

# The Origin and Development of Prison Fellowship International: Pluralism, Ecumenism and American Leadership in the Evangelical World 1974–2006

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Established in 1979 by Watergate felon Charles Colson, Prison Fellowship International (PFI) is now one of the largest para-church organizations in world evangelicalism. This article explains PFI's origins with reference to the existence of a transnational evangelical network, the compatibility of PFI's mission with the emergent theme of evangelical social concern, and a general crisis of penology across a number of Western countries. It explores the creative tension between Colson's empire-building instincts and the desire of PFI affiliates to influence the direction of the organization, revealing the transactional manner in which American evangelicals exercised global leadership in the late twentieth century.

In spring 1974, as Watergate prosecutors began to issue indictments against Nixon administration aides and the US House of Representatives considered whether the President himself should be impeached, the prominent liberal writer Richard Goodwin visited Washington, DC. The mood was sombre, but even in the “grimmiest gathering of political sophisticates,” he noted, a laugh could still be guaranteed. One only had to refer to the religious conversion of Charles Colson, former special counsel to the President. Colson was widely associated with the partisan excesses of the Nixon administration and with its efforts – some of them illegal – to undermine and stigmatize any sources of opposition to the presidential will. The *Wall Street Journal* had referred to him as “Nixon's hatchet man.”<sup>1</sup> As prosecutors closed in, however, Colson announced he had accepted Jesus Christ into his life. Goodwin observed that the story “was sure to touch off an instant competition

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Colson, *Born Again* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976), 62.

of Buchwald-style one-liners, tinged, nevertheless, by a slight underglow of professional appreciation for what appears to me a supreme con.”<sup>2</sup>

Doubts about the authenticity of Colson’s conversion never entirely disappeared. Within a couple of years, after Colson had served a seven-month prison term, published his conversion narrative, *Born Again*, and established a ministry directed towards prison inmates, many liberal commentators were more prepared to accept that the change in him was genuine.<sup>3</sup> But others continued to wonder, pointing both to the manner in which the publicity surrounding his conversion and ministry had enabled Colson to return with remarkable, as if almost plotted, facility to a position at the centre of national events, and to the continuous seam of authoritarianism that ran through his work for Richard Nixon into his crusade to make prison inmates obedient to God.<sup>4</sup>

On the evidence of the handwritten daily journals and letters that he wrote while in prison, Colson’s conversion was not a slick career-rebranding device. The journals and letters are introspective in tone, sometimes expressive of the joys of faith, at other times riddled with spiritual doubt. Colson’s decision after release to engage in a prison ministry is not just explicable in terms of his own realization – articulated throughout the journals – that many prison inmates were victims of injustice and that, in environments so profoundly marked by bitterness and despair, secular rehabilitative regimes simply could not succeed; it also was consistent with an increased evangelical interest in prisons as a mission field during the 1970s, stimulated in particular by the violent suppression of the Attica prison riot in September 1971.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, that Colson was able to open up prisons to his ministry owed as much to autonomous changes in official attitudes and policies as to his own will to secure a public redemption through the evidence of works. Formally incorporated in August 1976 as Prison Fellowship (PF), Colson’s ministry offered prison authorities an alternative to secular rehabilitative programmes that were widely judged to have failed and, in its emphasis upon peer-led inmate fellowship groups supported by community volunteers, to a costly, inflexible system of permanent correctional chaplains that could not meet the increasingly diverse religious needs of the American prison population.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Richard Goodwin, “The Mask of State,” *New York Times Book Review*, 30 June 1974, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Mary McGrory, “Was Colson ‘Born Again?’,” *Boston Globe*, 28 Jan. 1976, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Jeff Sharlet, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 228–36.

<sup>5</sup> Kendrick Oliver, “Attica, Watergate, and the Origin of Evangelical Prison Ministry, 1969–1975,” in Axel R. Schäfer, ed., *American Evangelicals and the 1960s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 121–38.

