered what day you were going to come.”

Thinking about one another beyond the service times demonstrated how the connections carried more weight beyond the bounds of the ministry.

Although rare, some volunteers discussed how they would coincidentally encounter participants after they have been released in public spaces. Joseph shared his experience: “One time, I saw an adult after his release. We were in public. He said, “hello” to me and we talked and caught up. He was really friendly with me because he still remembered me from the ministry.” Not only did the collaborators share about their participants remembering them, but they too acknowledged frequently thinking about or missing their participants. Carlo discussed how he felt after a break from volunteering:

Since we’ve had the break during COVID, I’ve really missed talking to the kids, seeing them on a somewhat regular basis, and getting to know them as human beings. We had a lot of fun. We had a lot of laughs with these kids and they’re just great. You’re really grateful for the time that you’re together.
The volunteers kept those they served in their thoughts and prayers and that was meaningful for their participants. Despite the exclusive nature of incarceration, the volunteers strived to make sure the participants did not feel forgotten. Dymphna explained this effort:

When I finish up my bible study, I say, “I’m going to remember our time together this evening, our discussion, and what was shared. Be assured that you will be remembered in my everyday rosary, and in my daily prayers.” It literally takes their breath away. “Really? You’re thinking of me when you’re not here?”

The relationships fostered within detention ministry were mutual. Both the collaborators and their participants held each other with genuine regard. The collaborators’ stories truly highlighted the unique intimacy of their formed relationships.

“I don’t know if ‘inmates’ is a word we can use. I know that they’re inmates, but when I’m there, I just call them my brothers and sisters,” claimed Mary. Another nuance to understanding the deeper relationships formed by the collaborators included how many of the volunteers saw their participants like their family members. It was common for the volunteers to use familial terminology to describe their interactions and relationships with their participants. Some were influenced by their faith to use “brother” and “sister” to describe their deeper relationships. This inspiration stemmed from the Pauline letters in the bible that often addressed their readers as “brothers and sisters.” For instance, Pio declared, “We are all a big family. God is your father and my father. Through Jesus, we are brothers and sisters. We may be of different colors, different races, and different languages, but our Father is the same.” Similarly, Teresita discussed, “You feel like they’re part of your family. We are like brothers and sisters.”
Other volunteers provided specific examples of participants who they have known over a long period of time. John shared about his relationship with a participant who he met with consistently for eight months until his participant was transferred to an upstate detention facility: “I couldn’t contact him anymore and I felt sad. He was like a part of my family. He thought of me like an older brother.” In the same way, Teresita commented how her participants would often describe her like a “sister” or “mom” to them. For Francis, he had a close connection with a participant of Filipino descent who would call him “Tito,” or “uncle,” which was “a respectful way of calling someone an elder even though there was no blood relation.” An instrumental part of volunteering within detention ministry was establishing deeper relationships and beginning to see those who attended the services nearly as family members. “It almost feels like I have an extended family, like I have more kids,” discussed Paul. Viewing those impacted by the justice system almost like family members exemplified the deeper solidarity the collaborators possessed within detention ministry.

**Mutual Transformation**

“I leave this ministry, week by week, little by little, a better person...This ministry changes your life. It is so special because it changes your life and it changes other people’s lives,” proclaimed Mary. One of the fruits of serving in detention ministry for the collaborators was witnessing a change, or transformation in their participants. At the same time, they experienced a personal transformation within themselves. I use the term, “transformation” to broadly describe any sort of change that occurred within the person because of detention ministry. In this section, I discussed how transformation in this context occurred mutually according to the collaborators’ experiences.
God was often credited with being the source of these changes. In regards to witnessing a change in the participants, John commented,

Most people who are incarcerated are going through some kind of transformation. How much of a transformation depends on each person and how much they’re willing to deeply reflect in their minds, hearts, and souls, to say, “I really need to make it right next time.”

The volunteers did not seek to impart change or transformation onto their participants. Most of them did not have proselytizing intentions, rather they understood that their purpose in serving was to simply be present. Most were aware that the issues surrounding incarceration were too great for them to even consider fixing. Because of the difficult realities many of their participants came from, the collaborators were amazed when they witnessed any sort of change or transformation within their participants. Dymphna explained her awe when seeing her youths demonstrate more vulnerability:

Adverse childhood events really do impact them and they have experienced so much that their young hearts are hardened. They don’t know any differently and they’ve had to survive in those surroundings. It’s impressive when you can see the moments of breakthrough, letting down their guard and warming up to somebody who really cares about them.

The volunteers acknowledged that witnessing any slight change or growth in their participants was special to them.

Some of the volunteers shared how they were able to observe changes within their participants after a single service. Joseph described his postulations during his bible studies:

I notice that their behaviors are different from the beginning of the service to the end of it...After half an hour of our conversation, I see that they change. Some change, while some do
not. Sometimes, I see that they are moved. I see tears coming down and I see them wiping their tears. I believe that there is an impact on them. I don’t think that I’m affecting them, but it’s God who inspires them.

Elizabeth and Monica shared similar sentiments in regards to their bible study observations. Elizabeth noted, “It’s fascinating how they would sometimes come to my service with a grudge and then by the end of the hour and a half, they’d be asking questions.” Monica described, “When I observe how they respond to the gospel sharing, I can see how their temperament changes throughout. They start from being really quiet to becoming more talkative and willing to share.” For the volunteers, witnessing their participants engage more with the services was a sign that there was some sort of growth or transformation.

Whether it was through a change of mood, more participation in conversation, or behavioral indicators such as crying, the collaborators believed that what the ministry offered made some sort of difference. For Dymphna, she believed that her youths showed change through their increased engagement during her services:

Whenever I leave bible study, I am filled with gratitude. I’m moved that one quiet youth, who appeared to be disengaged, shares at the end of the session a faith-filled comment or prayer. For me, it’s the realization that he really has been engaging and processing the readings and the discussion.

Although the current study did not aim to measure the outcomes or effects of participating in detention ministry services, the volunteers generally acknowledged that either God or their services yielded a level of influence.
“We share with them a blessing. We hold onto them and hopefully they change. You keep trying and you never know. At some point, they pick up something, and eventually it’s going to strike them,” shared John. Some collaborators had the opportunity to see the same participants over longer periods of time. For the ones who did, they witnessed gradual changes and transformation within their participants over time. Teresita described how she was able to consistently meet with a group of women for several weeks:

When they first came, I saw that they were very unhappy and angry. After meeting with these ladies every Saturday during the services, I saw change. I saw a difference in their faces and the way they talked. They began sharing more.

Monica shared an example of her experiences with an adult who she visited regularly for a few years:

I remember meeting this one guy for the first time. He had a hot temper and he would start a fight with anyone who got near him. I visited him for about three to six years while he was waiting for trial. Then one day, I noticed that he changed his temper. It was incredible because God was changing him. He went from having a hot temper to feeling bad for others who had a hot temper and couldn’t control it.

Monica believed that the eventual difference in her participant was due to God.

As mentioned before, the volunteers believed that God accompanied their services. Paul shared his journey through sacramental preparation with a youth:

Every time I met with this one guy, he became a more pleasant person. It was crazy to see that transformation. I saw him almost every week...Right before he was released, I remember going
into the unit and seeing him. I asked, “What’s going on over there?” He said, “I’m teaching these kids all the things you’ve been teaching me.”

For Paul, he saw the direct impact of his services and how faith also played a role. In Paul’s story, his youth sought to share the lessons learned with those around him. Transformation was never the goal for the collaborators, rather it was the byproduct of their faith, consistency, and solidarity. John expressed the immense reward he experienced from serving in this capacity:

This ministry is rewarding where it’s unmeasurable. People’s hearts get touched and they appreciate you. God changes them. Some feel their lives being touched by God. Hopefully that change and that transformation will happen to them and to the people around them. You don’t only change one person, you might change all the people who are impacted by that person. It will have a ripple effect on others.

Many collaborators were able to reflect on the influence of God and detention ministry on those they served. They were unable to deny their belief that the ministry was truly powerful in changing people, whether it was through their direct actions or whether it was God’s work.

