A Gang of Pentecostals

Inmate-Led Prison Churches in Rio de Janeiro

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Abstract

This article uses ethnographic data from two of Rio de Janeiro's inmate-led prison churches to examine how they function. It also highlights the structural and functional parallels of these churches with prison gangs. I argue that the gang-like characteristics of these churches are an important reason for the success of Pentecostalism inside Rio de Janeiro's penal system. The results of this research can inform future scholarly investigation and prison ministry initiatives.

Résumé

Cet article mobilise des données ethnographiques sur deux églises de prison dirigées par des détenus à Rio de Janeiro, afin d'analyser la manière dont ces églises fonctionnent et d'éclairer les parallèles existant entre ces églises et les gangs de détenus du point structurel et fonctionnel. Je montre que les similarités observables entre les caractéristiques de ces églises et celles des gangs sont pour beaucoup dans le succès du pentecôtisme au sein du système pénal de Rio de Janeiro. Les résultats de cette recherche pourraient être utiles à de futures enquêtes académiques sur ces questions et inspirer des initiatives au niveau de la gestion des prisons.

Keywords

prison ministry – religious innovation – signaling theory – Pentecostalism – Rio de Janeiro

Mots-clés

ministère pénitentiaire, innovation religieuse, théorie de la signalization, Pentecôtisme, Rio de Janeiro

1 Introduction

Heroes for Christ is a Pentecostal church located on the gritty outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. The church is small, between forty and fifty official members, but crowds regularly swell to over one hundred people, especially on holiday services or baptisms. Heroes for Christ does not have a formal affiliation with a larger denomination; it is an independent church sustained by member tithes and donations. The church's theology is traditionally Pentecostal with a particular emphasis on daily practice of the faith. Smoking, drinking, swearing, and drug taking are strictly prohibited and many of the members carry a Bible with them throughout the day. Communal fasting campaigns, prayer meetings and ministries to the indigent are also core components of the church's vision. The church hosts four worship services a week which are fueled by enthusiastic worship, personal testimonies and a sermon delivered by the pastor or a member of the leadership team. There is an evangelistic thrust to the services and attendees are usually offered a chance to dedicate or recommit their lives to Jesus Christ.

Church leaders are elected by members and reflect the socio-demographics of the congregation. The entire congregation comes from the lower rungs of Rio's steep socio-economic ladder, as does the leadership team. None of the pastors, assistant pastors, deacons, secretaries, or worship leaders have attended a seminary or any other post-secondary education. Personal testimonies and more importantly, the daily practice of the faith serve as the credentialing process for their leadership positions. In many ways, Heroes for Christ is emblematic of the Pentecostal movement that has grown tremendously in Rio de Janeiro's poor and marginalized neighborhoods over the past thirty years by empowering local leaders to guide the institutions.

What is different about the church is that all of its members, leaders and regular attendees are incarcerated. Heroes for Christ is a prison church that operates autonomously and is led by inmates in the Salgado jail.¹ Heroes for Christ is not an anomaly; Pentecostalism has become an institutionalized pres-

¹ Salgado is a pseudonym for the jail's real name.

ence in Rio de Janeiro's prison system. In every one of the city's prisons and jails, a church similar to Heroes for Christ operates inside the cellblocks.

Rio de Janeiro is predominately Catholic, not Pentecostal. Inmates as a group are not known for their religious fervor or piety. In fact, the vast majority of prisoners are incarcerated because they committed acts explicitly prohibited by Pentecostal teaching. Moreover, Rio's jails and prisons are dominated by powerful narco-gangs, like the *Comando Vermelho* (Red Command), which do not tolerate the presence of rival groups and control nearly every aspect of prison life. Yet, Pentecostalism flourishes in this environment. So, why has Pentecostal Christianity become such a prominent force inside Rio de Janeiro's prisons?

Based on data collected from a year of ethnographic research, I argue that an important reason Pentecostalism thrives inside jails and prisons in Rio de Janeiro is that inmates have established autonomous and self-sustaining prison churches led by inmates. These prison churches share core theological tenets with other Pentecostal churches, but in their organizational structure and authoritative role in the prison population, they resemble a prison gang.

