Returning Citizens: Components of a Successful Reentry
An Interview with Dr. Dean Trulear of Healing Communities

Harrold Dean Trulear, Ph.D.

Harold Dean Trulear, Ph.D., has served as Associate Professor of Applied Theology at Howard University School of Divinity since 2003. Prior to joining the Howard Divinity faculty, he served as Visiting Distinguished Professor of Religion and Public Policy at the Templeton Honors College at Eastern University. He also held faculty positions at Yale University, Colgate Rochester Divinity School, The Center for Urban Theological Studies (Geneva College), and Jersey City State College.

Abstract: A Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Morehouse College (1975), he completed his Ph.D. with distinction at Drew University (1983). Dr. Trulear is the author of over 100 articles, book chapters, essays and published sermons. He directs a national research and demonstration project called "Healing Communities," mobilizing congregations to support those returning from incarceration through the establishment of family and social support networks. Through his research and activism he has been named a Fellow at the Center for Public Justice in Washington DC, and served as a consultant to the Faith and Families portfolio of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. In 2014, Dr. Trulear was named as one of "14 Faith Leaders to Watch" in 2014 by the Center for American Progress. He also serves as a member of the Executive Session on Community Corrections at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Successfully reintegrating the formerly incarcerated into society is important for individuals, families, and the economy. Fwd.us is “a bipartisan political organization that believes America’s families, communities, and economy thrive when more individuals are able to achieve their full potential.” The organization’s website notes “our criminal justice system poses one of the greatest challenges confronting our country today.”
Dr. Harold Dean Trulear, an ordained Baptist minister, Associate Professor of Theology at Howard University School of Divinity, and a returning citizen is also the National Director of Healing Communities USA. Healing Communities is a nonprofit organization that assists churches and faith communities for the work of assisting returning citizens and provides “a framework for a distinct form of ministry for men and women returning from or at risk of incarceration, their families and the larger community.” Dr. Trulear spoke with Public Justice Review (PJR) editor Kerwin Webb about the genesis of Healing Communities, the challenges with reintegrating returning citizens, and how one of the most important components of a successful reentry is a good social support network. During this interview, Dr. Trulear shared how his life and work both have demonstrated his commitment to faith and justice. The interview has been edited for clarity and brevity. PJR is grateful to Dr. Trulear for his time and generosity in sharing.

As part of the returning citizens series, Public Justice Review (PJR) has featured the voices of writers who have been engaged in advocating for the cause of the formerly incarcerated. Our writers have been people who research/study criminal justice reform, work directly with returning citizens through their churches or other organizations, and/or are returning citizens themselves.

Center for Public Justice’s (CPJ’s) guideline for political community notes that “we have a responsibility to create the organized institutional means of upholding and enforcing justice for all, even as we develop and pursue a wide variety of other, nonpolitical callings for which we were also created. All citizens should also enjoy equal treatment in the rights, privileges, and benefits of the republic’s commonwealth, for the sake of the common good.”

KW: Good morning Dr. Trulear and thank you for your time. Please tell us about your work with Healing Communities and how you entered this type of work.

DT: In 2005 the Annie E. Casey Foundation noted that 2006 would be ground zero for returning citizens. In 2006, there were more people coming home than anytime in history. By and large, these individuals were returning to fragile communities. The big takeaway, or the big question was “what can your sector do to be supportive of people coming home from state and federal prisons?”

My background is the intersection of faith and criminal justice. Healing communities came out of the request from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Initially people thought it [the main ingredient to a successful reentry] was about jobs. I have found that the two most important factors are thinking process and social support.

As Dr. Trulear noted, many people presume that the single most important factor in successful reentry is the ability to find work. While employment is incredibly important, especially for practical matters like living expenses, fines, fees, and other costs associated with parole/probation, and life’s other necessities,
employment alone is not the single most important component. A 2014 study from Marquette University illumines this truth.

In 2014, Marquette University published a research project titled, Beyond Basic Needs: Social Support and Structure for Successful offender Reentry in the Journal of Qualitative Criminal Justice & Criminology. The project sought to address barriers to reentry. Authored by Andrew S. Denney, University of Louisville, Richard Tewksbury, University of Louisville and Richard S. Jones, Marquette University, the study used “in-depth interviews with ex-offenders deemed as successful and explores what significant requirements, if any, successful offenders perceive to need and/or have experienced as lacking while attempting to successfully reenter society.”

The authors write “findings from this study highlight that many of the research-identified needs are not major barriers because they are often provided for by various non-profit agencies. Furthermore, successful ex-offenders overwhelmingly identify poor social support as a major barrier that oftentimes remains neglected in government and nonprofit organizational planning.”

KW: Dr. Trulear, as an ordained minister, a theology professor at Howard School of Divinity, and as person working daily to help returning citizens, what entity should take the lead in meeting the needs of returning citizens?

DT: The faith community is uniquely positioned to do that [forming a social support system] because that’s the work of the church! The church is a place of values and relationships.

Dr. Trulear explained that relationships are key to sustaining people when they attempt to re-enter society. Because of the barriers, setbacks, and difficulties, it is important to have a strong support system in place to walk with the person through the ups and downs. And through his work with Healing Communities, he is able to help other congregations become healing communities.

KW: How many Healing Communities are there across the country?

DT: [We are] partnering with denominations that are using materials developed for congregations to become Stations of Hope. Some of the denominations include the United Methodist Church (UMC), Progressive National Baptists, American Baptists and others. We are also affiliated with the Pennsylvania Council of Churches, and I would conservatively estimate that over the past eleven years, we have had over 1000 churches using the Healing Communities materials.