Beyond witnessing change and transformation in their participants, the volunteers embraced their own personal transformation over the course of serving in detention ministry. To some, what they gained from the ministry surprised them. Bernadette expressed, “It’s not like I got into this expecting something back. I thought I was going to be giving everything.” In the same way, Paul reflected, “I feel like I’m getting more out of this ministry than anyone else. ‘Wait a minute, I’m doing this for others, but why am I getting so much out of it myself?’ It’s definitely made me a better person.” Mary
summarized how she continually transformed over the years of her volunteering service and she contributed her growth to God:

I’m really blessed that the Holy Spirit lives in me because I’ve said, “Yes.” I can’t help but go out and share it with as many people in the most intrusive way. I just want them to feel it. In doing that, it transforms me all the time. I feel like I’m never done transforming when I’m with them.

For the collaborators, what they gained through volunteering was innumerable: some found a deeper purpose and appreciation for life, others grew to be less judgmental, and most felt an increase in their personal faith.

By being in solidarity with those whom they served, some volunteers discovered a greater sense of fulfillment and gratitude, which shaped the way they lived their lives. Philomena shared, “When you are able to gain their trust, it makes you feel like you’re worth something. It makes you feel like what you contribute is meaningful.” Through a deeper sense of purpose and gratitude for life, the volunteers gained an outlook that influenced them to live more consciously. “This ministry definitely has given me more purpose and I’m getting something out of it too,” expressed Bernadette, “I am more appreciative of my life growing up...I don’t know, it just makes you thankful.” Carlo explained how listening to the heartfelt wishes of his youth during his bible studies reminded him to be thankful for his life:

At the end of the service, these kids who are locked up are praying for you to have a safe ride home. They always do it. You don’t ask for it, yet they do it. When you think about it, it makes you more grateful for life. You’re like, “What am I complaining about?”
Many of the collaborators expressed how they would not have gained a greater sense of purpose and gratitude if it were not for their experiences as a detention ministry volunteer.

Another way the collaborators demonstrated personal transformation was by becoming less judgmental. Philomena reflected on the ways she has changed:

This ministry has taught me to not judge. We have to know the root cause before we judge or decide to criticize anybody. This ministry has helped my life where I don’t wanna do bad to others. Even if others are bad, I don’t want to judge them until I know what made them that way. And once I find out that reason, most of the time, I feel sorry for them.

Philomena’s reflection highlighted how the experience of serving in detention ministry possessed the potential to inform and deeply influence the volunteers. Mary asserted that “anybody exposed to detention ministry more than a few times will be changed... It’s so exhausting to judge all the time. The power of the Holy Spirit has completely transformed me and healed my heart and psyche.”

Throughout the faith sharings with the collaborators, most reflected on how they grew over time. Most discussed how—like many others—they too were once overly judgmental and quick to criticize those impacted by incarceration. Francis shared about his notable change from when he first started volunteering:

I feel ashamed of how my attitude towards those in prison was before. I used to think that they were all bad people based on how they looked and their attire. I asked God for forgiveness because I was one of those people who thought, “Oh, they’re nobody. They’re dirt and scum.” Now I’ve changed. It was a gradual change.
Francis recognized his eventual transformation and felt remorse for his old ways. His testimony highlighted how some of the collaborators felt discomfort when recognizing their previous judgmental and demonizing attitudes towards this population.

When asked to share advice to anyone interested in becoming a volunteer, Teresita posited, “You’re going to have more peace within yourself and your heart is going to change.” The final way in which detention ministry impacted the participants was in relation to their personal faith. Many discussed how their faith has increased, strengthened, or transformed. Monica acknowledged how serving those impacted by incarceration influenced her personal faith:

Because of this ministry and the services I do, I am able to witness and see the power of prayer in my life... The inmates help shape me and build up my faith. I don’t know if I’ve made any impact on them, but all I know is that over all the years of my service, they have impacted me much more than I give to them.

In the same way, Teresita described her spiritual growth: “This ministry helped my faith mature. I am happy God invited me to this because it’s changed my heart to believe more in Him. It’s grown my love for my brothers and sisters.” Volunteering in detention ministry was profoundly touching to the collaborators. It sparked a personal transformation that they did not initially expect. By choosing to engage in this ministry, they entered a space for rehumanization and genuine solidarity with a marginalized population. Furthermore, their faith and belief in the power of God wove throughout their experiences. Through their years of continual service, the volunteers fostered deeper relationships that ultimately yielded transformation for all involved.
The Essence of Volunteering

In composing this chapter, I encountered an overwhelming sagacity I felt belonged to spiritual and intellectual giants. To my astonishment, the data gathered from this study came from ordinary people who possessed an extraordinary calling to dedicate their lives to the service of the incarcerated. The themes presented in this chapter reflected the essence of the volunteering experience. Although the collaborators each possessed a unique, individual positionality, their collective wisdom—which stemmed from many years of service, countless hours of prayer and reflection, and invaluable moments of solidarity—embodied the boundless capacity for detention ministry to uplift those impacted by incarceration. Through their testimonies, the volunteers ultimately seared through the illusion of separation that veiled this population with demonizing falsities. In the next and final chapter, I further elucidated the findings of this dissertation in attempts to garner deeper understanding around this topic of inquiry.
Chapter 7–Visiting

Prayer of the Detention Ministry Volunteer

O Lord, Sower of unending peace and restoration,

Grant me the faith and humility to be an extension of Your Presence.

In visiting Your children, allow me to see Your face and nothing else.

May I listen to their suffering and embrace their goodness

In order to be in solidarity with You who are imprisoned.

For it is in Your love where separation ceases to exist and transformation takes place.

Make me an ambassador of hope,

An instrument of compassion,

And a conduit for You

To heal the spaces of injustice.

Amen.

In entering the discussion of this phenomenon, I begin this last chapter with a prayer. Through the creative synthesis process described in the methodology of heuristic inquiry, I compose this prayer that is ultimately a culmination of the deeply felt experiences and themes that come from the findings of this study. With the words and reflections of the collaborators, this prayer is essentially a co-creation of our shared experiences of volunteering in detention ministry. Moreover, it was important for me to dedicate my scholarly efforts and the entirety of this dissertation to God, weaving a spirit of visiting and encountering Christ throughout. I was intentional along this research journey to allow the Holy Spirit as well as the spirit of my theoretical frameworks–Critical Pedagogy, Catholic
Social Teaching, Liberation Theology, and Restorative Justice—to inform my decisions, reflections, and analysis.

Since my initial encounter with this topic of inquiry, the following research questions guided the dissertation trajectory:

1. How do volunteers experience detention ministry and how does it inform their service to those impacted by incarceration?
   a. What brings volunteers to detention ministry and why do they continue to stay?
   b. How does detention ministry inform volunteers’ approach to serving those in situations of marginalization?
   c. What, if any, influence does detention ministry have on the volunteers as well as on those they serve?

The findings of this study answer and elaborate upon the aims of the research. Through a constant engagement in prayer and my continued activity as a detention ministry volunteer, I read the words of my collaborators in the light of faith and praxis. Before collectively analyzing the collaborators’ experiences, I composed a collection of individual portraits and themes in order to appreciate and understand each volunteer’s background, differences, and unique positions that comprises this niche population. Then, I moved onto my next layer of analysis, which included seeing how their experiences connected across each collaborator.

From this intimate undertaking, the following themes emerged from the findings of this study:

(1) Within detention ministry, volunteers experience and understand God through love, faith, humility, and hope. (2) Detention ministry serves as a pedagogical space for listening, learning, and
greater awareness. (3) Volunteers continually foster a critical consciousness of the injustices
surrounding incarceration. (4) Through humanizing and being in solidarity with those impacted by
the justice system, volunteers experience and witness a mutual transformation. These themes not only
illuminate the experiences of volunteers, but they answer the initial research questions and contribute
to further theorization of this phenomenon.