<sup>6</sup> Kendrick Oliver, “‘Hi, Fellas. Come on In’: Norman Carlson, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and the Rise of Prison Fellowship,” *Journal of Church and State*, 55 (2013), 740–57.

The aim of this article is to make more explicable the subsequent stage in the development of Colson's prison ministry: the establishment of Prison Fellowship International (PFI) and its expansion to the point where, claiming more than 125 national affiliates across all six inhabited continents, it has become one of the largest para-church organizations in world evangelicalism.<sup>7</sup> Colson's ambitions for international outreach emerged very early. During a European trip in spring 1977, he discovered "an enormous interest in our prison work." He instructed PF's executive vice president Gordon Loux to maintain a list of "key contacts" and "prison groups" overseas and send them PF newsletters, brochures, speeches and other material: "I think we can have an impact on prison problems all around the world."<sup>8</sup> But Colson also cast the expansion of PF's activities abroad as counterintuitive, because the organization faced more than enough challenges establishing its presence at home. That the expansion occurred was due to the will of God and the demands of others. It was, he told the Southern Baptist Convention in 1979, "a remarkable story of God's sovereignty; we had no intention of spreading our ministry abroad until we had our act together in this country, but the hunger is so great there, as it is here, that we could do no less than dutifully respond."<sup>9</sup>

PFI owed its origins to the existence of transnational evangelical networks in which Americans were prominent but not dominant and to a crisis of penology, experienced across a number of countries other than just the United States, which attracted the interest and concern of religious bodies as well as secular public-policy advocates. The organization was also profoundly shaped by the creative tension between Colson's empire-building instincts and the insistence of PFI affiliates that they have a voice in the direction of the organization and that an American model would not always translate successfully to other national contexts. Indeed, PF's encounter with the world had notable feedback effects on Colson's own religious ideas and on the practices of his original ministry back in the USA. Albeit within definite limits, PF became more ecumenical in its philosophy, and it also embraced initiatives that had first been trialled overseas, including the establishment of separate prison wings run according to a Christian ethos and the use of Alpha course materials in its programmes. In his account of the American evangelical humanitarian agency World Vision, David King has traced a shift in the

<sup>7</sup> Prison Fellowship International website at [www.pfi.org](http://www.pfi.org), accessed 4 April 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Colson to Gordon Loux, 14 June 1977, Folder 1, Box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Colson, draft speech to Southern Baptist Convention, no date (c. spring 1979), Folder 47, Box 2, Fred B. Rhodes Papers, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

organization's ethos since the 1960s from a sectarian emphasis on mission to a "practical ecumenism" involving collaboration with non-evangelical and often secular partners in service of goals that focussed increasingly on relief and development.<sup>10</sup> A similar story can be told with respect to Prison Fellowship: this article offers a case study of the transactional manner in which American evangelicals, operating in global settings, exercised leadership in the final decades of the twentieth century.

#### CONTEXT A: NETWORKS AND INTERLOCUTORS

Prison Fellowship International did not spring entirely spontaneously from Colson's sudden realization, following his European visit in 1977, that his prison ministry might have an overseas as well as a domestic market. PF's first overseas affiliate – Prison Christian Fellowship (PCF), launched in London in spring 1979, and eventually renamed Prison Fellowship England and Wales (PFEW) – initially developed out of a transatlantic network of Christian political and business leaders fostered and maintained by the Fellowship Foundation, based at Fellowship House in Washington. The fellowship – originally titled International Christian Leadership (ICL) – had played a key role in establishing the architecture of American civil religion in the postwar period, organizing the annual presidential prayer breakfast and more generally making the introductions that sustained a grand interlocking web of lay Bible study and prayer groups across elite circles in the United States.<sup>11</sup> As swiftly as Colson had found Christ, the fellowship found Colson, brought him into contact with other evangelicals in Washington and exhibited him as a symbol of the potential for national spiritual and political reconciliation after the Watergate scandal.<sup>12</sup> Colson's first venture in prison ministry – a series of two-week seminars for inmate "disciples" who then returned to their institutions to seed and direct their own groups of Christian prisoners – was hosted at Fellowship House and loosely modelled on the fellowship's own cellular organizational structure.<sup>13</sup>