KW: Dr. Trulear, earlier in this interview you mentioned that when it comes to reentry, the two most important factors that help determine a successful one are thinking process and social support. What are numbers three and four?
DT: Three and four are housing and jobs. Economic realities of food clothing shelter are real, but the fact is that if the mindset and social circle has not changed, then the person will lose the other three. We see you as a human being, created in the image of God, and everyone is special.

KW: I learned that you had a hand in helping the DC government change their terminology around the formerly incarcerated. Please elaborate.

DT: In 2008, a group of clergy met with city officials. In the meeting I said, by calling people ex offenders, you are defining them by their past. In prior work, we would use the term returning citizens because it looks forward. The term “ex-offender” is a negative term because it defines the person by what they were in the past. After this 2008 meeting, the District Council met and adopted the language. Now Washington, DC, by legislation, calls people with convictions returning citizens.

Dr. Trulear is calling Christian citizens to a form of political discipleship9. In his book The Political Disciple: A Theology of Public Life10, Wheaton College theologian Vincent Bacote defines political discipleship as politics and discipleship. “Bacote suggests that discipleship and politics are not as opposed as many people think. Bacote reconciles politics and discipleship by recalling the fundamental charge to steward and make something of the world that God gives to humanity at the creation of the world.”

In addition, the Center for Public Justice (CPJ) has a Political Discipleship curriculum, which is “a praxis-based curriculum created for small groups that provides a practical approach to Christian citizenship and engagement with public justice.” In the interview, Dr. Trulear reminded Christians that not only do they have the ability, but they also have a responsibility to live out their faith convictions in the world.

DT: God’s people have influence. We must use that influence to help with practical matters in the world. What I say to Christians is that our capacity to bring our theology into the public sphere can make a difference in public policy. We come from a religious tradition whose heroes are just as involved (with criminal justice system) as anything else and Christians cannot relegate the criminal justice system to secondary or optional as a form of ministry.

KW: Are there any other organizations (besides churches) that have worked with Healing Communities to help provide this holistic approach to reintegrating returning citizens?

DT: Just Leadership USA11, founded by Glenn Martin, a formerly incarcerated member from New York, is training formerly incarcerated people to expand their leadership and influence to reduce mass incarceration. There were thirty-six people in the class (2017), including six ordained ministers. People who have gone through the criminal justice system qualifies us to speak to the criminality of it. Punishment in and of itself does not lead to transformation. Faith in Action Network12 (PICO) is another
organization working hard to develop a response to Mass Incarceration. In addition, there are many local community based organizations that are working with Healing Communities.

KW: Are businesses supportive of Healing Communities?

DT: I cannot think of any businesses that have been overtly supportive of Healing Communities [yet]. Just recently, however, Bank of America announced that they would no longer be doing business with for profit prison companies.

KW: What are some things that government can do to help?

DT: States [lawmakers] must come to the conclusion that these [returning citizens] are human beings that have made mistakes. It costs approximately $50,000 a year to lock people up, but cost less than $5,000 a year to provide supervision. People who talk about taxes being wasted are missing the point if they don't consider the fiscal aspects of incarceration.

KW: Are there any final words that you would like to leave with our readers?

DT: [To those who happen to be returning citizens] You were created in the image of God and nothing you have done forfeits that. The Imago Dei is primary. It is important to find a community of faith that will receive you and walk with you through these early months. It may get hard, but it is not impossible.

As we conclude our series on returning citizens, Dr. Dean Trulear’s take was extremely helpful. We have had authors explore various topics that people feel are necessary for successful re-entry: employment, education, food security, housing, and family and social support. While each of these is important in its own right, Dr. Trulear pointed out what is probably the most critical component of success for the returning citizen is thinking process or mindset change.

As Christian citizens, faith leaders, lawmakers, and government agencies seek to address the fallout from America’s mass incarceration problem, individuals and advocates like Dr. Dean Trulear and Denise Strothers, organizations like the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Healing Communities USA, Just Leadership USA, Faith in Action Network, and others are doing the important work of reintegrating the formerly incarcerated.

PJR is most grateful that Dr. Trulear spent some time with us and shared his wisdom and insight for the series, The Returning Citizen: A Public Justice Perspective on Reintegrating the Formerly Incarcerated.
1. https://www.healingcommunitiesusa.com/
5. https://cpjustice.org/index.php/public/page/content/political_community
6. https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1096=&context=socs_fac=&sei-redir=1&referer=https%253A%252F%252Fwww.bing.com%252Fsearch%253Fq%253Dhow%252520important%2520is%2520social%2520support%2520in%2520a%2520successful%2520reentry%2526form%253DE-DNTHT%2526mkt%2526Den-us%2526httpsmsn%253D1%2526plvar%253D0%2526refig%253Df01d3c282b1402afc3327af12f7ed98%2526sp%253D-1%2526pq%253Dhow%252520important%2520is%2520social%2520support%2520in%2520a%2520successful%2520reentry%2526sc%253D0-55%2526qs%253Dn%2526sk%253D%2526cvid%253Df01d3c2822b1402afce327af12f7ed98#search=%22how%20important%20social%20support%20in%20successful%20reentry%22
8. https://www.healingcommunitiesusa.com/about
11. https://jlusa.org/
12. https://faithinaction.org/

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