In this article, I will describe the qualitative methods I used to gather the data on the prison churches in Rio de Janeiro and explain how signaling theory may help to understand prison churches' emphasis on visible practices and rituals. I will demonstrate the gang's crucial influence on the prison churches by the way these groups claim ownership of space in the cellblocks, implement order in the absence of the state, require submission to church leadership, and emphasize collective unity. Though narco-gangs like the *Comando Vermelho* may be an unlikely source of inspiration for a religious group, the gang-like characteristics of these churches have enabled them to flourish throughout Rio's correctional system.²

2 Methods

I started the research for this project by spending two weeks living inside prison "as an inmate" in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, a neighbor to Rio de Janeiro. I spent one week in two different prisons where I slept in the same

² This article draws on data I used to write the book *If I Give My Soul* (2017). Some of the passages in this article have been reprinted from the book with the permission of the publisher. Though I am using the same data, I have since engaged with criminologists and recently published studies on inmate-led religious groups in the United States which have deepened my understanding of the role of Pentecostalism inside of prison (Densley 2012, 2015; Hallett et al. 2016; Pyrooz and Densley 2016; Johnson and Densley 2018).

cells, ate the same food, played in the same soccer games, and followed the same schedule as everyone else in my cellblock. These prisons were part of a parallel prison system initiated by a Catholic priest in the 1970s and though considerably safer than the other prisons in the state, all of the men in the cellblocks where I stayed had been convicted of serious crimes and had served time in the other prisons.

I was aware that Brazilian prisons were very different places than the neighborhood in suburban Minneapolis where I grew up or the university campus where I had hatched my research plan. I knew that I had a lot to learn about the social world inside of prisons and this methodology allowed me to observe and participate in prison life in a way that reading about prisons or simply interviewing the incarcerated could not.

I was not a real prisoner during this part of the fieldwork. I had not been convicted of a crime and I knew that I could leave if I wanted to. I hope that I never really “know” what it actually feels like to be imprisoned, but the time I spent behind bars at least gave me a taste of what it would be like.

For example, I remember lying wide-awake on the top bunk in my cell on a Thursday night. I could not sleep and my cellmate in the bunk below mine had been snoring uninterrupted for over three hours. I had never heard anyone snore so loudly for so long, the entire bunk shook. Lying on my back, I looked over my toes and through the bars of the window I could see the moon shining brightly in the deeply black sky and I started thinking, “What if I had to spend ten years in this place?” Maybe we have all asked ourselves a question like this, “What if I was in prison?” I know that I had. Lying in the prison cell that evening, this question was no longer an abstract exercise because I was asking myself, “Could I handle ten years sleeping in *this* bed behind *these* bars?” I was overcome with despair just thinking about the hypothetical situation. I had spent four days in the prison and ten years seemed like an eternity, I did not know if or how I could do it. I kept thinking about what a tragic waste it would be for my life and what incredible pain it would cause my family to have me in there. Those emotions, mixed with regret or remorse over the crime I may have committed or the pain that my action had caused others, would be a torturous combination. I could not pretend to understand how individuals cope in that scenario, but when I woke up the next morning, I understood why there were no smiles in the breakfast line.

Prison is an intimidating place to conduct research and I had concerns before I began the fieldwork, but in general, the inmates graciously accepted me into their world if only for a week and were more than generous with their hospitality. As one inmate told me, “You are our guest. We get a lot of visitors, but nobody has come to live with us. We are glad you are here.”

Though the prisons in Rio de Janeiro were very different places than those I visited in Minas Gerais, the two weeks I spent “as an inmate” served as a foundation to build the rest of the methodology. Salgado Jail was one of my primary research sites in Rio de Janeiro. Inmates were brought here immediately after their arrest and remained in the cellblocks until their trial. Some waited more than two years to see a judge. During my fieldwork nearly half of the over 5,000 people incarcerated in Rio de Janeiro were held in jails like Salgado.³ Since the space in the city’s penitentiaries was highly regulated, the jails became holding tanks and were nearly bursting at the seams with inmates awaiting trial. The conditions inside the cells are hard to describe with words alone, but nearly everyone I met who had seen them used the word *dungeon* at some point in their description of Salgado’s cells. The concrete walls in the cells had been painted white years ago, but during the fieldwork, they were streaked black with layers of dirt, dried sweat, and mildew. Six months before I arrived, a volunteer from Rio de Paz, a local NGO, made the front page of the newspaper by posing in one of the cells with a thermometer in his hands that read 56.7°C (134°F).⁴

The prisons in Rio de Janeiro were more orderly, monitored more closely and also more difficult to gain access to than the jails. I visited four of the city’s jails and two prisons, but focused my research in Salgado and one prison, Cinza Penitentiary.⁵ Cinza is a large dilapidated building that looked like an airplane hangar divided by a long corridor lined dozens of fifty-bed cells. The cellblocks at Cinza were not nearly as crowded as Salgado, each man had his own bed. I was not able to gain the same level of access that I did in Salgado, but many of the sights, smells, and sounds were similar to those in the jails.

