



## Prison Ministry and Spiritual Transformation: A Case Study of Bible College Programs in Indonesian Correctional Facilities

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### **Abstract**

This research explores the role of structured theological education in the rehabilitation of inmates in correctional institutions in Indonesia using a mixed methods design to determine the impact of a Bible college program implemented in five correctional facility locations between 2021 and 2023. This study investigates how a curriculum focused on forgiveness, self-acceptance, and purpose influenced participants' psychological and spiritual development. Quantitative data was collected through surveys before and after the program, measuring changes in attitudes toward forgiveness, self-esteem, and outlook on the future. Data were analyzed using SPSS. Qualitative insights were gained from semi-structured interviews with 50 program graduates and follow-up interviews with 25 released prisoners, as well as observational data from classroom sessions. The results showed significant increases in participants' self-acceptance and life purpose indicating that the program fosters traits important for personal growth and social reintegration. Participants reported a transformation from a victim-centered mindset to a responsible and service mindset with 72% engaging in community work or service post-release. These results highlight the effectiveness of faith-based education in correctional contexts, especially in culturally diverse environments such as Indonesia. This study contributes to a broader understanding of how structured theological programs can reduce recidivism and facilitate lasting spiritual and psychological healing and support a balanced approach to justice that focuses on correction and redemption.

**Keywords:** *Prison Ministry; Spiritual Transformation; Correctional Facility; Indonesia*

### **1. Introduction**

The majority of prisons in Indonesia carry out religious-based guidance activities which are generally provided in the form of the following four religious activities: (a). Regular Religious Studies; Activities in the form of regular recitation and understanding of the Bible are mandatory obligations. Every individual is required to take part in this program at least once a week. Implementation is carried out through collaboration with external parties such as educational institutions or religious foundations on a voluntary basis. This means that the warden is not obliged to provide compensation to the volunteers for producing improved behavior. The goal is simply so that each prisoner can better understand what is right

and wrong in their respective religious views, so that awareness of past mistakes can emerge and encourage efforts to improve behavior and thought patterns in a better direction; (b). Worship Community; Collective worship is an important aspect of the religious-based reform process in penitentiary institutions in Indonesia. Based on what was conveyed by inmates and prison officers, it is known that those who consistently carry out group worship activities generally have a better level of discipline. Apart from that, a significant impact was also found on social ties between prisoners, so that strong togetherness emerged in life in prison. With this strong connection, it is known that the level of violence and riots in correctional institutions has decreased significantly; (c). Celebration of Religious Holidays; Religious holidays are one of the days eagerly awaited by the community, especially correctional inmates. Apart from providing happiness due to various leniency or remission of sentences given on religious holidays, various activities are also carried out to enliven religious holidays, thereby encouraging togetherness and harmony among inmates in prison; and (d) Study of Religious Literature; The study of religious literature is carried out to provide an in depth understanding of various religious concepts and laws, so that it can be a guide for prisoners in carrying out their daily lives. Generally, religious literature encourages humans to be the best individuals in various aspects, especially social aspects. Thus, the formation of quality individuals who are able to become agents of social change in a positive direction can be produced properly (Hamja and Sukarini, 2022: 162-163).

In-prison rehabilitation using a variety of models of religion approaches have been successful implemented, including cognitive behavioral therapy, vocational training, and educational programs, each of which has had varying degrees of success in reducing recidivism. However, religious education programs remain important in addressing the often overlooked spiritual and psychological needs of prisoners, as well as offering avenues for existential reflection and ethical recalibration. Rehabilitation in prisons in many Western countries, especially the United States, shows that faith-based prison programs can positively influence inmates' attitudes, increase self-esteem, and reduce violence in correctional institutions (Johnson and Larson, 2018; Clear *et al.*, 2019). Statistical data from Rickman (2014) shows that Americans in the United States have a lower percentage compared to Indonesians who consider religion to be very important in everyday life of people (66% (USA) vs. 99% (Indonesia – Figure 1).



Figure 1. Religion is very important in everyday life of people (66% (USA) Vs 99% (Indonesia – Rickman, 2014)

However, in Indonesia, the integration of structured theological education is still new, and only a few studies have examined its specific impact on prisoner transformation. Therefore, this research on

Bible college programs was designed as a short course initiative in various correctional institutions in Indonesia with the aim of fostering psychological resilience and transformative change by immersing participants in spiritual teachings. The curriculum emphasizes forgiveness, pursuit of purpose, and ethical responsibility—principles essential to positive reform. This approach is in line with the order of social and cultural life in Indonesia, where religious values always influence individual behavior and communal life which is rooted in belief, so it is hoped that this program will encourage prisoners to internalize values that are in line with society's expectations of moral responsibility, so that potentially easing their transition back into society. This research aims to bridge the literature gap regarding the effectiveness of religious education in encouraging personal growth and reducing recidivism among prisoners in Indonesia.