In the 1950s, the fellowship – as ICL – made a number of attempts to establish an effective leadership group in Britain, as Frank Buchman's Moral

<sup>10</sup> David King, "The New Internationalists: World Vision and the Revival of American Evangelical Humanitarianism, 1950–2010," *Religions*, 3 (2012), 922–49.

<sup>11</sup> For a critical account of the Fellowship Foundation see Sharlet, *The Family*; also D. Michael Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 35–37; Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 35–81.

<sup>12</sup> Colson, *Born Again*, 143–240.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Colson, *Life Sentence* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1979), 40–41, 58–60.

Rearmament had managed to do in the interwar period.<sup>14</sup> These efforts were unsuccessful: its representatives lacked the right connections, Moral Rearmament was still working the same market, and the national Anglican establishment remained confident that its institutional genius and resources were equal to the challenges confronting the church.<sup>15</sup> By the late 1960s, however, there were new opportunities. Following Buchman's death in 1961, Moral Rearmament fell into decline, the Church of England found that it was rapidly losing its influence on public culture and private behaviour, and ICL positioned itself as a channel through which men of stature could explore the salience of Christian principles to the leading issues of the day.<sup>16</sup> In 1966, ICL sponsored a four-day conference in Cambridge on the theme "A Relevant Faith amidst Rapid Change"; British speakers included the Bishop of Coventry; George Thomas, minister of state for Wales; and the industrialist Viscount Caldecote; alongside ICL delegates from the United States, Africa and Europe.<sup>17</sup> Thereafter, ICL's British leadership began to organize regular weekend conferences at Windsor Castle, as well as a series of talks and discussions under the collective pseudonym Christian Responsibility in Public Affairs.<sup>18</sup> An ICL dinner at the House of Lords in October 1967 attracted acceptances from the Archbishop of York; Lord Denning, the Master of the Rolls; Lord Longford, Leader of the House of Lords; and Jeremy Thorpe, the leader of the Liberal Party.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Abraham Vereide to Eustace Wade, 9 Nov. 1949, Folder 1, Box 203, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; Stanley Brown to Wallace Haines, 21 Dec. 1953, Folder 8, Box 202, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; Bruce Reed to Abraham Vereide, 14 June 1957, Folder 6, Box 203, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. On Moral Rearmament see Callum G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow: Pearson, 2006), 197–202.

<sup>15</sup> On Anglican confidence in the 1950s see Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 30–32; Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920–2000* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 443–53; Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000* (London: Routledge, 2009), 170–75.

<sup>16</sup> On the religious crisis of the mid-1960s see Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 175–92, and Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> ICL Conference Programme: "A Relevant Faith amidst Rapid Change," 30 June–3 July 1966, Folder 5, Box 204, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>18</sup> Wallace Haines to Douglas Coe, undated, with attachment: "Tentative Schedule in Britain, 1969–70," 26 Aug. 1969, Folder 6, Box 204, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; James F. Bell to "The Core," 26 May 1971, Folder 10, Box 205, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; "Christian Responsibility in Public Affairs: Report of 1970–1971," no date, Folder 15, Box 205, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>19</sup> "List of Acceptances to I.C.L. Dinner, House of Lords, 18th October 1967," Folder 5, Box 203, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