In this chapter, I discuss the findings of this dissertation in an effort to unravel meaning within
the context of detention ministry. I first acknowledge and consider the influence of the collaborators’
individual positionalities on their overall experiences. Following, I organize the discussion of themes
and findings through an amalgamation of this study’s theoretical frameworks, highlighting the singular
thread of social justice throughout. I juxtapose the collective themes to the understanding of Critical
Pedagogy in the light of faith (Kirylo, 2023). Then, I further analyze them through the
conceptualization of solidarity by Pope Francis (2020). Next, I share the limitations, implications, and
considerations beyond this dissertation. Finally, I extend an invitation to anyone reading this
dissertation in hopes that the findings and discussion of this study can curate a reflective and spiritual
space for personal inspiration.

The Whole Self

The findings of this dissertation began in Chapter 5, where I presented individual depictions
and individual themes for each collaborator in this study. The intent of Chapter 5 was to deeply know
each collaborator as a whole person in order to understand how their experiences contributed to the
collective themes. Additionally, I sought to truly honor each collaborator and their experiences as there
are very few research studies that consider the volunteer as an important stakeholder. Although the
volunteers share the experience of detention ministry, it is evident that each possesses distinct backgrounds and personal histories that influence their approach to service. A combination of their social locations uniquely shape each collaborator: their relationships, social roles, cultural backgrounds, education, and their own personal formation.

When examining the influence of their personal relationships and social roles, Mary and Paul often reference their position as parents. For Mary, being a mother is a source of joy and love in her life. She describes how she views herself in a motherly light whenever she conducts services with the adult populations. Similarly, Paul is a father and really values being a positive male role model. His role as a father influences how he approaches serving the youth who attend his bible studies. Carlo offers a unique perspective to parenthood: although he is not a parent, he is heavily influenced by volunteering alongside his wife. He discusses how he and his wife struggled to have children of their own and they eventually came to see the youths in their services as their own children. Having a parental role shapes how each of these collaborators approach their services and view their participants.

Another noticeable aspect for some of the collaborators include their cultural backgrounds and history. I specifically refer to Joseph because he uniquely experienced incarceration when he was in Vietnam, prior to immigrating to the United States. He discusses how his three years of incarceration influenced his understanding of the importance of having visitors and how this contributed to his calling to volunteer in detention ministry. In regards to his views on the prison systems in the United States, his point of reference includes his incarceration in Vietnam. This personal history influenced him to view those who are incarcerated as having more luxuries compared to his experiences. Other collaborators also discussed the ways their cultural identities and histories shaped their views: Teresita
mentioned how her faith stemmed from her childhood friendship with God when she was a little girl in Mexico. Francis recalled early memories of being the only member from a small village in the Philippines to earn a college degree. The collaborators essentially bring their cultural memories and experiences to their perspectives of volunteering.

Through their testimonies, it was common for each collaborator to possess personal ways in which they practice and enrich their faith—essentially their own formation. For instance, John, Monica, Bernadette, Elizabeth, and Dymphna are involved in other ministries at their parish, or they have had jobs that were directly related to helping other people. Bernadette and Dymphna had jobs and roles within their respective parishes related to youth ministry and catechism. John and Monica are part of a prayer and support group that convened consistently. Elizabeth pursued advanced studies in theology and obtained a chaplaincy certification. These sources of training and formation shape these collaborators’ values and views of serving others. They bring their outside wisdom and experiences to their services within detention ministry.

Lastly, there are collaborators who have very specific points of views and histories that influence their experience of detention ministry. For instance, Francis discusses how his career as a CPA and his entrepreneurial and business-like mindset frames how he views his services. He uses specific terms such as ROI or “return on investment” to describe his values and he critiques the prison system from a broader economic lens. Ephrem shares how he attended the seminary when he was Protestant prior to converting to Catholicism. He often references his Protestant lens, comparing it to his Catholic understanding when serving in the ministry. Pio describes his upbringing in Mexico and notes how he did not have formal education after his elementary years, rather most of his education
took place within parish and ministry settings. Because of this, Pio attributes his knowledge and wisdom to the Church and Scripture. Like Pio, Teresita’s upbringing shapes her closeness to God. Throughout her faith sharings, she references God like an intimate friend who accompanies her services.

For this study, I intentionally recruited collaborators who highlighted the diversity within the detention ministry volunteer population from the specific diocese. Each volunteer possesses a unique positionality that ultimately influences and inspires their service: their beliefs, views, and approach. These collaborators essentially offer their whole selves to their services. Despite sharing a common religion, the volunteers’ individual lenses showcase how the experience of detention ministry can be very different depending on the person. Although this study sought to understand the general experience of this niche phenomenon, any human endeavor or experience has its own nuances because groups of people are rarely monolithic.

**Critical Pedagogy in the Light of Faith**

When analyzing and discussing the overarching themes that emerged across the collaborators, I recognize that I was only able to conceptualize these ideas because of my grounding in Critical Pedagogy as well as the other theoretical frameworks mentioned in Chapter 2. Again, I reiterate my personal biases and the difficulty of separating myself from this topic of inquiry. In choosing a heuristic methodology, I allowed my deeply felt connection to this phenomenon to take part in understanding the essence of the shared experience. Through a critical and socially-just oriented lens, I find that the primary themes that the volunteers experienced highlight the processes and concepts explained within critical pedagogy. Uniquely set within the context of detention ministry, this dissertation highlights the
The concepts of critical pedagogy in the light of faith, which ultimately ties in the tenets of Liberation Theology and Catholic Social Teaching (Kirylo, 2023).

Continued Action, Reflection, and Conscientização

First and foremost, the detention ministry experience allowed for the collaborators to engage in praxis (Freire, 2018), which involves the constant action and reflection upon their experiences and understanding. For this dissertation, the eligibility criteria to participate required collaborators to possess at least five years of volunteering experience as well as to currently be active within detention ministry. The average years of service per volunteer was 13 years. Because of this, each collaborator had many years to reflect on their service. Their continued involvement over time highlights how this experience was meaningful for them to keep volunteering. For instance, Monica possesses the most years of volunteering experience with 29 years and counting. An individual theme from her experiences includes how she journeyed through her personal faith alongside her volunteering service. Many of the volunteers describe how their journey of reflection and prayer encourage their further volunteering. Because of the time and history they have spent in detention ministry, many express a deeper joy and contentment when sharing about their experiences. Despite any difficulties they may have encountered, the collaborators made sense of their greater purpose for volunteering.

Whether the collaborators consciously know about praxis or not, their testimonies lead me to believe that they engage in it: through their cyclical and iterative movements of reflection, prayer, and action, the collaborators foster a level of criticality or conscientização (Freire, 2018) in regards to the injustices surrounding incarceration. Through their close experiences with marginalized populations, the collaborators essentially develop and foster a critical consciousness regarding the dehumanizing
structures related to the prison system. Throughout their faith sharings, the volunteers discuss how they learned a lot about their youth and adult participants: their backstories, environments, and traumas. By sharing an intimate space where they are exposed to human suffering and injustice, the collaborators are able to open their eyes to the injustices they would have never known if they merely stayed isolated and comfortable in their privileged spaces. Freire (2018) highlights this death of an elitist or privileged way of thinking “so as to be resurrected on the side of the oppressed...[resulting] in a changing of consciousness” (p. 122-123). Ephrem articulates this notion when he talks about how his privileges of living a “fairly normal” life could allow him to “easily turn a blind eye to people who are suffering.” Once he learned about the difficult realities of his participants, rather than ignoring it, he chose to keep volunteering.

For Freire (2018), “the more the people unveil this challenging reality which is to be the object of their transforming action, the more critically they enter that reality” (p. 93). The collaborators develop a critical awareness not only from their specific services within detention ministry, but from being in proximity to the detention facilities. Many of the volunteers such as Paul, Mary, Monica, and Dymphna share about their negative experiences when interacting with facility staff. Francis specifically recalls witnessing a violent incident where he believed that the facility staff were overly harsh. Through these firsthand experiences, most of the volunteers’ reflections and prayer led to a criticality, with some desiring to act upon their critical consciousness. For instance, John’s experiences influence him to “be more vigilant” when voting for local leaders and politicians. I want to note that I specifically use the verbiage of “fostering” critical consciousness when describing this theme: I take into consideration that all the volunteers each possess varying levels of criticality when offering their
testimonies. This points to the idea that critical consciousness is on a continuum: some of the collaborators express more critical themes than others.

