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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [James Ridgeway](#) | June 21, 2010

You sometimes have to wonder why the state of Louisiana doesn't just transform Angola prison into a year-round Christian camp meeting. As [I've written before](#), under the tutelage of Warden Burl Cain, Angola has become a place where the only kind of rehabilitation on offer is Christian redemption.

I respect any kind of spiritual life prisoners might turn to for guidance or comfort. But pushing a particular doctrine on the ultimate captive audience is something else altogether. Fifteen years after Cain's arrival at Angola, there are [seven evangelical churches](#) on the prison's grounds. Its educational programs, inmate organizations, and to some extent even the venerable prison publication *The Angolite* are all dominated by a Christianity that leans powerfully toward the Southern Baptist Church. At today's Angola, being a self-proclaimed Christian or better still, becoming a convict preacher appears to be the best way to gain the kinds of special privileges that make prison life more bearable. Anyone who isn't interested is free to rot in a hell on earth presumably in preparation for their eternal fate, since few men emerge from Angola's gates alive.

Yet the press tends to eat this stuff up, celebrating Burl Cain as a visionary who has transformed hardened criminals into hard-working, God-fearing souls. He has done this by governing the 5,000-man prison plantation, as one [Baptist publication](#) put it, with an iron fist and an even stronger love for Jesus.

The latest homage to Cain appeared Saturday in [USA Today](#), in anticipation of Fathers Day. It seems that the warden has instituted programs to help prison dads that is, some prison dads spend more time with their kids. Lest anyone think this is being done simply to bring some humanity or even joy into the lives of prisoners and their families, the article reminds us that it also serves a sociological purpose.

More than 1.7 million children across the USA have a parent in U.S. prisons, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The number of children with a father in prison grew by 77% from 1991 through mid-2007. And those children are two to three more times likely to wind up behind bars themselves, says Christopher Wildeman, a University of Michigan sociologist who has studied the effects of imprisoned parents.

To try to snap that trend, Angola and other prisons across the country sponsor two programs aimed at reconnecting prison dads with their children: Returning Hearts, a day-long carnival-like celebration where inmates spend eight hours with their kids, and Malachi Dads, a year-long training session that uses Bible passages to help improve inmates' parenting skills.

Inmates must show good behavior to participate in the programs, Warden Burl Cain says. Once they feel reconnected to their family, their attitudes improve, he says. Around 2,500 inmates have participated in Returning Hearts since it began in 2005. Malachi, which started in 2007, currently has 119 men. The ones who were problematic before are not problematic anymore, Cain says. Prison didn't straighten them out; their kids straightened them out.

I am all for encouraging more contact between prisoners and their kids. And technically, only one of these programs requires inmates to be Christians; the other simply requires good behavior. But former prisoners have told me that at Angola, the shortest route to proving good behavior runs straight through the alter. If you have not embraced Jesus and specifically, Cain's Jesus, things can be quite a bit more difficult.

[Kenny Zulu Whitmore](#) has been at Angola for three decades, and spent most of them in solitary confinement. Like the members of the Angola 3, Whitmore was active with the Black Panthers in the 1970s, and believes his relegation to permanent lockdown has to do with his political beliefs. The unit where Whitmore resides is called [CCR Closed Cell Restricted](#) which is Angola's name for long-term solitary confinement.

Prisoners in CCR have no opportunity to spend long days with their children on Angola's spacious ground. But they are supposed to have access to a limited number of contact visits with their families which simply means they can sit with them in a guarded room, not separated by bars or glass. According to a recent post on the blog maintained by Whitmore's friends, even these visits do not always take place as planned.

Recently inmates housed at Louisiana Penitentiary CCR units have been denied normal contact visits and privileges. Even after contact visits have been approved and some visitors have travelled across the country at considerable expenses. Inmates at LA State Prison are allowed ten (10) people at any time on their Approved visiting list. This list constitutes those individuals who have completed the prison's necessary paperwork and who have submitted to a comprehensive police background check. Upon acceptance the applicant is listed on the inmates approved visiting list and may then visit up to 2 times a month.