By the early 1970s, then, ICL was enjoying considerable success in its efforts to access the higher echelons of the British establishment. It was also keen to draw promising young men – the political, religious and business leaders of tomorrow – into its activities.<sup>20</sup> One of these was Michael Alison, who had followed a classic establishment route through Eton, Oxford, the Coldstream Guards and time at a merchant bank before his election as a Conservative MP in 1964. After the Conservative victory in the 1970 general election, Alison became Parliamentary under-secretary of state in the Department of Health and Social Services. More unusually, perhaps, he was a devout Anglican evangelical who had studied theology at Cambridge and pursued ordination prior to deciding on a career in politics.<sup>21</sup> In 1967, Alison – who was highly regarded by the Archbishop of York – had been invited to become a lay member of the Church of England’s Council on Evangelism, an effort to reverse the discernible drift away from the church at the grass roots and to “make more effective the Church’s representation of the Gospel today.”<sup>22</sup> Alison regularly participated in ICL meetings and those organized under the banner of Christian Responsibility in Public Affairs.<sup>23</sup> In April 1972, he chaired a private dinner for younger men nominated by the ICL leadership in Britain at which the speaker was Sir William Armstrong, head of the home civil service.<sup>24</sup> Following the February 1974 election, when the Conservatives were replaced by Labour as the party of government, Alison was invited by Douglas Coe, who led the Fellowship Foundation, to visit the United States in order “to gain a picture of what we are involved in.”<sup>25</sup> During that trip, Alison was introduced to Charles Colson, attending a fellowship breakfast in Boston at which Colson, recently indicted, presented his personal confession of faith. Upon

<sup>20</sup> Wallace Haines to Abraham Vereide, 15 April 1967, Folder 5, Box 203, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>21</sup> On Alison’s background and career see John Barnes, “Obituary: Michael Alison: Hard-Working Conservative Minister,” *The Independent*, 31 May 2004; and Andrew Roth, “Obituary: Michael Alison: Clear-Thinking Christian Tory of the Old School,” *The Guardian*, 1 June 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Senior Secretary to Bishop of Coventry, 19 May 1967, ff. 49, Volume 115 (1967), Michael Ramsay Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, London. On the Council on Evangelism see Paul A. Welsby, *A History of the Church of England 1945–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 49–50.

<sup>23</sup> Wallace Haines to Abraham Vereide, 15 April 1967, Folder 5, Box 203, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; Wallace Haines to Douglas E. Coe, undated, with attachment: “Tentative Schedule in Britain, 1969–70”; “Christian Responsibility in Public Affairs: Report of 1970–1971.”

<sup>24</sup> David Enghauser, “Statement about the Work in Europe,” July 1972, Folder 1, Box 206, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas Coe to Michael Alison, 21 March 1974, Folder 5, Box 206, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.



his return to London, Alison wrote to Colson on the theme of belonging to God, a letter Colson credited with influencing him to plead guilty to a felony charge – because he could not claim fully to belong to God while he was still trying to defend his past pre-conversion conduct in court.<sup>26</sup> Alison sent another letter during Colson’s time in prison; Colson described it as “wonderful.”<sup>27</sup> Alison and his wife, Sylvia Mary, continued to be involved with Fellowship Foundation activities throughout the 1970s, serving as members of the fellowship’s core British leadership group.<sup>28</sup> Whilst her husband helped to establish a Christian fellowship in the Houses of Parliament, Sylvia Mary Alison organized a prayer and Bible study circle for Parliamentary wives, inspired by the example of the fellowship’s Congressional wives group in Washington.<sup>29</sup>

It was Sylvia Mary Alison, more than her husband and as much as Charles Colson, who adopted and nurtured the notion that, as with the broader fellowship, Colson’s prison ministry might also travel across the Atlantic and contribute to the efforts of British evangelicals to bring a rapidly secularizing country back to God. Her efforts in England and Wales would represent the first critical proof of concept for the internationalization of PF’s work. Colson had stayed with the Alisons during a visit to Britain in June 1976 to promote *Born Again*. When he talked to them about his plans for his prison ministry, Sylvia Mary, who had worked as a therapist in a psychiatric hospital prior to her marriage and who, consistent with her attendance at Holy Trinity, Brompton, the principal pioneer church for charismatic Christianity in Britain, herself frequently experienced prophetic visions, was stirred and intrigued.<sup>30</sup> In early 1977, she visited Colson and his wife in Washington, and was present in the PF office when news came through that the Federal Bureau of Prisons would increase the ministry’s access to federal correctional institutions. She shared with PF staff a prophecy “that God was going to bring revival to the prisons throughout the world.”<sup>31</sup> The following year, on another trip to the