What makes the understanding of praxis and critical consciousness unique within this study is the incorporation of the collaborators’ faith. Volunteering with those in positions of marginalization and oppression is an example of living an authentic faith. A tenet within Catholic Social Teaching, visiting those impacted by incarceration is an example of a service that possesses a preferential option for the poor. Highlighting the message of *Rerum Novarum (On the Condition of Workers)* (Leo XIII, 1981), the volunteers recognize that children and adults who are incarcerated require special considerations and a greater compassion. Essentially, the collaborators take “seriously what Jesus took seriously” (Boyle, 2021, p. 15), which is to live the gospel message of love and inclusion, especially towards those who have been outcasted by society.

Freire (2018) discusses the notion of faith, which he primarily speaks about a sense of having faith in the marginalized to overcome their situations of oppression. Within the findings of this study, faith refers to the volunteers’ personal beliefs of God and their understanding through a Catholic lens. Connected, the idea of faith within this study also highlights an “authentic faith in the oppressed” (Monzó, 2019, p. 241) and their ability to overcome the barriers to humanization. Therefore, praxis within this sense undoubtedly involves a communion with God that embodies a “Christian life centered around a concrete and creative commitment of service to others” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 9). Many of the volunteers discuss how their faith is the source of their inspiration to engage in detention ministry. Teresita, John, Joseph, and Ephrem specifically reference their scriptural inspiration of serving the “least” (NABRE, 2011, Mt. 25:40) which they ultimately believe means serving Christ.
And nearly all the collaborators mention how prayer and faith are essential components of their detention ministry experiences.

**God in All Things**

Prior to beginning the data collection for this dissertation, I understood that the conversation of God and faith was inseparable from my topic of inquiry. Within the context of detention ministry, spirituality and faith are inherently embedded because all the volunteers draw a level of inspiration from their personal faith. It is clear across the faith sharings that the collaborators view and experience God in many, if not all, aspects of their lives. From their calling, to their consolation, and to their daily functions, God is omnipresent throughout their concrete and intangible lives. For instance, Teresita, Paul, and John mention their personal inspiration and calling from God. “It’s what God wants us to do: he really wants us to love each other” states Paul. Many referred back to God when reflecting on their motivations for continuing their service.

When honing in on the actual experience of God within their volunteering services, most of the volunteers discuss God’s activity and the ways in which He moves them and their participants. In regards to conceptualizing praxis within this context, most of the volunteers attribute their cycle of reflection and action to God. By engaging in praxis, one develops a critical consciousness. But with a faith lens, I argue that critical consciousness in this context can be equated to being the voice of God, or the movement of God within the minds and souls of the volunteers. Gutiérrez et al. (2020) conceptualize this concept in this way: the volunteers’ services are a manifestation of God’s activity in present history. Because the volunteers believe that it is God who moves through their inspiration and action, the fruits of their service—critical awareness, deeper relationships, solidarity, and
transformation—can be seen as the work of God in their lives and the lives of those who participate in the ministry services. Embracing a humility to God, the volunteers would refer to themselves as instruments, conduits, or ambassadors for God. “It’s not me. I’m only an instrument,” declares Pio. The collaborators consciously hold this belief whenever they enter each service, allowing God to use them for His greater glory.

Although I do not specifically delineate a theme regarding the difficulties the volunteers experience serving in detention ministry, some of the direct quotes within the themes discuss how facilitating services is not always a straightforward or pleasant experience. For instance, Ephrem mentions once having a “messy bible study” where his youth “were goofing around and it seemed like a waste of time.” Despite the challenges the volunteers face over the years of their service, most lean on God during these moments. Monica articulates this experience: “The more you let God guide you, the more things will fall into place. Things are going to be okay.” Part of the volunteers’ reliance on God during these times reflects the nature of the ministry’s purpose, which is that of presence, or simply showing up. As volunteers, they are not responsible for any form of success or outcome, rather the collaborators focus on relational companionship. They believe that through their accompaniment, God facilitates the growth and transformation, if any. Mary acknowledges God’s power when recognizing His presence in her ministry: “I don’t think you can be in the presence of the Holy Spirit and not get restorative healing.” For the volunteers, their direct activity in detention ministry is a way of living God’s message, which is “incarnated in the community of faith [and] gives itself to the service of all” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 7).
The first theme I organized in this dissertation embodies the volunteers’ experience of God. It is important to begin with God in order to understand not only the volunteers, but how they create meaning from their work. Moreover, any discussion of God is not complete without the discussion of love. Only a boundless love can adequately ground this phenomenon. Although love is an abstract concept that has been conceptualized and understood in various settings, love flows from every volunteer’s actions and is an essential experience within the context of detention ministry. Gutiérrez et al. (2020) describes love as “nourishment and the fullness of faith,” (p. 6), which the volunteers give to God and to others.

The notion of God can be interchanged with the notion of love for others. The collaborators clearly express and feel a deep compassion for those whom they served. Mary and Joseph explicitly state their love for those impacted by incarceration. Philomena recognizes the exchange of love through her volunteering: “When I go in there, they love me and I love them.” Without this profound love, their experiences would not reach insightful or meaningful depths. With each visitation, both the volunteers and their participants find a home in the space of detention ministry—the space of love. Because of love–God–any influence, impact, change, or transformation is possible. The volunteers ultimately share a love that is gentle and tender, oftentimes a love that many of the participants lack or rarely experience. This aligns with what Boyle (2017) deems as the source for any personal change: “unless love becomes tenderness—the connective tissue of love—it never becomes transformational” (p. 85). Grounded in a well of love for God and others, the collaborators are able to tirelessly give this love, evident through their years of service.
The Dialogue Underneath

The primary means for the collaborators to learn about their participants are through their various services. This includes bible studies, Communion services, one-on-one visits, and sacramental preparation. Although different, each of these services allow for the volunteer and participant to engage in conversation and dialogue. Within this study, I understand the idea of dialogue requiring a “horizontal relationship of...mutual trust” (Freire, 2018, p. 91) during each service. The collaborators express how they are able to learn a lot about those impacted by incarceration from hearing their stories and personal reflections. Oftentimes, these services provide a time and space for vulnerability. It is common for the volunteers to learn about the difficult challenges and hear the heartfelt feelings from their participants within their conversations.

Dialogue is essentially the mechanism in which learning occurs. It is also the means in which the collaborators develop a critical awareness of the injustices surrounding incarceration. Through dialogue, the volunteers eventually see change within themselves—a personal and critical transformation. From this understanding, dialogue helps foster a “love and trust that acknowledges our humanity...[becoming] conscious beings for ourselves rather than for the oppressors” (Monzó, 2019, p. 241). Again, the conceptualization of dialogue was not consciously talked about during the faith sharings, but understanding this tool of critical pedagogy helps explain how the volunteers see personal growth and change over time.

Underneath detention ministry and inherent through the various services, dialogue is the starting point for kinship. The collaborators all approach their services with a kindness and openness that allows for sharing. When examining this tenet of critical pedagogy in the light of faith, it is
important to note that the collaborators believe that God is actively present within each dialogue and conversation. All the volunteers begin and close their services with prayer, an indication of invoking and inviting God into their services. Although the topics of conversation can go astray, the volunteers intentionally include faith in their dialogue. “Remember, we’re still faith-based here, so we need to talk about God sometimes,” reckons Bernadette. With dialogue as the first step to enter into communion with the participants, the volunteers make sure that God also joins the conversation.