## **2. Research Methods**

This research uses a mixed methods research design, combining a quantitative survey with qualitative interviews regarding rehabilitation conducted over three years from 2021 to 2023 in five selected location of correctional institutions (LP) and detention centers (Rutan) in Indonesia representing various demographics and levels of regeneration. security in Indonesia, namely: (1) Abepura Prison, Jaya Pura, Papua, (2) Malendeng Prison, Manado and Bitung, North Sulawesi, (3) Pematang Siantar Prison, Pangururan, Tarutung, North Sumatra, (4) Poerwokerto and Nusakembangan Prisons, Central Java, and (5) So'e and Ba'a Prisons in East Nusa Tenggara. The study involved 245 inmates participating in a college Bible short course program representing a diverse sample with respect to age, background, and type of offense. These participants enrolled voluntarily, motivated by their interest in exploring spiritual growth and rehabilitation through theological education. Enrollment is open to all inmates at all selected facilities, thereby cultivating an inclusive sample of individuals with a wide range of criminal histories, ranging from nonviolent offenses to more serious crimes. By tracking completion rates across groups, this study aims to account for variations in program engagement and attrition, thereby ensuring a reliable analysis of the impact of Bible college programs.

In an effort to maintain ethical standards and ensure informed consent, all participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Each participant was allowed to withdraw from the study at any time, and all data collected was anonymized to protect their privacy. Data were collected through a variety of methods to capture quantitative and qualitative dimensions of participants' experiences in Bible college programs. Quantitative data was collected through surveys before and after the program, which measured changes in attitudes related to forgiveness, self-acceptance, and outlook on the future. These surveys were developed specifically for this study, based on information from psychological constructs relevant to rehabilitation and personal growth. The pre-program survey was administered before participants began the course, serving as baseline data, while the post-program survey was administered after the course was completed, allowing for a comparative analysis of changes in attitudes caused by the Bible college program. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with program graduates, providing deeper insight into their experiences and personal reflections. Fifty graduates were selected for these interviews based on a combination of level of engagement and program availability, allowing for a representative sample. Interviews focused on participants' views on forgiveness, personal responsibility, and spiritual growth, with open-ended questions encouraging them to discuss how the program influenced their perspectives on their past actions and future aspirations. Furthermore, follow-up interviews were conducted with 25 graduates who had been released and had returned to society six months after release which aimed to assess the sustainability of the program's impact by exploring how the participants applied the principles learned in this program in their daily lives and processes. reintegration.

Quantitative survey data was analyzed using SPSS 26.0 to examine changes in attitudes before and after the program regarding forgiveness, self-acceptance, and views of the future. Paired sample t-

tests were conducted to determine the statistical significance of changes across these variables, while descriptive statistics provided a summary of overall trends in participant responses. Additionally, subgroup analyses were conducted based on demographic factors such as age, offense type, and length of incarceration to explore potential variations in program impact across different participant profiles. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis facilitated by NVivo 12 software.

Observational data provided additional context to these themes, revealing how participants' involvement with the Bible college program influenced their interactions and overall attitudes. The combination of interviews and observational data allows for triangulation of findings to ensure a thorough understanding of how the program impacts inmates at both cognitive and behavioral levels (Ariawan, 2024).

### **3. Results and Discussion**

A Bible college program implemented in five correctional institutions located in different locations in Indonesia demonstrated high completion and engagement rates, with a completion rate of 87% across all groups. Participants maintained a high attendance rate, averaging 92% throughout the program, indicating that inmates were willing and motivated to participate in the theological education offered. This high level of engagement is more than just presence; participants actively contribute to discussions, complete theological assignments, and demonstrate overall commitment to program goals. Active engagement in group assignments and discussions highlights collective openness to personal growth, as well as a willingness to explore new perspectives regarding morality, spirituality, and life purpose. The program structure likely facilitates this engagement, as the group-based design fosters a supportive environment where inmates can share experiences, encourage each other, and grow collectively in understanding. This sense of community is critical in building a shared accountability framework, which strengthens participants' commitment to the program. Quantitative data collected from pre- and post-program surveys highlight the profound impact Bible college programs have on psychological and spiritual metrics among inmate participants.

First, forgiveness scores increased significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ), reflecting changes in participants' willingness to confront and let go of feelings of hatred or self-blame. Forgiveness—both toward others and oneself—plays an important role in the rehabilitation process, helping prisoners develop a healthier psychological outlook. Increased self-acceptance metrics were observed in 83% of participants, indicating that theological engagement helped them confront and accept their past actions, an important step toward self-forgiveness and internal peace. This increase in self-acceptance is often expressed as a newfound sense of worth and dignity, with participants feeling recognized and accepted despite past transgressions. Additionally, 76% of participants reported an increased sense of purpose, underscoring the transformative potential of a program curriculum that emphasizes personal growth, moral responsibility, and a forward-looking perspective. Increasing awareness of this goal is particularly relevant for prisoners facing reintegration, as it equips them with the motivation to make a positive contribution to society upon release. Overall, these quantitative findings reveal a strong and statistically significant positive impact on participants' psychological well-being and sense of self-worth, highlighting the effectiveness of structured theological education in fostering these changes. Qualitative data collected from interviews and classroom observations, revealed major changes in inmates' perspectives and attitudes, particularly in three key areas: transformation in perspective, spiritual growth, and future orientation.