In total, I made over 40 visits to Salgado and Cinza and attended 30 Pentecostal worship services inside of the cellblocks in those institutions. I recorded private semi-structured interviews in Portuguese with 15 men who were incarcerated at the time of the interview and recorded dozens more interviews with men who were previously incarcerated. I returned to Rio de Janeiro again a year later to conduct follow-up interviews with men who had been released from prison.

3 Since I conducted the fieldwork, the city of Rio de Janeiro has reorganized the prison system and Salgado and many jails like it have been closed.

4 Werneck (2010).

5 Cinza is also a pseudonym for the penitentiary I studied.

3 Signaling Sincerity

During the fieldwork, religious life was readily on display in the prisons I studied. It was woven into daily life in the cellblocks. Many of the rituals and daily practices were conducted in shared spaces making them visible to observers like myself and other men inside the prison. Many inmates carried Bibles with them throughout the day, others wore customized t-shirts proclaiming their religious affiliations. Because of the tight quarters, the sermons and worship music could be heard by nearly everyone living in the prison. After my first few visits to the prisons in Rio, I wondered why the Pentecostal inmates appeared to be intent on practicing their faith in such a public manner.

One reason the prison churches emphasize public displays of devotion and church affiliation is to address the question that hovers around nearly all conversations about religion and prison, “Do they *really* mean it?” It is an important question, but one that I avoided asking directly in this project. I do not believe that social scientists are equipped to make judgments about the authenticity of anyone’s religious commitments, so I never tried to determine whether the inmates in the prison churches “really” believed the theological premises of Pentecostalism. Instead, I focused my questions, observations, and analysis on the inmates’ religious practice and how the men lived their lives inside of prison.

The inmates in Cinza and Salgado did not share my aversion to judging the authenticity of other people’s religious commitments. In fact, the question was front and center in prison subculture, and prisoners constantly evaluated each other’s religious lives. Prison church leaders were very concerned with the question of authenticity, or if a church member was a “true believer” because the church’s ability to exist was contingent on other prisoners judging the church’s collective faith practice as genuine. As long as the Pentecostals were known as a group who practiced what they preached, they would be protected from prison violence and allowed to occupy space in the prison.⁶

The prison churches had their reasons for repeatedly proving their faith was authentic to onlookers, but the gang also had an interest in ensuring that the Prison Pentecostals were not just “hiding behind a Bible.” In many cases, gang leaders permitted members to disavow their gang commitments in order to join the Pentecostals. If the gang members-turned-Pentecostals were deemed by the prison population to be insincere in their post-gang religious practice,

⁶ Johnson (2017).

it would make the gang look foolish and vulnerable to manipulation. Both the church and the gang dealt harshly with men whom they believed were just playing Pentecostal, but neither group relied on mere verbal expressions of belief as the criteria for judgment. Gang members and prison church members observed the daily lives of the men in prison in order to gauge the authenticity of their faith commitments. The daily rituals, easily observed by the rest of the prison, served to signal to anyone watching that the church members were not “hiding behind a Bible.”

Signaling theory may help to understand the public nature of religious life inside of prison.⁷ Personal religious beliefs are inherently difficult to verify, but in order to co-exist both the gang and the church need to agree that a Pentecostal convert is to be trusted in their confession of faith. If verbal professions of religious affiliation are deemed unreliable by both sides, how do groups make these important judgements? Bacharach and Gambetta argue that this sort of trust can be built through exchanging mutually understood signals.⁸ These signals must be “hard-to-fake” and understood by all parties, in this case fellow inmates.⁹ These actions then provide the material or “evidence” that a person’s religious commitments are trustworthy.¹⁰

Social groups like gangs are particularly adept at using and interpreting these sorts of signals to determine commitment to their groups.¹¹ The Comando Vermelho, Rio’s most powerful narco-gang, used these types of signals in the prisons I studied. Every afternoon they required members to participate in daily rituals like their *grito de guerra* (war cry), a collective call and response chant pledging allegiance to the gang that could be easily heard throughout the building.