An Ongoing Journey

To better illustrate and summarize the volunteering experience of detention ministry through a lens of critical pedagogy in the light of faith, I provide the following composite depiction:

Before beginning detention ministry, the volunteer possesses experiences and related formation in regards to ministry, catechism, and/or faith. Through a desire to serve God in a greater capacity (and ultimately an invitation or calling from God), the volunteer applies and completes the necessary requirements in order to become a volunteer in the detention ministry. The volunteer begins their first service (bible study or Communion service) with a personal agenda or expectation of how the service will go. The volunteer is first surprised and wary about entering the detention facility. The volunteer is then further astonished when visiting, listening, and interacting with those who are incarcerated: they realize that the prison population consists of people with great suffering, yet great insight. After the service, the volunteer goes home and begins to pray and reflect about their experiences. The volunteer continues facilitating weekly services and with each session, the volunteer learns more and more about the difficult realities of many of their participants as well as the ways the prison system needs to improve. They experience some of the most touching and heartfelt moments after some of their
services; they also have services that are difficult to facilitate or heavy when making sense of the suffering and injustice. Any prior judgments or opinions they once had fades and their faith deepens as they pray more for their participants, the structural injustices, and for themselves. Their services begin to feel more comfortable and comforting, as the volunteer develops relationships and a tender approach to visiting their participants. In time, they see their participants more for their humanity and the differences that exist are bridged with a sustaining solidarity and communion. After years of service, the volunteer acknowledges how they continue to change little by little: their faith, beliefs, approaches, expectations, and the way they view the incarcerated and incarceration. The volunteer chooses to continue on this journey: offering more of their love, presence, and kinship to their participants and to God, who—during this whole exchange—has been hiding in every one of their encounters and experiences.

**Solidarity Experienced**

Viewing Critical Pedagogy in the light of faith helps explain the processes and meaning-making underlying the phenomenon of volunteering in detention ministry. All the themes that are presented in this dissertation are related and interconnected, so it is difficult to clearly delineate this discussion without some overlap. For this section, I specifically focus on the theme of solidarity, and I acknowledge that this concept embodies many parts. Through their visitation and weekly services, the collaborators ultimately engage in solidarity with those impacted by incarceration. Through this solidarity, they are able to learn, critique, uplift, and transform. When understanding solidarity within the context of detention ministry, I borrow Pope Francis’ (2020) definition of solidarity:
Solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity. It means thinking and acting in terms of community. It means that the lives of all are prior to the appropriation of goods by a few. It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labor rights. It means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money... Solidarity, understood in its most profound meaning, is a way of making history, and this is what popular movements are doing. (section 116)

A collective analysis of my faith sharings with each collaborator touch on this conceptualization of solidarity. Additionally, I need to reaffirm that the experience of solidarity within this context wholly includes the presence of God. A liberation lens views this communion with God and others as ultimately the “fullness of liberation—a free gift from Christ.” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 24). By further discussing the findings of this study through this frame, I seek to emphasize the extravagance and influence of volunteering in detention ministry: not just what it entails, but how it can truly change the lives of those who authentically visit the imprisoned.

**Thinking and Acting in Terms of Community**

A tenet of Catholic Social Teaching is the assertion that “we are one human family... We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, wherever they may be” (“Solidarity,” 2024, para. 1). Most of the collaborators reach a point where they come to view their participants as more than just participants or incarcerated individuals. Through their intimate conversations and interactions, many form deeper relationships, beyond just a volunteer-participant dynamic. “Through Jesus, we are brothers and sisters,” declares Pio. Many collaborators see the youths and adults as their own family members.
Through their services, there is an “indivisible solidarity between the world and the people, [which] admits of no dichotomy between them” (Freire, 2018, p. 92). Part of this solidarity presumes that each person has a social responsibility to one another. For instance, Dymphna mentions how it was her responsibility and “mission” to help those who did not have much. John asserts that this social responsibility to help others stems from God’s calling.

Part of thinking and acting in terms of community involve selflessness and generosity. From a Restorative Justice lens and rooted within indigenous ways of knowing, all people are interconnected (Zehr, 2015). In listening to their sharings, I see that the volunteers continually reflect on these values and their calling. When examining the many years of volunteering spent in this ministry, it is clear that the collaborators demonstrate a value of serving others, who they view almost as their own kin. The volunteers’ mere presence is an indicator of their commitment to help those who have less. Despite the physical separation and oppression of incarceration, the volunteers continually create spaces of belonging with each service held. They believe that their participants still deserve a community of support. Ephrem comments how he sees himself as “a representative of the Catholic Church” whose purpose is to tell his participants that they “are not separated from the Church,” and that they are welcomed. “You hold them in your heart and you pray for them,” shares Dymphna. Whenever the volunteers are not physically with their participants, they make sure to carry them wherever they go.

**Human Lives are Prior**

Several of the collaborators talk about how other people view the incarcerated population to be less than human. Despite the disparaging and dominant narrative around those who are incarcerated, the volunteers uplift and reaffirm the dignity of their participants through their intimate encounters
and solidarity. In order to do this, the volunteers identify and ground themselves in the goodness of their participants. Bernadette, Ephrem, and Joseph talk about how they constantly remind their participants of their inherent goodness in the midst of their dehumanizing situations. For the collaborators, the justice system does not dictate a person’s goodness, which is a message many of the participants do not hear. In doing this, the volunteers ultimately engage in promoting rehumanization as a response to the harmful effects of incarceration on their participants’ dignity. Through their solidarity, the volunteers work towards a “full humanity...[that] cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism” (Freire, 2018, p. 85).

The foundation for any effort towards social justice is grounded in the fact that every human has dignity and is sacred (“Life and Dignity,” 2024). Many of the collaborators express their faith and belief that each person is a child of God. Mary asserts how everyone is “created by God,” and because of this “common denominator,” everyone has dignity and deserves to be treated in a dignified way. The understanding and embrace of dignity is antithetical to the demonizing rhetoric behind the prison population. Although this belief is foundational in order to engage in an authentic solidarity, it is important to recognize that the collaborators did not always possess humanizing perspectives on the prison population. It is common to enter detention ministry with preconceptions that align with the demonizing attitudes of society. Francis specifically acknowledges this point when he admitted to once viewing this population as “dirt and scum.” He expresses feeling “ashamed” and how his attitudes went through a “gradual change.” In order to even consider making a difference, a requirement of being in solidarity with marginalized populations is first realizing and affirming everyone’s goodness and humanity.
Combatting Dehumanizing Structures

One of the main themes from this dissertation encompasses the critiques the collaborators possessed in regards to the prison system and the dehumanizing systems surrounding incarceration. Human beings are poorly treated, abused, and harmed at the hands of the prison system (OIG, 2024; Dierkhising et al., 2014; Cauffman, 2004; Domalanta et al., 2003; Boxer et al., 2009). To this day, there exist deficiencies and malpractices within prison staff (OIG, 2024). Several volunteers highlight these shortcomings through their witnessing of staff treatment within the detention facilities. Some talked about their personal experiences with staff not being pleasant, while others shared the instances they witnessed staff mistreating their participants. Moreover, many of the collaborators mention their distrust of the prison system and the procedural aspects of the justice system. “It’s hard to say if the justice system is fair. I doubt it,” claims Monica. Meanwhile, John summarizes his view of the justice system by claiming there is a “dark side” to it.

“Combatting” in relation to the findings of this dissertation embodies the volunteers’ actions of bringing awareness to their loved ones and community members about the injustices they witness. In regards to combatting these dehumanizing structures, the volunteers first notice a dissonance between their direct experiences and what they hear from others. In this liminal space, the collaborators essentially embrace a criticality that leans towards prioritizing the humanity of those suffering. This is evident especially whenever they encounter negative, judgmental attitudes in regards to the prison population. Philomena, Teresita, and Dymphna find themselves defending their participants within their own “spheres of influence.” John asserts that those impacted by incarceration are “victims themselves”–by the system, their families, and their situations. Over their years of service, the
collaborators learned about the difficult realities that many of their participants faced and how their conditions have led to their eventual incarceration. This view aligns with the underlying belief within Restorative Justice that those who offend have often been victimized themselves (Zehr, 2015).

Outside of their services, the collaborators find themselves correcting any false, negative, or overly disparaging views of those they serve. They criticize others who quickly judge without understanding fully. This study highlights the firsthand accounts of the volunteers, those who do not have a stake within the prison system. Moreover, this study reaffirms the literature behind the detrimental effects of the prison system. What the volunteers experience and witness aligns with what previous studies have already found. Despite this appalling reality, harmful practices still persist today.

