

Yoga for ALL: My Journey Teaching Yoga in The Juvenile Detention System

- by Dr. Donna Jagielski

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'
(Matthew 25:25-36)

"But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind." (Luke 14:13)

How often have we questioned the accessibility of yoga? How accessible is it to ALL? Is the invitation to practice yoga truly available to all? Far too often in our westernized world, yoga is a privileged luxury that is acquired through the ability to have disposable income. People with such incomes have memberships to take classes at studios and gyms. We also need to examine the location in terms of accessibility. Oftentimes, people need to travel to where yoga is. Seldom, does yoga travel to the people who need it. Fortunately, with the increase of Christ centered yoga practitioners, this trajectory is changing. Some churches are offering Christian Yoga. There is also an increase of "mobile yoga programs" where teachers travel to where the need is. As a result, people in marginalized communities are obtaining the benefits of yoga and the playing field is becoming more equal. We have come a long way in making yoga accessible to ALL populations. We now find yoga programs in K-12 schools, senior centers, specially for patients of dementia related conditions, embedded within recovery and mental health programs, for Veterans, specifically coping with PTSD, yoga in prisons and juvenile detention centers.

"A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor." (Proverbs 22:9)

Upon receiving my initial yoga certification I never had the intention of teaching at a studio earning high pay. My desire has been to use my yoga practice to serve the Lord. While in prayer and meditation, I have pondered the following questions: Where are we offering yoga? What are the populations we are MISSING? Who needs to have accessibility to yoga and are not receiving it? As a result of my contemplation, I first started teaching within the yoga ministry at my church. I also began to infuse it in the ladies group I led at church. Even though I did enjoy this route, I felt something was still "missing". After intense prayer I immediately thought how rewarding it would be to bring yoga to the incarcerated population. I learned as much as I could about prison ministries and organizations that bring yoga to the incarcerated population. I also quickly realized this would be a difficult journey. To teach any marginalized population there is often an intensive and long process due to the privacy and security of the individuals the environment serves.



As my journey continued, I was blessed in meeting a woman at my church who worked for the juvenile corrections department and expressed to me that they were seeking someone to teach yoga. She explained the obstacles they were facing. The obstacles were: had to be certified in yoga, be willing to serve as a volunteer, and be willing to work with this challenging population. All three obstacles for me were: check, check, check. I qualified in all three areas! A match!

I have been teaching at the juvenile detention center for almost a year now. As I look back to my first visit, it has been an interesting and extremely rewarding journey. The logistics alone are an adventure. Arrive early, there will be sallyport doors, sign in, show identification, escorts and checks for contraband. Simply put, if you don't need it for teaching class, leave it at home or lock it in your car. Travel lightly. Get used to the sound of keys and steel metal doors closing. Get used to stark environments. Get used to teaching yoga with only a mat. Props are not allowed. Safety and security comes first. Get used to the productive struggle of trying to establish a relationship with your students, to respond to their needs without getting to know them, nor do they know you, except for being "the yoga teacher". Get used to having staff present during the duration of class and circulating continuously, and possible interruptions. It is a very unpredictable environment so classes can arrive late, sometimes canceled at the last minute. Sometimes classes are placed on "pause" for several weeks due to unit lockdowns or anything else that may happen. Get used to including all the girls in your prayers. I pray for them each day.



As a result, being flexible is a must. I plan sequences using colored index cards that I have placed on a ring so that I can flip to any sequence ranging from a gentle yin to a faster paced flow. I use instrumental background music so the girls are not distracted or emotionally triggered by any song lyrics. In their rigidly structured world, this is an hour where they are encouraged to take as much time needed to enter and exit out of poses, explore challenges and rest as needed. Empowering and equipping these young women to make their own choices during the practice is what teaching Christ centered yoga looks like to me. Even though I never speak directly about God when I teach these girls, God is ever present in that gym.

Between my years in the field of education and research, I am blessed with the support

from the staff at the detention center to provide a pre and post “check in” with the girls before class starts and at the end. Using various printed images such as emojis, kept in clear bags, the girls select one that best suits their mood, energy level at the beginning of class and at the end. What adds to the empowerment for the girls is that I always provide some way for the girls to decline in selecting. Choice, voice and agency are important for everyone, especially youth who are in such repressive environments. Obtaining such insight from these selections helps me to provide a customized practice that best meets their needs. It also provides me valuable information at the end, on if the practice did indeed meet their needs. In an environment where there are a plethora of constraints, there are still ways one can make a significant impact and difference.



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Yes, teaching in this environment is challenging but this is what I signed up for. I knew coming through the door this journey would not be easy. What is easy is that I continue to listen to God and what He guides me to do. Providing these young women an opportunity to equip themselves with the tools to self-regulate, de-escalate, self-manage, reflect, process, find peace and calm, only if it is just this hour, during their time in yoga class, is my service to them and the Lord. Each girl knows this is their opportunity to have a choice because this practice is THEIR practice. I am only a guide, a facilitator, who offers them suggestions and invites them to the practice.

I recognize that this type of teaching isn't for everyone, but as a Christ centered yoga teacher, I am committed to obeying the Lord in identifying the communities and populations who are not receiving yoga. I believe it is my responsibility to work towards creating better solutions so that everyone has accessibility to yoga. Part of freedom revolves around equity and accessibility. The more I strive to provide equitable accessibility to yoga, the better I continue to be in serving the Lord. We are all children of God.

Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. (Hebrews 13:3)



Blessings
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