Rio de Janeiro’s prison subculture is shaped by gangs, which makes it a perfect place for a strict religion like Pentecostalism to thrive. Pentecostalism employs a series of costly rituals like fasting, abstinence from alcohol and drugs, daily prayer and mandatory participation in worship services. The publicly visible practices combine to signal identity and make it very difficult for inmates to “hide behind a Bible” and get a free ride with the church.¹²

7 Spence (1974); Johnson and Densley (2018).

8 Bacharach and Gambetta (2001).

9 Maruna (2012); Ralph (2014).

10 Cronk (2005).

11 Densley (2012, 2015); Pyrooz and Densley (2016).

12 Iannaccone (1992, 1994); Irons (2001); Sosis (2003); Sosis and Bressler (2003).

4 The Comando Vermelho

Powerful narco-gangs the control vast swaths of Rio de Janeiro.¹³ The *Comando Vermelho* (CV), Rio's most powerful gang, began inside of prison in the 1970's when the Brazilian government housed political prisoners and street criminals inside of the same cellblocks at Candido Mendes prison.¹⁴ The volatile mixture of dissidents and streetwise convicts spawned one of the most violent and tightly organized narco-gangs in the world, the Comando Vermelho. Fueled by a burgeoning cocaine market in Brazil, the gangs grew in the city's *favelas* by creating de facto governments more powerful and present than the state's offerings. These areas were socially and geographically isolated from the rest of the city, largely ignored by the state and vulnerable to an alternative governing force. Elizabeth Leeds summarized the growth of the gangs as follows: "Parallel power structures thus have arisen in a space left empty by the lack of truly protective state structures."¹⁵ The cellblocks of Rio's prisons are also "spaces left empty" by the state and are ruled by parallel powers.

Though the gangs grew in size and influence by setting up fiefdoms throughout Rio de Janeiro, they never relinquished their power inside of prison. Dr. Elizabeth Sussekind, a lawyer, university professor, and former Brazilian National Secretary of Justice, explained to me how the gangs leverage the threat of violence to establish their control in the cellblocks:

The penitentiaries are spaces controlled by gangs because everyone fears the gang leaders. The guards do not enter the cellblocks, because the state doesn't really equip them to go inside the cells, so they stay at the door. The guards have to enter unarmed, so they end up having to obey the gang leaders, because they walk around with concealed weapons and they have outside connections. They can use these connections to threaten the guards' families, and since the state doesn't protect its prison guards, the guards, well, not all of them, are silent about the violent threat of organized crime that exists inside prison.

Gangs have been able to maintain their power inside of prison for the last forty years through the threat of violence. Rival gangs have emerged since the inception of the Comando Vermelho, but in the prisons I studied, it was the CV and not the prison administrators, who decided on everything from where inmates

13 Gomes (2019).

14 Lessing (2010).

15 Leeds (1996), p. 78.

slept to when the inmates would launch collective prison riots. Inside of each prison, a “president” was appointed by gang authorities on the outside to maintain order and ensure that the gang’s rules were enforced in the cellblocks. As a former CV member told me, “You have to do whatever he [the gang leader] says, get it? If you don’t, you will end up dying in that place.”

5 Prison Pentecostalism

In the last three decades, Pentecostalism has developed a unique relationship with criminal gangs not only in Brazil, but throughout Latin America.¹⁶ Understanding the role of gangs in Rio’s prisons is crucial to understanding what I call “Prison Pentecostalism” and the emergence of prison churches throughout Rio’s penal system.

Pentecostalism’s presence in prison arose after gangs had firmly established their dominance in these places. This is important because Prison Pentecostalism began and grew in an environment controlled by narco-gangs. In the early 1990s Pentecostal Christianity grew rapidly in Rio de Janeiro’s *favelas*, the same neighborhoods where the gangs flourished and many inmates lived prior to arrest.¹⁷ Based on conversations I had with people who were incarcerated in Rio during this time, a small but vocal group of Pentecostal inmates began to emerge inside of Rio’s prisons. As their numbers grew, they began to organize themselves around their Pentecostal identity and started to call themselves the “*Comando de Cristo*” or “Christ’s Command.” These groups of incarcerated Pentecostals not only borrowed their name from the gang, they also looked to the Comando Vermelho as a model on how to create autonomous, inmate-led, sustainable organizations inside of prison. Over time, Pentecostal groups evolved by looking towards churches like the Assemblies of God and created organizations that could best be understood as gang/church hybrids.

5.1 *Pentecostal Space inside Prison*

When I began the fieldwork for this project, the prison churches had become an institutionalized part of prison sub-culture. Inside of Salgado, I asked a member of the Heroes for Christ prison church what he did when he arrived at the jail for the first time. “The first thing I did was to find the prison church. I knew that in basically every prison or jail, there is a church that is led by the pris-

16 Brennenman (2010, 2014); O’Neill (2010, 2015); Thorton (2018); Wolseth (2008).

17 Freston (1995).

oners.” I visited six prisons in Rio de Janeiro and inside each of them were cells owned by a narco-gang as well as a cell or series of cells owned by the prison church called, *celas dos irmãos*, or the “Brothers’ Cells.” The Brothers’ Cells belong to the Pentecostals inside of prison. In these cells, incarcerated Pentecostals called the shots, forming their own parallel power inside of prison.