**Confronting the Destructive Effects of Neoliberal Capitalism**

Through a combination of my direct experiences within a dehumanizing system and my engagement in a justice-oriented praxis that yields conscientization, I see more of the “neoliberal corporate culture” (Giroux, 2020, p. 153) that has a hold over various aspects of American life. In particular, I condemn the prison-industrial complex. One of the ways that some of the collaborators critique the prison system is in regards to the problematic financial aspects behind it all. Monica, John, and Mary discuss how the justice system is funded by taxpayer money, but they do not agree with how the funds are being used. Mary and Joseph specifically mention how detention facilities need to focus more on rehabilitative efforts such as increasing prosocial opportunities and mental health services, rather than focusing on punitive practices.

“Mass incarceration may be understood as the preferred method of social spending in late capitalism” (Deckard, 2017, p. 4). Through a more expansive economic view of prisons, Francis
critiques the prison-industrial complex by equating it to a business venture that profits from incarcerating human beings. Similarly, Pio states how it is “good business to keep people in jail.” Francis and Pio are correct: previously mentioned, the United States had a total expenditure of over $250 billion in 2019 on state and local corrections, judicial and legal costs, and employment (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021). Through a triangulation of the volunteers’ critiques, the literature behind incarceration, and the critical frameworks grounding this study, I see how neoliberal capitalism has a hold on the prison system as it continues to perpetuate injustices that are “fed by reductive anthropological visions and by a profit-based economic model that does not hesitate to exploit, discard and even kill human beings” (Francis, 2020, section 22). When the collaborators see that injustices continue to persist over the years of their service, they come to foster a criticality that questions and confronts the systems at play.

Through my grounding in Critical Pedagogy, I am able to view this issue from a wider perspective of grossly unequal power relations. Ultimately, the firsthand accounts and words of the collaborators provide a “radical knowledge by [revealing] the specific relations of domination and subordination that lead to conditions of oppression...a pedagogy of appropriation” (Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008, p. 34). Although the findings of this dissertation do not prescribe specific solutions to the crises of incarceration and the prison-industrial complex, it spreads this radical knowledge to reprioritize human life. Ultimately, hope resides within the work and spirit of the collaborators: “Hope conjugated with struggle is the through-line in critical pedagogy that sustains revolutionary power against the forces of neoliberal attacks on [humanity] as the practice of freedom” (Vega & McLaren, 2019, p. 1).
A Way of Making History

Solidarity “is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people...on the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good” (John Paul II, 1987, section 38). The final theme of this dissertation encompasses the notion of how solidarity leads to mutual transformation. Several collaborators believe that their involvement and commitment to detention ministry has ultimately been life changing: for themselves and for those they serve. Although this dissertation does not seek to measure the impact or effects of engaging in this ministry, the collaborators truly believe that change occurs within this space. The most concrete and noticeable transformation that the volunteers experience is the awakening of a personal criticality that orients towards promoting justice and embracing humanity, what Day (1963) terms as “a revolution of the heart” (p. 215).

This interior revolution is a way the volunteers make history within themselves. From their personal transformations and newfound insights, they are changed for the better—not only in their views, but through their more tender and loving approach to serving those who are suffering. After listening to their reflections, I see how detention ministry has a profound influence on the way the volunteers view, approach, and encounter those in situations of marginalization as well as all those around them. They essentially “ventilate the world with tenderness” (Boyle, 2016) and they hope to make an impact through their compassion. Beyond the ministry, the volunteers eventually share their experiences and wisdom to those around them, especially to those who have judgmental notions about the prison population. Moreover, their service, love, pedagogy, and work towards rehumanization embody what Thomas Merton defines as the goal of nonviolence: “not immediate victory over the
adversary, but the transformation of human relationships—of society—through the healing and restoration of human nature” (Hillis, 2021, p. 124). From a liberation lens, the volunteers’ continual activity and deep spiritual conviction—their praxis—ultimately manifests God’s love in history (Gutiérrez et al., 2020). The collaborators may not directly impact the larger dehumanizing structures, but they make history by transforming themselves and spreading love to those within their personal and communal spaces.

Freire (2018) asserts that in order to transform or make changes, there requires an “unshakeable solidarity...[that] is born only when the leaders witness to it by their humble, loving, and courageous encounter with the people” (p. 129). By entering into solidarity and sharing their love and service to others, especially to those in situations of oppression, the collaborators authenticate the vision of a beloved community (King, 1957, as cited in King et al., 1992), and truly, the kingdom of God (NABRE, 2011, Mt. 25:34). Embracing a genuine solidarity with the oppressed is what I believe and what Boyle (2011) contends will eventually dismantle unjust institutions (I substitute “slavery” with “incarceration”):

You actually abolish [incarceration] by accompanying the [incarcerated]. We don’t strategize our way out of [incarceration], we solidarize, if you will, our way toward its demise. We stand in solidarity with the [incarcerated], and by doing so, we diminish [incarceration’s] ability to stand. (p. 173)

By creating a space of belonging, the volunteers step into the liminality of becoming. If solidarity is the vehicle, then liberation is the destination, where all are welcomed and where all have the potential to become more fully human. It is not about coming to a solution, rather, coming together. I desire to
always stand with and to be with those who are marginalized, so that boundless love can erase all bounds and that better days may come.

Acknowledging Bounds

Patton (2015) notes that “There are no perfect research designs. There are always trade-offs” (p. 223). In presenting the limitations of this study, I acknowledge what the study is not and what it does not claim to do. I reiterate that the aim of this study was not to find a solution to the issues of the prison system and incarceration, as these issues are broadly complex and multifactorial in nature. Also, this study is not an evaluation of a program and its effects, nor is it a theological analysis of detention ministry. Ultimately, this dissertation sought to explore the experiences of detention ministry volunteers. Through this exploration, there are rich themes and findings that bring a more humanizing light to the prison population. Moreover, it is evident that the experiences of volunteering foster a critical consciousness in regards to the injustices surrounding incarceration. After discussing the results of this study, I recognize that there are bounds to this study and the context in which the findings should be interpreted.

Firstly, this dissertation utilized a qualitative heuristic methodology in order to explore the phenomenon at hand. Therefore, the traditional standards for quality research (i.e., generalizability, replicability, and control groups) was not my aim. The findings and themes from this study are not meant to be generalized to other prison ministry populations. This dissertation examined the experiences of 14 individuals within a diocese’s detention ministry. There are various factors to consider including the goal of this specific detention ministry as well as the Catholic culture within the diocese. Moreover, faith-based efforts may differ entirely based on the religion, which in this case was
Catholicism. Although I recruited a diverse group of collaborators that represented major cultural groups within the diocese, it is important to note that the average age of the collaborators was 64, which leans towards a more mature and older population. This study did not take into consideration the possible influences of being older in age on the experiences of detention ministry. Ultimately, this dissertation examined a niche phenomenon with an even more niche population of collaborators.

I designed this study and developed a research aim to focus solely on the phenomenon of volunteering within detention ministry. Although I acknowledged the individual identities and positionalities that influenced each collaborator’s experiences in Chapter 5, I believed that this topic of inquiry was nuanced enough to examine. I have personal experiences solely in juvenile facilities and did not fully consider how the experiences of volunteers in adult facilities would differ. During my faith sharings, I learned that the logistical aspects of service delivery for the volunteers within the adult facilities differed within the juvenile facilities. One example includes how those who volunteered in the juvenile facility were more likely to see the same participants over a period of time compared to those who served in adult facilities. Data analysis included all of the volunteers—adult and juvenile—and it would be interesting to see if the findings would be similar or different if it focused on just the juvenile volunteers or just the adult volunteers.

