

## **Theological Paper**

Disrupting the prison flow of black males from the Rochdale Village (11434) community

in Queens, New York

Joseph Browne

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### **Introduction**

On Saturday, March 25, 2023, based upon a mentor and mentee conversation, there was an emphasis in their discussion on the recent events in Queens borough neighborhoods. 33 alleged gang members were brought before the courts on a 151-count indictment. What compounded the severity of the matter was that five

of those who were indicted were charged with murder. All 33 would possibly be arrested and sent to prison for the proposed timeframes ranging from 8 years to 25 years to life.

The gang-related case was in the 11434 zip code area. A major question arises as to what factors in this particular community may have influenced or unfortunately resulted in individuals more specifically Black males such as those indicted, to be part of the apparently increasing mass incarceration population in Queens? A subsequent concern is with regards to the educational opportunities which may have been denied or not given access to, and which could have instead provided them with options for their present and future aspirations. Consequently, the focus of this research will center on mass incarceration, economic challenges due to unemployment, as well as gang membership and activities facing young Black males of the Rochdale Village (11434) community in Queen, New York. The questions of what is going on, what does God say about it, and what does God want to be done about it must be addressed.

### **Social Analysis**

#### **Mass incarceration**

According to recent statistics, New York City was identified as having a population of 7.8 million individuals. It is estimated that Blacks comprise about 23.82% of the total ("New York City, New York Population 2023," n.d.). The Rochdale Village community has population of about 59,000 with 52,244 (88.4%) being Black. "The negative portrayal of Black men seems to be the personification of violence" (Kumah-Abiwu, 2020, p. 67). When one looks at the arrest rate in the Queens area for 2021, there are alarming numbers that were reported. The following are the statistics for Black arrests within each category: misdemeanors – 42.3%, murders - 61.7%, rapes-45.4% and robberies – 58.9%. "Despite efforts to shrink it, New York's prison infrastructure is one of the largest in the country" (Gawert, 2021, p. 2).

What this means is that there is a high potential for more arrests within NYC and more specifically the Rochdale Village community which will result in a large volume of Black men who would be incarcerated. "With incarceration there is collateral damage to those locked up, as well as to those who they are connected to: partners, children, extended family, and any positive friendship networks they had" (Crutchfield & Weeks, 2022, p.3). There are also other negative impacts of mass incarceration on individuals, their families and communities. "The emotional and financial costs associated with indirect contact undermine the long-term health and well-being of women and children" (Center for American Progress, 2018, p. 5).

#### **Economic Challenges as a result of Unemployment**

“Within the context of social analysis, facts and issues are no longer regarded as isolated problems” (Holland & Henriot, 1983, p. 11). There is approximately 35% of this Rochdale Village population which are reported as not earning any income. A contributing factor could be higher-than-average population of children under the age of 18 who live in this community. There are other issues associated with the unemployment of Blacks in NYC. According to recent reports “One in five Black New Yorkers is officially unemployed, stuck in a part-time job when they want full-time work, or so discouraged they are not even looking for employment (David, 2022, p.1) This can be viewed as a ripple or domino effect in NYC’s recent history as a result of the pandemic. It can also be stated that “a tremendous Black male joblessness has resulted in a myriad of social problems. Black male joblessness has significantly contributed to crime, violence, incarceration, and family disruption” (Richardson and Vil, 2015, p.74).

### **Gang membership and activities**

“Engaging in violence and crime is perceived among some marginalized Black men as a form of labor where violence and other illicit activities are treated as work” Richardson and Vil, 2015, p. 71). There are various coping as well as means of addressing these difficult parameters within the community by those who reside there. With regards to recent statistics, even though there was a 1.2% reduction in New York City’s overall crime index between November 2022 and November 2021, there was a 3.6% increase in robberies as well as a 3.0% increase in felony assaults between the same time frame (“NYPD Announces Citywide Crime Statistics for November 2022” 2022b). There continues to be a NYPD focus to possible gang-related activities and incidents. “The best predictors as to who was usually targeted as potential gang member were ethnic background, gender, home life or living arrangements, and socio-economic status” (Gass and Laughter, 2015, p. 355).

What results in some communities has been the formation of gangs and/or expansion of gang-related activities. “The fact that gang-involved youth are much more likely than noninvolved youth to engage in delinquent and criminal behavior is one of the most indisputable findings in criminological research” (Walter-Barnes and Mason, 2001, p. 1814). The family structure could be one of those key elements which can have a major impact on the decisions which are made by young Black males. It is interesting to note that as a substitute or extension of the concept of family and community, “the gang is an important social institution for low-income male youth and young adults” (Spergel, 1990, p. 172).

### **Theological reflection and formation**

#### **Mass Incarceration**

There are various Biblical passages which one can review as they explore the topic of mass incarceration, Isaiah 61:1 (ESV) states, "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound." This is also echoed in the New Testament in Matthew 3:16, Mark 1:10 and Luke 4:18. When these words were spoken by Jesus Christ in the New Testament, He was including those who are incarcerated as a segment of the population as to those He came to outreach to.