The size and structure of the Brothers’ Cells vary, depending on the institution. In some of the larger penitentiaries I visited, Pentecostal inmates controlled entire cellblocks, but inside the smaller, less stable jails, they owned a single cell or claimed part of a hallway as their own.

Cinza Penitentiary, one of the oldest and largest penitentiaries in Rio de Janeiro, was home to the best-organized and longest-running prison churches that I observed during my fieldwork. Close to fifteen percent of Cinza’s inmates lived in the Brothers’ Cells at the end of the building’s long corridor. They marked the beginning of their territory by painting the wall with an enormous mural that depicted Moses, staff in hand, crossing through a split Red Sea followed by dozens of Israelites. The bright, primary colors starkly contrasted with the faded gray, soot-stained walls of the building, and the words “Welcome to the Cinza Penitentiary Prison Church” were written in big block letters above the Old Testament scene. Adjacent to the church’s cells was a chapel where the prison church held their daily worship services and regular baptisms.

Not every prison church was able to create such a dramatic space as in Cinza. For example, because Salgado was packed to five or six times its intended capacity, there was not enough room for the prison church to have its own cell. Despite these constraints, owning space was still important to the prison church. Salgado’s church, Heroes for Christ, claimed the final thirty feet at the end of the cellblock corridor as its own. The arrangement was negotiated with the leaders of the Comando Vermelho and the church’s prohibitions and rules were strictly enforced. I asked the church’s pastor about the space, and he told me,

The church has to be respected, so I don’t want anyone smoking in the church’s space, because worship time is sacred. We see the respect they [inmates not affiliated with the church] have for us, a fear. The moment the service starts there is silence so they can hear the word, they put on their shirts and listen to God.

The members of the church inside Cinza also made their space sacred through a series of prohibitions and practices. Smoking, swearing, gambling, watching television, and drug use were not allowed in this space. The Pentecostal cells stood out from the other cells because the inmates kept the lights on during the

day as opposed to the other cells that were purposefully kept dark to prevent anyone from observing what was happening inside the cells. Also, the pornography that served as the default wallpaper in the other cells was noticeably missing in the church-controlled wing.

The Comando Vermelho uses the color red as an identity marker. Prison church members did not claim a color as their own, but some churches did use clothing to signal membership. Before they evolved into prison churches, members of the *Comando de Cristo* wore suit jackets, slacks, and ties inside prison. While this practice had been abandoned by the prison churches I observed, in Cinza penitentiary, inmates wore white shirts adorned with the church's logo – a Bible laid open with a dove flying through the bars of a prison cell window to identify themselves as church members.

Occupying and controlling space inside prison was an important innovation which allowed the incarcerated Pentecostals to organize from a loose-knit group to an institutionalized presence in every jail and prison in the city. This move was directly inspired by the gang's control of cells and gave the prison churches legitimacy in the eyes of the prison population. This is an example of a strategy employed by incarcerated Pentecostal leaders that would have been nearly impossible to implement if the churches were led by a prison ministry based outside prison. Outside groups would likely not understand the importance of claiming ownership of space inside of prison and would not have had the influence with the prison gangs or administration to negotiate the arrangement.

5.2 *Order, Not Chaos*

Gangs serve an important role inside prison by providing order and predictability. The Comando Vermelho prohibits sexual assaults inside of prison, cooperating with the police and has a monopoly on the use of violence. Even though the guards rarely entered the cellblocks, daily life was not chaotic, but predictable and governed by the gang's law and enforced by the organization's appointed leaders.

One of the reasons I was able to enter the prisons and jails to conduct the fieldwork for this project was a result of the gang's edict to treat visitors with respect. The first time I visited the gang-controlled section of Salgado, the gang leader called for the attention of the entire wing as I was about to leave, and within thirty seconds the radios and televisions were turned off and all conversations stopped. Even the buzz from the electric tattoo needle being used on the bicep of an inmate in the corner vanished. In the silence that followed, the gang leader spoke to me and said, "I want to thank you for coming in here today. People on the outside think we are a bunch of caged animals in here,

but as you can see we are not. I want you to know that you are welcome here anytime." As I left, I shook hands with at least two dozen gang members. I had not expected to be received so warmly by the Comando Vermelho. At first, I admit that I was shocked at the reverence I witnessed from the inmates toward myself and the other visitors (which were almost exclusively Pentecostal volunteers) in Salgado, but as I continued the fieldwork, I encountered this sort of treatment in every facility I entered.