When scrutinizing the methodology of this dissertation, I utilized a phenomenological design, in particular, a heuristic inquiry, which presumes the researcher’s biases when conducting the study. Although I sought to engage in member-checking throughout the data analysis and formation of themes, I ultimately utilized my positionality and grounding in specific theoretical frameworks to guide my decision making and the end results of this study. The methodology and methods used
within this study were clearly outlined in Chapter 4, but the replication of this study by other researchers may not necessarily yield the same findings.

Another consideration includes how the present study explored the experiences of detention ministry solely through the perspectives of the volunteers. One of the subthemes indicated by the collaborators was how they witnessed personal transformation within their participants. Without the viewpoint of those who participate in detention ministry, this study offered a single-sided illustration of the phenomenon. I touched on themes relating to solidarity, but it would be not complete without gathering the perspectives of those who participate in the ministry services. Lastly, the findings from this study does not guarantee any immediate policy changes or benefits to those currently incarcerated, rather it highlights the inspiration and insight from those who volunteer within prison settings.

**Onto the Next Journey**

This dissertation is unique in its approach to discover new knowledge. With a qualitative, heuristic methodology, I not only offer new findings and insights to the field of prison/detention ministry, but I am also deeply touched by this exploration. Again, the findings from this study are not a solution to the problem of incarceration, nor does it guarantee any immediate policy changes or benefits to those currently incarcerated. These findings may mean different things to different people who are directly or indirectly related to the issue of incarceration. By framing and designing this study with a critical lens, I acknowledge the sociopolitical and historical context of incarceration and the largely oppressive culture and rhetoric around this vulnerable population. This awareness centers my efforts to work towards humanization and resist the demonizing attitudes of “throwing people away” (Boyle, 2011, p. 190). I wholeheartedly believe that in order to transform larger unjust structures, one
must first shift dehumanizing perspectives, alter attitudes, and chip away at the hardness of hearts around the demonization of this population.

I admit that it is difficult for me to conceptualize the implications for future research and exploration because I did not come to this journey with the intent to find a solution or recommend pragmatic steps for improvement. The unique methodology I employed in this dissertation ultimately challenged traditional methods of research inquiry, which includes the expectation of having a solutions-focused orientation to presenting concrete implications. Rather than emphasizing what needs to be done next, I simply ask myself, “What can be learned from this experience?” which highlights the pedagogical nature of engaging in research inquiry. Moreover, being able to incorporate my positionality and faith throughout this study allowed me to firmly hold onto the spirit of what Mother Teresa believes as God’s call for people: “We are not called upon to be successful, but to be faithful” (“Mother Teresa,” 2021). Despite this admittance, I do share my hopes and encouragement to those who seek for actionable steps after learning more about this phenomenon. In this section, I discuss how the findings of this study may inform future practices and considerations and what they might mean for those interested in the work of greater liberation.

Implications

This dissertation does not succinctly fit well into one field or area of study/practice. Therefore, the implications of this study are addressed to a variety of stakeholders and those with relations to the prison system. First, I speak to other volunteers within prison/detention ministries or anybody serving in similar capacities. I would like to thank you for your time, dedication, and commitment to sharing your presence with those impacted by incarceration. Your love and care are invaluable. From the
findings of this study, I encourage volunteers to intentionally reflect on their services as well as themselves. Part of this reflection includes examining personal biases, agendas, and privileges prior to entering services. Through continually reflecting oneself and one’s services, volunteers can ultimately improve their approaches. Moreover, I suggest creating spaces for genuine dialogue and learning within sessions. By embracing humility and kindness and sharing oneself to those who are incarcerated, volunteers ultimately potentiate genuine engagement and the formation of meaningful relationships.

Next, I speak to those who operate and coordinate ministries and/or faith-based programs within prison and detention facilities. Specifically for the detention ministry explored in this dissertation, I suggest taking into the consideration the training and formation of the volunteers. I believe that the first step in training volunteers, especially new ones, includes the guidance and encouragement for self-reflection and identifying personal strengths, values, and prior experiences that may influence their service. In regards to their faith and spirituality, volunteers would benefit from grounding themselves within the tenets of Catholic Social Teaching in order to link their activity to their spirituality and God’s greater calling. Additionally, training related to group facilitation skills would be beneficial: specifically incorporating tenets from Critical Pedagogy such as humility, dialogue, and praxis is encouraged. Any effort to promote egalitarian relationships within the services may yield more engagement and participation from those who attend. Moreover, I find that it is important for volunteers to have an opportunity and space to reflect individually and collectively with one another upon their services. In doing so, not only may their services improve, but generally speaking, the ministry may influence adjacent programs or operations within the facility. For other
prison ministries and faith-based programs within prison settings, I have the same recommendations, 
but to consider the context of their specific religion in addition to possessing a socially-just orientation.

To those who work directly in prison, detention, and judicial systems, my intent of this study is 
not to personally target or demean anybody. I understand that the prison system is large and 
multifaceted. My hope in exploring this area of inquiry is to uplift and rehumanize the prison 
population. Through examining the experiences of the volunteers, I emphasize that many of those who 
end up incarcerated have struggled and suffered through their own personal traumas. Although I do 
not excuse any crime or harm committed onto others, I believe that promoting restorative practices 
rather than punitive practices will respect human life and dignity while helping the prison system in 
the long run. I push forward the humanity of each person so that in your own spaces and jobs, 
kindness and tenderness become the backbone of any decisions or actions being made.

To policymakers, politicians, and those in influential positions of power, there is a wide 
breadth of research literature examining the detrimental effects of incarceration on individuals that 
does not include the current study. Although this dissertation adds critical findings to this literature, 
my motivation and hope for this study is to take a more humanizing approach of understanding the 
experiences of those who volunteer directly with the prison population. From my findings, the 
volunteers witness and recognize the various forms of injustice related to the issues of incarceration and 
the prison system. My appeal is to consider a preferential orientation towards the poor and vulnerable. 
This means thinking and acting in terms of community, solidarity, and compassion. I also ask for a 
critical reflection around the overarching dehumanizing structures—demonizing attitudes, neoliberal
capitalism, unjust judicial and legal procedures, lengthy sentencing, and the prison-industrial complex—in order to ensure truth and justice.

For Catholic dioceses, parishes, communities, religious, and laypersons, I hope that the findings of this study reveal the immensity of God and His identification with the poor. In particular, by encountering and serving those who are oppressed and marginalized, there is an increase in learning and faith. Moreover, I encourage further reading and exploration into the social teachings of the Church, for it offers a rich analysis of God amidst the political and social struggles of the world. For those already engaged in ministerial and volunteer work, may the findings of this study help deepen your vocation to serving God. Lastly, may this dissertation serve as a reminder to authentically live the gospel message of love and belonging.

For anyone who is not necessarily religious or spiritual, but possesses an interest in volunteering within detention settings, I recommend trying it out. Whether through government probation departments, prevention and reintegration programs, or any other service or charity organizations, there are many people doing great work around supporting those impacted by incarceration. The work towards greater humanization and liberation requires all people to participate. The findings of this study reveal the fruits of serving and what selfless presence means to those in situations of marginalization.

**Future Exploration**

It is not often to come across a study that explores new knowledge in this manner. Although the current dissertation situates itself within the literature of prison ministry in the United States, it cuts across the different disciplines of criminal justice, Catholic and religious ministry, and educational
pedagogy. Therefore, there are various paths for future studies to embark on. First and foremost, there is still a paucity within the literature in regards to prison/detention ministries. Many of the previous studies took place decades prior and there are newer cultural attitudes, approaches, and frameworks that underlie alternative views of the justice system. Future studies on this topic can explore different ministries, programs, and faith-based efforts within this setting. I also hope to see more qualitative designs in order to deeply explore the human experiences relating to prison ministry.

In regards to the specific ministry this study examined, future research can explore the experience of detention ministry from the perspectives of those who are incarcerated–those who attend the ministry services. It would be interesting to see the influence of the detention ministry on its participants and to see if they would attest to any personal change or transformation like the volunteers expressed. Also, if the intention is to improve practices and service delivery, the detention ministry can consider a case study or program evaluation that includes experiences from multiple perspectives: the leadership, volunteers, and those who receive the services. If the ministry would like to measure the impact of its services, quantitative designs can be utilized in future research. I do caution on infringing the spirit of faith-based efforts as quantitative approaches may not adequately capture the human essence of spirituality.