<sup>26</sup> Michael Alison to Charles Colson, 12 May 1974, Folder 1, Box 1, Charles Colson Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; Charles Colson to Michael Alison, 4 June 1974, Folder 1, Box 1, Charles Colson Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; Colson, *Born Again*, 235–45.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Alison to Charles Colson, no date (c. Aug. 1974), Folder 7, Box 10, Charles Colson Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; Charles Colson to “Brothers,” 12 Sept. 1974, Folder 7, Box 10, Charles Colson Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>28</sup> Haines, “Briefing on the Work in England,” no date (c. 1979), Folder 4, Box 207, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Alison to Michael Ramsay, 23 May 1974, ff. 342, Volume 274 (1974), Michael Ramsay Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, London; Sylvia Mary Alison to Douglas Coe, 15 April 1977, Folder 11, Box 206, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>30</sup> See especially Sylvia Mary Alison, *God Is Building a House* (Alresford: John Hunt Publishing, 2002), 17–19.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

United States, Sylvia Mary attended a PF seminar conducted at a women's prison in California. It was, she recalled, "an amazing experience for me. I felt so at home there, totally identified with the prisoners and also at one with the visiting team."<sup>32</sup>

In April 1978, during a Fellowship Foundation weekend at Windsor Castle, Sylvia Mary discussed Colson's ministry with Lord Longford, a former government minister well known for his interest in prisoner welfare and penal reform. The next day, Longford informed her that he had received some divine instruction: God had told him that Sylvia Mary should take the lead in setting up Prison Fellowship in England.<sup>33</sup> Over the summer, Longford and the Alisons met regularly to pray for further guidance. They decided to hold a conference in November, inviting participation from professions, groups and institutions with an interest in the spiritual well-being of prisoners, and they arranged for Colson to speak about the inspiration behind his ministry and about some of its programmes.<sup>34</sup> Around two hundred people attended.<sup>35</sup> Through the autumn and winter, Colson and Loux – who were by now also considering the possibility of establishing PF affiliates in Canada and Australia – channelled advice to Sylvia Mary about how to incorporate a separate British trust.<sup>36</sup> Prison Christian Fellowship was formally launched in March 1979.<sup>37</sup>

## CONTEXT B: JOHN STOTT, LAUSANNE AND ANGLICAN EVANGELICALISM

Sylvia Mary Alison had first committed her life to God whilst attending Billy Graham's Harringay Crusade in 1954.<sup>38</sup> Involvement with the Fellowship Foundation eventually brought the Alisons into Graham's outer circle, and they corresponded warmly with him from the 1970s onwards.<sup>39</sup> Colson

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 19–20.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 20–25.

<sup>35</sup> In her memoir, Sylvia Mary Alison stated that 170 people were present. Colson claimed that there were 230 attendees. Charles Colson to Gretchen Clabaugh, 8 Dec. 1978, Folder 1, Box 14, Prison Fellowship Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Colson to Gordon Loux, 22 Aug. 1978, Folder 1, Box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; Charles Colson to Gordon Loux, 11 Sept. 1978, Folder 1, Box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; Charles Colson to Gretchen Clabaugh, 8 Dec. 1978, Folder 1, Box 14, Prison Fellowship Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>37</sup> Alison, *God Is Building a House*, 24–5.