Though the prison churches were built on a value system that was very different than the gang's, it served a similar function by implementing order through a series of rules that were enforced by its leaders. Pedro was elected by his fellow church members as the leader of the Heroes for Christ church inside of Salgado. He was the "boss" of the prison church and had authority over everyone who lived in the Brother's Cells. Pedro delivered the majority of the sermons, organized communion, led the worship services, prayed before important rituals, and managed the church's leadership team. His duties extended beyond leading the religious rituals in prison, because he was also in charge of enforcing the church's rules and regulations.

Unlike the gangs, whose leaders are appointed from outside of prison, the prison churches elect their leaders democratically. Incarcerated members of the church vote to determine who will serve as the pastor, deacon, secretary, and worship leader. When I asked Pastor Pedro what criteria members use to evaluate candidates for the leadership positions, he emphasized consistency in character. "We vote based on how the brother lives day-to-day, his contribution to the work, the example he has given; this is what matters." The proximity of the voting members to the candidates make these elections very different than national political campaigns: the candidates are judged on their day-to-day lives, not their words, slogans, or hashtags.

In the most organized churches, an elected assistant supported every leadership position. In the Cinza church, for example, there was a secretary and an assistant secretary working for the church. They were in charge of the church's finances and keeping track of the members and visitors. When I first attended a service at Cinza, I signed a guestbook that had cataloged the names and home churches of over a decade's worth of visitors. During the service, the secretary handed me a personalized welcome letter signed by both him and the pastor. If the active secretary were released or transferred, the assistant secretary (who had by this time been trained for the position) would be promoted to be acting secretary and an election would be held among the inmates to elect the next assistant secretary.

The state was largely absent inside of Rio's cellblocks. One might expect anarchy and disorder in a prison where guards had little interaction with the

prisoners, but this was not the case. The gang fulfilled this function by instituting order through its rules and regulations. The prison churches were also born into an environment of state neglect and like the gang, they created a system of governance that ensured order and predictability in the spaces they controlled.

5.3 *Submission to Authority*

Whether appointed or elected, both the gang and church are led by clearly identifiable leaders. Each group adheres to a different set of laws and membership requirements, but belonging to either a prison gang or a prison church requires submission to authority. If the gang allows someone to leave their organization and join the church, the gang's president expects that the ex-member submits to the authority of the church and the pastor as he did during his tenure as a gang member. Consistency in character and submission to authority is valued by both organizations.

Junho, a Comando Vermelho member who served two prison sentences for drug trafficking and weapons possession, lived in the cells operated by the Comando Vermelho, under the authority of the gang's president and the organization's system of justice. He described as follows the authority structure in prison by comparing the gang's president to a pastor.

The Comando Vermelho has a leader who decides what happens to the people in there. Just like the church has a pastor who leads his church, the gang has a guy, their president, who was responsible for the 1,400 men in prison, who is responsible for everyone. The president has his group and they "solve problems" within the prison, you know? They take the guy who they think has done something and put him in a kind of a trial. They grab you, see what you have done, judge you, and sentence you.

Midway through his second prison term, Junho started to attend services hosted by the prison church. At the end of a worship service, he raised his hand when the prison pastor asked the audience if anyone would like to dedicate his life to God. Junho stepped forward and prayed with the pastor. Shortly after his public conversion, he packed up his belongings and moved from the Comando Cells to the Brother's Cells. When Junho moved cells he immediately became subject to a new authority, the prison church leadership. A daily drug user who had never been to church, the transition proved to be a difficult one. He was not prepared for the disciplined lifestyle, rigorous prayer routines, daily worship services, and Bible studies that were required in his new living situation. After a few minor conflicts, the elders of the church pulled Junho aside and spoke to him directly about what was expected of him as a member of the prison church.

Though it had been over two years since the conversation when I spoke with him, he remembered the message he received from the church leaders. "The key to being a believer inside prison is a simple one: obedience. You can't be a believer without obeying. If you are not obeying the leadership of your pastor, you are disobeying God." Junho adapted to his new situation and was able to finish his prison sentence living inside of the Brother's Cells because he submitted to their authority and obeyed the rules.

The CV enforced obedience to their rules through violence. The prison churches did not directly injure or kill members who did not obey, but they could expel a church member from the group. I asked the pastor of Heroes for Christ how his church handles members who refuse to submit to authority. He told me, "If a member is not obeying the rules and norms of the church, if he is not adapting, he will be taken out as quickly as he was let in. You can't hurt the church's work." Church membership is conditional and expulsion would leave the person vulnerable to a series of harmful consequences.