Another path that future research can explore is looking at the experiences of volunteers in different ministry settings. There are many other religious and faith-based programs that have volunteers directly serving different marginalized and vulnerable populations. In regards to Catholic ministries, future studies can compare their findings to this study and see if there are similarities across Catholic volunteers in different contexts. Furthermore, I encourage more critical research in order to
prioritize and uplift the human experience amidst dehumanizing systems. This dissertation does not specifically measure or operationalize human constructs, therefore future studies that aim to replicate these findings should utilize designs that allow for a fluidity in the methods and methodology, reflecting an openness to the complexities of human experiences.

Lastly, one of the themes from this dissertation touches on the experience of God, or the experience of the divine. I believe that utilizing research to capture the experience of God within different contexts can contribute to deeper understanding of faith and spirituality. Relating to this study, it would be interesting to further explore the notion of God within the context of detention ministry. It is important to note that this dissertation specifically utilizes critical and socially-just frameworks to make sense of faith and the topic of inquiry, therefore, future research must take into account the theoretical orientation as it may hugely impact the eventual findings. Although this is a weighty undertaking, there is potential for further reflection and theorization of human insight and understanding of God. Wherever future researchers decide to build upon the findings of this dissertation, I hope for these endeavors to center a humanizing approach and work towards promoting the well-being of people.

*A Promise of the Kingdom*

In reflecting on the next steps for the current dissertation study, I acknowledge the calling of Critical Pedagogy and my other theoretical frameworks. They exercise a systemic and structural analysis that prioritizes the lives of the oppressed and marginalized; they also identify the need to reimagine, transform, restructure, and dismantle oppressive systems. I cannot say that the findings of this dissertation reach that calling. Although fostering a critical consciousness helps one notice the
sources of injustice, a true conscientização should lead one to actionably work against dehumanizing structures. Despite the newfound knowledge and insight discovered through this exploration of the volunteering experience, the harsh reality remains: the prison system continues to exist and harm human beings. Unless society employs a more restorative, relational, and humanizing approach to addressing incarceration, individuals and communities will continue to suffer.

This is where my dissertation ends and I am drawn to look inward. Examining the power dynamics of all those involved within the prison system acknowledges that those who are incarcerated have the least power. They do not or rarely have a say in how prisons should operate or rehabilitate. Moreover, those who visit or volunteer do not possess much power either. In reflecting on where I go from here, I have an assured faith in always practicing a pedagogy of tenderness that embraces the loving, gentle, and nonviolent approach of Jesus Christ. Rather than residing in desolation, I look to the power and humility of God who closely identifies with the “least” (NABRE, 2011, Mt. 25:40) and I remain hopeful in the promise of Easter, the triumph over death and suffering, and the coming of God’s kingdom.

**An Invitation to Visit**

One day during a bible study, one of my participants—a youth who has been attending my services for almost a year—asked me if I could write him a reference letter for his upcoming court date. He needed somebody who knew him and could speak of him in a positive light. With the approval of my coordinator, I did not hesitate to write him one, giving him two copies: one for his lawyer and one to keep personally. At the next bible study service, he told me, “Chris, I don’t think your letter worked. The judge gave me more time.” Prior to composing his reference letter, I knew that it would be foolish
of me to believe or promise that my letter could influence the judge’s sentencing, rather, my hope was that whoever read it—his probation officer, lawyer, judge—would see my youth beyond his crimes: as someone kind, respectful, funny, and genuine, and as a kid who carried a burden far heavier than he could handle. After I shared this intent, he replied, “Thanks Chris for trying. I really appreciate everything you’ve done for me.” We ended our session praying for each other, and I promised him that I would always be praying for him.

This dissertation is like an extension of that reference letter and it serves as an invitation. On behalf of my experiences and the experiences of the volunteers, I write this dissertation not to change policies or dismantle the prison system, rather, I want to put a spotlight on the humanity of those impacted by incarceration and convey how much they mean to me and my collaborators. The most important lesson I learned from being a volunteer is this: if we judge, label, pathologize, and demonize others, we lose sight of the whole person—we lose sight of the complexities that frame a wider understanding of others. We essentially hinder our capability to fully love. Therefore, I invite you to simply visit: to encounter those who are different from you—those who have less privileges and those who experience suffering and injustices in ways that we cannot imagine. If you stay long enough to listen and learn, then I promise that you will experience a communion, love, and vibrancy that will leave you forever changed.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Faith Sharing Guide

Introduction for each session: Hello (participant name)! I want to thank you again for taking the time to meet and speak with me. Again, this interview should take approximately 60 to 90 minutes, but I am flexible if our conversation happens to last longer or shorter. As a reminder, I will be audio recording this interview. I want to assure you that our conversation today will be kept confidential, meaning that I will keep what is said secured and anonymous. Given the topic of our conversation today, I want to inform you that some of the questions may bring up new or uncomfortable feelings and if at any point during the interview you need to take a break or stop, please let me know. Do you have questions for me at this time? (pause to answer any questions) Okay, are you okay if we begin with prayer?

Closing for each session: That concludes our session for today. Thank you so much again for taking the time to talk with me today. I am really honored that you would share a part of your life with me. I am truly grateful. After I transcribe and analyze the interview data, I may reach out to you for clarifications as needed. (If needed:) I would like to schedule our next meeting. If you have any questions about the study or if anything comes to mind, don’t hesitate to reach out!

Questions for Faith Sharing 1

I would like to ask you some questions regarding your call or desire to be involved with prison ministry…

1. Can you share a little bit about yourself, who you are, and what initially drew you to this ministry?
   a. Did you have any prior experiences serving vulnerable populations?
   b. What prior experience do you have with other forms of Catholic ministry?
   c. How does your faith/spirituality influence your desire to be involved with this ministry?

2. What were your initial impressions when you first began this ministry?
   a. What are some early experiences that have been particularly memorable to you and why?

3. What continues to draw you to serving in this ministry?
   a. What does the ministry mean to you now compared to when you first began?
   b. Which aspects of the ministry do you enjoy the most?
   c. Which parts do you not enjoy or prefer?

4. Is there anything else you would like to share in regards to your calling and desire to be involved with this ministry?

Questions for Faith Sharing 2

I would like to ask you some questions regarding your experiences serving incarcerated populations and your perspective on your role and relationship to these individuals…

1. In what ways do you feel your service has made an impact on those who you serve?
a. Can you share a specific story or relationship that has been meaningful or memorable for you?

2. In what ways have these individuals made an impact on you?
   a. How would you describe the relationships you developed with those you served?

3. What is your understanding of healing or restoration within the context of prison ministry?
   a. How do you feel this ministry contributes to overall restorative justice?

4. We hear the words solidarity, communion, accompaniment, and/or kinship when serving marginalized populations. How do you understand being in relationship with someone who is different from you?

5. How does this ministry influence your understanding of human dignity in relation to marginalization/oppression (incarceration)?
   a. How does your faith/spirituality play a role in facilitating your understanding and experiences of service?

6. How would those you serve describe you and your relationship to them?

7. Is there anything else you would like to share in regards to your relationships and experiences of directly serving the incarcerated population?

Questions for Faith Sharing 3

I would like to ask you some questions about how this ministry has shaped you and your views...

1. In what ways has this ministry influenced your views on incarceration and the corrections/prison system?
   a. In what ways do you think the corrections/prison system can improve in rehabilitating inmates?

2. How has this ministry shaped your views on social justice and having a “preferential option for the poor?”

3. Has this ministry inspired you to do more (or be more)? If yes, how so?
   a. How has your service influenced your faith/spirituality?

4. What do you feel is the most important lesson learned from being part of this ministry?

5. In what ways do you think the ministry can improve?

6. What insights or words of wisdom would you share with someone who is interested in becoming a volunteer?
   a. How would you describe the incarcerated population to someone outside of this ministry?

7. Is there anything else that you would like to share in regards to your perspectives on the prison system or how this ministry has shaped you?