Contact visiting is the normal policy for inmates at Angola. Only those inmates assigned to punitive housing units are restricted to non-contact visits. While CCR is a non-punitive housing unit, CCR inmates are allowed only 2 contact visits a month. All other visits received in a month by CCR inmates are held in CCR's non-contact visiting booths (small, closet like spaces with inmates and visitor separated by a thick mesh screen). The reason given for this policy is the lack of visiting space for large numbers of contact visits on the RC CCR unit. Consequently, only 5 contacts may be scheduled each visiting day for the roughly 90 inmates housed in CCR.

Given such limited space for contact visits at CCR, the unit's policy requires inmates to submit requests for approval often months in advance to reserve an available date. When a CCR inmate submits a request for contact visitation he is merely reserving a date. On that date any visitor from his visiting list who arrives up to a total of 5 may enjoy a visit under normal contact visiting procedures. This requirement is merely to insure that no more than 5 contact visits are scheduled for any visiting day. CCR inmates are NOT required to also seek approval for those visitors, since they are already on the Approved visiting list.

Whitmore claims that in some cases, Visitors, upon arriving at Louisiana State Prison are being allowed into the prison but upon arrival at the CCR unit being denied a contact visit and forced into non contact visiting booths because, they are told, they lack the proper approvals. So for these fathers and sons, mothers and wives, there will be no heartwarming family reunions, except in adjoining boxes across a wire screen.



James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face.

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by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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Funny thing is, in Angola, the guards and other employees DO live in a gated community in the literal sense. While prisoners live in a **different kind** of gated community.

If the mystical truth that comes to a man proves to be a force that he can live by, what mandate have we of the majority to order him to live in another way? We can throw him into a prison or a madhouse, but we can not change his mind.

-William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience

To understand Louisiana is to understand contradiction on the most fundamental level possible. As per the language of the 13th Amendment, slavery is abolished unless you have been convicted via due process. Govt. Jindal, whether he agrees or not is the overseer of more than 10,000 slaves in his state, about 2% of the population. The religion as you already know is just a simple way to appear as though the right thing is being done to a public that has been fooled into thinking that we actually live in a democracy where elected officials have the public's best interest in mind. Anyone with a critical mindset that has spent any amount of time at the prison will come away feeling a deep feeling of disgust. There is real misery there under the guise of Christian redemption. If there is a God or a heaven, I don't want to go where Warden Cain is going. The same goes for our founding fathers, Jefferson and Washington too, also slave owners.

Here is an author's take of a visit that he took a family to. You can see the whole story at:

<http://realcostofprisons.org/blog/archives/2007/03/index.html>

Among the many jarring sights I have witnessed as a reporter writing about poverty, one of the saddest involved a father, a son, and a maximum security prison outside Joliet, Illinois.

It was a two-hundred-mile round trip from their home in Milwaukee, and I had the only car.

The Stateville Correctional Center is a gloomy fortress with high concrete walls that could serve as a prison movie set.

After sleeping through the drive, Dwayne (the son) struck a pose of boredom as we approached the main cell block, while his mother looked stoic and his siblings seemed alarmed.

A guard led us to a room ringed by vending machines where a worn-looking prisoner said he was thankful for the rare chance to see his kids.

I left them to a private visit, and when they reappeared Dwayne was sobbing and the others looked like they had witnessed a death. They miss their father, was all their mother could say. They piled in for a mournful ride home, a study in how many lives can be linked to one prison cell.

Ironically I turned on the TV on Fathers Day and Johnny Depps movie Blow was just beginning.

At the end of the movie I was brought to tears when his character believes that his daughter has finally come to visit him in prison. At that moment I was him and I felt all the pain and joy associated with such reunions. Ive personal seen the heart break and tears of otherwise fearsome men when they were denied such visits and also the strain they experience when returning to their cell after receiving them.

Many times the guards taunt the distraut prisoner inciting his rage. No one that has witnessed such scenes and who still has their humanity can view them without chocking up. At least not me. For I know how important my children are to me.

The religion although important to many is not the sole solution. There is a more powerful force at work here the unconditional love of a parent for his children.

This is acknowledged in this post here:

The ones who were problematic before are not problematic anymore, Cain says. Prison didnt straighten them out; their kids straightened them out.

I would add that forced religion whether by such groups as the Taliban or christian groups in the military or prison is in the end counter productive.

Religion like love cannot be forced upon someone without bitterness in return.

Out of all the prison issues there are this is the least of these. indefinite solitary confinement should remain the focus.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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