Before I arrived to conduct the fieldwork at Cinza a member of the prison church had been forcefully removed from the group for sexually abusing a younger church member. This was a clear violation of church policy and the pastor used his influence with the prison administration to see that the man was transferred to a different institution. The inmate judged guilty by the church was sent to the most dangerous wing of Rio's most notorious prison. From the way the story was explained to me, such a transfer was essentially a death sentence.

Conversion to Pentecostal Christianity provided a way out of the gang and a path to membership in the prison church, but in order to continue to live in the Brother's Cells the convert had to submit to the church's authority. Prison church pastors were not as powerful as the gang's president, but they held unique authority inside of prison. Gang leaders and church leaders used different mechanisms to enforce adherence to their group's rules. They were unquestionable and had the power to punish those who did not obey.

5.4 *Collective Unity*

Finally, the prison church members showed remarkable solidarity with each other. When they held worship services on the patio or in the cellblock hallways, everyone participated. None of the church members stayed back. Whether they felt like it or not, the prison church members left their bunks when they were called and moved as a collective unit to the worship space to sing, pray and listen to the sermon. This ensured a critical mass of attendees at each event and provided visible evidence of the church's formidable presence in prison.

The prison church required more than participation in the rituals from its members, they demanded unity and group cohesion. Divisions or rivalries among church members were not tolerated and enemies had to reconcile with each other. A former prison church member told me, "In the Brother's Cells, everyone has to speak to each other. I have to help you. For example, we include those who are alone during visiting hour with our visitors. We might provide material help, or it might be something else, but there has to be unity."

This unity was on display in a number of ways inside of prison. Pentecostalism is notorious for splintering into sects or competing churches because of theological or personal conflict. This was not the case with the Pentecostal groups inside of prison. I never observed or heard of a prison church unraveling due to a theological disagreement or a renegade prison pastor starting his own church in the same cellblock.

The emptiness of the Pentecostal cells during visiting hours also demonstrated the unity of the prison churches. During visiting time none of the church members were left in the cell by themselves. Residents of the Brother's Cells who had family or friends arrive during the allotted visiting time were obligated to include their cellmates who did not have visitors to share in the conversation and any food they may have brought in from the outside. Time with loved ones was precious, as was the food they brought in, so sharing the experience with others was costly but required.

The prison churches I studied were not supported financially by outside churches or ministries. The incarcerated congregation supported their church through freewill offerings. The money and resources donated to the church were used to buy musical instruments, supplies for special celebrations and assistance to inmates with specific material needs. In Salgado, inmates were thrown into the cells with clothes on their backs, in some cases shirtless and barefoot. These inmates remained shirtless and shoeless until someone from the outside brought them clothing. The prison church used the collected offerings to purchase toothpaste, toothbrushes, sandals and t-shirts for incarcerated men who did not have the means to procure these basic necessities. During the fieldwork, members of Heroes for Christ pooled enough money to buy an interstate bus ticket for the mother of a fellow inmate who did not have the money to travel to visit her son. They spoke of this purchase with great pride.

The Pentecostal worship services in prison were animated and boisterous. The churches' shirts and visible identity markers left little doubt as to who belonged to the group. But the unity and commitment to each other was one of the most powerful and effective means the church used to attract and retain members. Sharing their meager resources and the consistent acts of generos-

ity and charity contributed to the church's standing among inmates, including those who were not part of the church.

5.5 *Empowering Indigenous Leaders*

The hands-off approach implemented by the guards in Rio's prisons and jails provided an interesting context to study religion because the environment was mostly unregulated by outside forces. The inmate-led churches were not directed by an outside prison ministry, chaplain, or any denomination and were not under the direct supervision of prison staff. Pastors and volunteers from outside churches made regular visits to the prison to preach and conduct worship services, but they needed to have permission from the inmates to enter the cellblocks. The presence of these volunteers was an important part of religious life inside of prison and served to support the ongoing work of the prison church. The Pentecostal churches in the surrounding neighborhoods helped to shape the structure of the prison churches. But the prison churches were not simply incarcerated versions of Pentecostal churches. The influence of prison gangs like the CV was woven into the prison churches' DNA.