Isaiah 42:7 states, "To open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." This scripture speaks of expressing concern for and being instrumental in addressing the needs of different individuals who are in challenging situations. It speaks of those who are blind, but it also mentions the needs of the prisoners who are in dark places. This could be descriptive of their physical but also the emotional and psychological conditions.

If one looks for examples of God being present with individuals in prison, one can review the story of Joseph after he was placed in prison for a crime he did not do. Genesis 39: 20-23 (ESV) states, "And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison. But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison." Joseph spent about three years in prison before his release. This gives emphasis to the point that being incarcerated does not mean one is abandoned by God. One can also explore Samson's imprisoned time in terms of its perceived humiliating aspect. Judges 16: 21 -23 states, "Then the Philistines grabbed him (Samson), gouged out his eyes, brought him down to Gaza, tied him up in bronze chains, and made him grind grain in their prison." Samson was treated like a serious threat to the society even as to the terms and conditions of his imprisonment.

Two New Testament examples of being imprisoned was Paul and Silas. Acts 16: 16-40 speaks of Paul and Silas beaten and then placed in prison. God utilizing an earthquake to free them. As a result of what transpired, the jailer gets saved and then Paul and Silas are freed the following morning. Also in Acts 12: 5 -17, one can read, "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him." Peter is miraculously released by an angel.

Matthew 25: 35 -36 contains the Church's responsibility and Christ's response with regards to mass incarceration. "I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." And Jesus' response was (v. 40) "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"

Connected to the topic of mass incarceration is the subject of racial discrimination and inequitable treatment of all. Genesis 1:26 (ESV) states, "Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." All of humankind was made in the image of God. We are all the descendants of the first created. Galatians 3: 27-29 (ESV) states, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. This scripture emphasizes the point that we are all one in and through Christ Jesus. There is no distinctiveness as to how each one is to be viewed or treated versus the other person. Justice should be equal for all. racial disparity should not exist.

Exhibiting unfair treatment was also negatively expressed in various Biblical passages. One example of this is found in I Timothy 5:21 which states, "I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism." One can also find the similar sentiment in James 2:1, "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism." All of these scriptures have a similar perspective to what is denoted in association to when racial discrimination and unfair treatment occurs between individuals.

An example of having to deal with unfair treatment was with the food distribution to the Hebraic and Hellenists women in Acts 6: 1-7. Acts 6:1, "In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food." There appeared to have been unfair treatment as well as unfair practices of how things were distributed. This scenario also brings to the forefront occasions when someone needs someone else to speak up on their behalf and to address the matter of being the voice for those who do not have a voice or are not easily granted forums to express what is transpiring. There is a need for fair distribution of access to resources as it relates to occasion of racial profiling and mass incarceration.

John 7:24 states, " Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly." This scripture takes one's view of others from being determined simply from external factors and characteristics but not to be limited to solely these points of consideration as well. This was also evident in Numbers 12: 1 when it states, "Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married; for he had married an Ethiopian woman." God responds to what had been said by Miriam becoming leprous. Revelation 7:9 states, "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands." This scripture highlights the multi-cultural aspect of God and expresses His love and embrace of all cultures from different places.

## Employment

One scripture of encouragement about the intrinsic as well as external benefits or results of working diligently is found in Proverbs 12:11 which says, “He who tills his land will be satisfied with bread, but he who follows frivolity is devoid of understanding.” The scripture also can be referenced to discourage pursuing quick means of getting rich or spending without a plan but instead to be prudent in what one does. Another scripture of reference is I Thessalonians 4:10b-12 which says, “But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.” This scripture serves also to encourage focus on working to be able to address the needs or concerns of others as well as with regards to your needs.

Individuals can also reference other scripture as they relate to the subject topic of employment. One of those is Colossians 3:23 “And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.” This scripture admonishes individuals to be conscientious in their work activities and to do such with the thought of pleasing God by what they do and how they perform their tasks. A correlating scripture about more so speaks about the responsibility of the employer is found in James 5: 1 -5 which states, “ Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.” These scriptures from James provides warnings or points that are to be considered by employers as to how they treat their employees.

## Gang-related affiliations and activities

However, there are times when due to challenges of obtaining legal customary employment, one might explore alternative sources of income via gang-related activities. One might not find the word “gang” within biblical passages but the concept and characteristics of such can still be explored and identified. The institution of gangs as a unifying entity for “brotherhood” can be seen in various scriptures. Ecclesiastes 4:10-12 (ESV) states, “For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” Another passage is Romans 14:7-9 (ESV) which states, “For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we

live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living." This scripture expresses the benefit of comradery and belonging as part of a group dynamic.