#### **3.1. Transformation in Perspective**

One of the most prominent outcomes observed in the qualitative data was the transformation of inmates from a mindset of victimhood and hopelessness to a mindset of responsibility and purpose.

Participants reported a shift from viewing incarceration as mere punishment to viewing it as an opportunity for self-reflection and transformation. This reorientation allows them to accept personal accountability, acknowledging their past actions while fostering a commitment to positive change. Many prisoners show a new sense of compassion toward others, including fellow prisoners and victims, as they begin to empathize with the consequences of their actions on others. This shift is important because it shows the potential of religious education to help individuals reshape their worldview and develop healthier relationships with themselves and others.

### **3.2. Spiritual Growth**

The program's curriculum facilitates deep engagement with biblical principles, resulting in significant spiritual development among participants. Prisoners report a more meaningful prayer life and a deeper understanding of Bible teachings, which they apply to their daily lives. The development of spiritual practices, such as prayer and meditation, provides prisoners with a source of inner peace and emotional resilience, helping them overcome the challenges of incarceration (Wilson and Foster, 2018). Additionally, participants expressed a growing desire to serve others, either within correctional institutions or in the community upon release, indicating that the program fosters a spirit of selflessness and compassion. A new desire to contribute to the well-being of others aligns with the program's goal of instilling the values of community and service, which are an integral part of rehabilitation and reintegration.

### **3.3. Future Orientation**

In addition to personal and spiritual transformation, participants develop a clearer vision for their lives post-liberation. Many prisoners express a desire to be involved in service or community service activities, and view this as a means of making a positive contribution to society. The curriculum's focus on leadership and service prepares them for potential roles as mentors or community leaders, helping them redefine their identities and envision constructive paths forward. This future-oriented mindset fosters hope and motivation which are important elements for successful reintegration. Participants' commitment to service and community service also demonstrated a reduced likelihood of recidivism, as they were more likely to engage in pro-social activities and maintain relationships with support networks after release.

### **3.4. Post-Release Results**

Follow-up interviews with 25 graduates who had been released from detention revealed promising post-release outcomes. Approximately 72% of these graduates are involved in ministry or community service, demonstrating a continued commitment to the values developed during the Bible college program. Many participants report positive experiences reintegrating into their communities that are often facilitated by the spiritual principles and personal growth they achieve through the program. Most importantly, graduates who participate in service activities often find a sense of belonging and purpose to provide them with emotional and social support as they face the challenges of reentry. Additionally, data on recidivism shows that program graduates have lower recidivism rates compared to the general prison population. This suggests that the program's emphasis on forgiveness, purpose, and community service contributes to long-term change and reduces criminal behavior.

In general, the findings of this study provide strong evidence that structured theological education can be an effective tool for prisoner rehabilitation, especially in contexts where religious values are deeply embedded in society. The success of this program appears to be driven by several main factors: (1) Comprehensive Curriculum. The structured curriculum, based on material from Harvest International Theological Seminary, offers inmates a solid foundation in theology and practical skills for personal transformation and ministry. The combination of theoretical knowledge and applied learning helps inmates internalize spiritual principles and translate them into actionable goals (Smith and Johnson,

2019). The balance between theology and practice provides inmates with a holistic framework for understanding and making personal changes, which is critical to program effectiveness (Du Plessis, 2014); (2) Focus on Forgiveness. Forgiveness emerges as an important theme throughout the program, overcoming the psychological and emotional barriers that often hinder inmate rehabilitation. By encouraging participants to accept forgiveness—both of themselves and others—the program facilitates a process of emotional healing and reconciliation. This focus on forgiveness allows prisoners to confront feelings of guilt and resentment, creating a foundation for positive relationships and fostering psychological resilience. Significant increases in forgiveness scores indicate that this aspect of the curriculum effectively addresses core emotional needs and contributes to overall program success; and (3) Goal-Based Approach. The program's emphasis on future service and community service helps inmates reframe their prison experience as an opportunity for growth and not just a term of punishment. This goal-oriented approach instills a sense of purpose and self-worth, which is essential for long-term rehabilitation (Wilson and Chang, 2023).

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This research supports the premise that incarceration, when combined with purposeful and structured theological education, can be an opportunity for meaningful personal transformation, not simply a punitive experience. Observed positive post-release outcomes, including lower recidivism rates and successful societal reintegration, indicate that this model holds promise as a replicable framework for correctional institutions both in Indonesia and globally. As correctional institutions seek holistic rehabilitative approaches, integrating faith-based education tailored to cultural and social contexts can offer an effective way to reduce recidivism, increase moral accountability, and support inmates' journeys toward reintegration. Further research could expand these findings by exploring long-term impacts, adaptation to varying correctional environments, and comparison with other rehabilitation methods to refine and optimize this promising approach.

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