My interpretation is that religious practice inside of prison in Rio de Janeiro would have looked very different if directed by formal prison ministries or by a state-sponsored chaplain. It is impossible to know exactly how religious life would look inside of prison if it was guided by outsiders, but given the stigma of gangs in larger society, I doubt that "free-worlders" would have had the idea, or would have been comfortable in planting independent, inmate-led Pentecostal groups that shared so many characteristics with prison gangs. For example, the prison church repurposed the gang's ritual of a "war cry" into their own call and response ritual which they used at the end of each worship service to pledge allegiance to God and the church. The church's war cry served a similar purpose to the gangs' and is one example of many innovations that could only come from the prison environment itself. The origins of these practices gave them legitimacy and served as evidence to the rest of the prison that the church members were serious about their religious commitments.

It is also impossible to guess which inmates would rise to leadership positions if an outside group had been involved in leading the religious movements inside of the jails and prisons I studied, but they would likely be different than the leaders voted into power directly by the inmates. Pedro, Heroes for Christ's pastor, was a day laborer who had not finished high school. He, like the other prison church leaders I met, had not been to seminary nor had he been formally trained in theology. But Pedro had charisma and leadership abilities which were recognized by his cellmates and his preaching style uniquely fit the prison context. His arrest and subsequent conviction for armed robbery did not

present the obstacle on his path to church leadership that it may have outside of prison. The Pentecostal inmates in Salgado were able to monitor the way he lived behind bars, so they had ample material to base their opinions of him. The way he lived his life in the jail held more weight among his peers than any degree or diploma he may have received. A prison ministry operated from outside prison could not make these sorts of evaluations and may have selected someone else if the decision was theirs.

Rio's prison churches give a clear example of how faith can empower indigenous leadership, even when the individuals in a given group are among society's most stigmatized people. Moreover, Pentecostalism favors the sort of charismatic authority that is difficult, if not impossible, to teach in the classroom. The leadership qualities held by many of the prison church leaders may also be useful in leading a group like a narco-gang, so it should not be surprising that gang leaders could transition to new roles as religious leaders almost seamlessly. Since many prison church leaders were former gang leaders, it should also not be surprising that the prison churches had many "gang-like" characteristics.

The leaders, to whom church members submitted, were elected from within the group, not assigned by the prison administration or any outside group, so the members and leaders alike had ownership of these churches. As one Heroes for Christ member told me inside of the jail, "The church is ours. It belongs to those of us on the inside." Just as important, the prison church members held one another to a strict moral code. Though their status as inmates carried tremendous social stigma outside prison, behind bars this code provided an opportunity for inmates to act morally and participate in an activity that they perceived as honorable. Finally, the Pentecostal churches preached a message of redemption which held that even those who had been convicted of despicable acts were not lost causes, but worthy of redemption. This message has particular resonance when delivered by a convicted criminal serving his sentence.

6 Conclusion

My hope is that in keeping with the theme of this special issue, the findings from this project have contributed to a better understanding of religious life inside prison. This study is just one example of many that shows how Pentecostalism has been able to thrive in difficult material circumstances by empowering indigenous leadership, adopting innovative church models and inspiring dignity among societies' most stigmatized. Bob Dylan sang "*Someone showed me a picture and I just laughed. Dignity has never been photographed.*" Captur-

ing dignity is not only a challenge for the photographer, but the social scientist as well because dignity is also hard to quantify. But the sense of dignity was impossible to ignore in the interviews I conducted as inmates spoke about their prison churches and the lives that they felt these organizations had transformed. Rio's prison churches do not present a solution to the inhumane conditions of the city's penal facilities, nor will Pentecostalism single-handedly solve larger issues of social inequality. But faith and the inmate-led churches provided meaning, purpose, a new identity, and dignity for many of the men I met inside prison.

Rio's prison churches do not only exemplify the growth of Pentecostalism in Latin American prisons. They represent too what may be a global phenomenon of inmate-led religious movements inside the world's prisons. Social scientists have documented the impact of faith-based programs, but much less is known about religious movements and groups inside prisons that are initiated and led by inmates.¹⁸ These groups are difficult for outsiders to identify and sometimes impossible for researchers to access. I have heard anecdotal accounts of inmate-led religious groups operating inside prisons throughout North and South America. These groups seem to share many of the characteristics of the prison churches in Rio, even though the cultural and social contexts are very different. Recent research on inmate-led prison churches and religious movements in the United States indicate that these groups have the potential to change the culture of entire prisons if incarcerated leaders are allowed to serve and mentor fellow inmates.¹⁹ I believe that there is tremendous potential in studying the role of inmate-led religious movements inside prisons throughout the world over the next decade. This work and future studies can contribute not only to the scholarly literature but also to ministries and faith-based groups working with incarcerated populations.

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