But there are also some negative aspects of gang affiliation and activities. Ephesians 5:11 (ESV) states, "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them." This scripture discusses the negative effects of engaging in unrighteous activities. Corinthians 15:33 (ESV) which states, "Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." This scripture connects with Psalm 1:1 which states, "Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers." These scriptures give focus to the need to be selective of the company we keep. These scriptures can be viewed as warning to keep from activities which might result in mass incarceration.

Another consideration of gang-related involvement is its connection to violent acts. Proverbs 6:16-19 (ESV) which states, "There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers." This is also expressed in Psalm 11:5 (ESV) which states, "The LORD tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence." God once again expressing His displeasure with violent acts can be found in I Timothy 3:3 which says, "Not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money."

#### **Social compassion**

It is understood that at times, incarceration is necessary, however the concern is with regards to the circumstances, its frequency, and more importantly, the fairness or equitable justice in how it is conducted, especially pertaining to the young Black males of the community. As it relates to employment opportunities, it is important to identify that even though access to employment for young Black men is very low, there is still the need for efforts to dissuade the draw of gang-related association and activities. It is often stated that time brings about change.

Besides the changes in the overall ethnic composition of the neighborhood, it is important to take the time to consider current responses to the questions of who will be involved with regards to bringing about the change, and when the change is expected to start? The words or questions that I would want to ask them individually can be found in or mirror the lyrics of the song "Do you know Where You're Going to?" by Diana Ross. They include: Do you know where you're going to? Do you like the things that life is showing you? Where are you going to? Do you know? Do you get what you're hoping for? When you look behind you, there's no open doors. What are you hoping for? Do you know?

#### **Theological Implementation**

After the social analysis as well as the theological reflection and formation has been completed, it is then time for urban theological implementation to occur. One of the primary things to consider is that there is a need for a collective involvement by a cross-section of individuals. There is an African proverb which states, "If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together." There must be a level of comradery in order to engage the "troubling realities of injustice, poverty and spiritually struggling people.

We need the help to move out into the world to be a presence of healing and hope for others" (Villodas, 2020, p. xxvi). What makes changes occurring difficult at times is also realizing that there are individual racial prejudices as well as facing the challenges of institutional racism which "grants advantages to some and disadvantages to others" (Villodas, 2020, p. 57). This has been extremely evident as it pertains to mass incarceration and subsequently the overwhelming unemployment statistics of the black and brown members of the community.

"The starting point is to get a vision of Who God is, how He acts, and what He expects from us" (A. Hirsch & Hirsch, 2010, p. 9). As was discussed in Urban Theology class on 2/27/2023, there is a need for a vision to be shared. One's vision statement could be worded as – "The goal is to be an established resource in the community to assist young Black males with exploring their options towards pursuing career interests and passions after graduation." The mission statement could be, "To provide guidance and helpful tools to develop and implement young Black males' action plans and career-oriented future endeavors." This can be achieved through independent as well as group discussion sessions to provide forums for their concerns to be voiced, thoughts to be shared, and questions to be answered or at least explored.

Some might ask what additional steps can be taken to achieve traction and momentum in dealing with these above-mentioned problems in the 11434 community. One step towards reducing the population of mass incarcerated young Black men is to establish a place where they can come to and obtain free guidance and advice from life coaches. "Each Black man must honestly assess where he is, his conditions, his inadequacies, his strengths, and work on personal growth and development" (Boyd, 2007, p. 9). A second step is to partner with Legal Aid or other similar establishments to help young men with legal matters and incarceration-related issues.

When it relates to employment matters, there will be the need to organize forums for open group and individual discussions to foster and encourage beneficial skills towards successful employment preparation. Also, career workshops can be conducted which will provide a series of informal meet and greet opportunities in the first couple of months at a local establishment or church location with the young Black males and their family members. This will be to present the

proposed efforts to assist young Black males. These events will at the same time allow everyone to candidly share their thoughts, concerns, expectations, disappointments as well as frustrations. As it pertains to reducing or thwarting gang-related association and activities, there will be the need to provide safe, free alternatives which are geared towards encouraging brotherhood in a positive environment. This will be fostered through encouraging positive community connection and affiliations via a place they can come to any day of the week to interact with others, as well as regular group activities, and weekly events.

### **Conclusion**

The overarching emphasis for this implementation strategy is to explore ways of improving the future of young Black males in the Rochdale Village - 11434 zip code area. It is important to note that, not only are these Black young men valuable to their respective families, but they are also important to the overall 11434 community. The churches, as one of the useful assets, can be viewed as important in their personal and community development. The churches will also be a key partnership for the different components of any efforts engaged to promote and produce progress or transformation in the current and future trajectories of these young Black men.

With the help of God and the collaborative contributions and resources of those that partner with the church, great results are expected. "We do not worship a God Who sits apart, but Who enters human pain and redeems it from within" (McCaulley, 2020, p. 31). The young Black males of the Rochdale Village community are no longer to be viewed as simply the generation for the future; they are the generation for what is presently transpiring, and worthy investment of the Kingdom's focus and efforts at this present time.

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