<sup>38</sup> Sylvia Mary Alison, "The Origin and Purpose of Prison Christian Fellowship," no date (c.1980), Sylvia Mary Alison Papers (in Alison family's possession). I am grateful to the Alison family for permission to cite these materials.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Billy Graham to Michael Alison, 5 March 1976, Sylvia Mary Alison Papers (in Alison family's possession); Billy Graham to Sylvia Mary Alison, 7 March 1977, Sylvia Mary Alison Papers (in Alison family's possession); Billy Graham to Michael Alison, 13 July 1984, Sylvia Mary Alison Papers (in Alison family's possession).



himself had recognized the value of having Graham endorse his ministry in American prisons and he also considered the structure of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association a potential model for PF to follow as it moved to expand overseas.<sup>40</sup> But by the late 1970s the mode of American evangelicalism that Graham represented did not seem as possessed of integrity and at ease with modernity as it had to European audiences two decades before. Graham's 1966 Earls Court crusade had failed to stimulate popular interest on the same scale as Harringay; his own reputation was then damaged by his reluctance to offer a firm public judgement on the conduct of his friend Richard Nixon during the Watergate affair; and increasingly, in the form of the New Christian Right, there arose other, angrier evangelical accents which threatened to interfere with the frictionless reception of Graham's ministry overseas.<sup>41</sup>

It was not his association with Graham, then, that generated an audience for Colson's concept of prison ministry beyond the immediate base of those associated with the Fellowship Foundation. Colson's own personal story was, of course, compelling; more directly and willingly than Graham, he could speak to a chastening experience of corruptive power, eliding his personal fate with the broader reputation of the United States after Vietnam and Watergate, in a manner that made his evangelical message more marketable to religious centrists and progressives in Britain and mainland Europe. Moreover, Colson's ambitions for his ministry – to bring individual inmates to Christ, to materially aid their rehabilitation, and, more broadly, to advance the intellectual case for reducing the role of prisons in the struggle against crime – were compatible with the indigenous Anglican evangelical tradition, cerebral and socially concerned, embodied by John Stott, president of the Evangelical Alliance. The influence of this tradition was already discernible in the distinctive form taken by the British version of the fellowship, which prioritized the discussion of ideas and the application of Christian principles to public policy far more than did the American movement.<sup>42</sup> In his first correspondence with Colson, Michael Alison, who himself had been led to

<sup>40</sup> Charles Colson to Gordon Loux, 1 Aug. 1977, Folder 1, Box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; Charles Colson to Gordon Loux, 22 Aug. 1978, Folder 1, Box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; "Minutes of the Meeting of the Trustees of Prison Christian Fellowship," 17 Nov. 1981, Board Minutes, Prison Fellowship England and Wales Archives (in possession of Prison Fellowship England and Wales). I am grateful to Prison Fellowship England and Wales for permission to cite these materials.

<sup>41</sup> William Martin, *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 323–25, 424–35, 472–73; Grant Wacker, *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 211–14.

<sup>42</sup> James F. Bell to "The Core," 26 May 1971.

God by Stott in 1948, offered a more theologically informed perspective on Colson's situation than Colson had hitherto received from any of his fellowship associates in Washington, where questions of faith and purpose tended to be addressed in less stringent terms.<sup>43</sup> Colson – who would emerge late in the decade as a trenchant critic of the intellectual emptiness of much American conversion discourse – replied that no letter he had received over the past year “impressed me quite as much as yours.”<sup>44</sup>

As Colson began his sentence, John Stott's vision of an intellectually sound, socially concerned evangelicalism, advanced in Britain through his own writings and the National Evangelical Congress at Keele in 1967, received the endorsement of the world evangelical movement in the form of the Lausanne Covenant.<sup>45</sup> In 1977, Stott and Alison collaborated on a proposal for “A Community of Christian Concern,” loosely modelled on the Fellowship Foundation but based in London – a proposal that was eventually to mature into the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity.<sup>46</sup> Having read *Born Again*, Stott invited Colson to contribute to the 1979 London Lectures in Contemporary Christianity, which had as their theme “Crime and the Responsible Community.”<sup>47</sup> Rigorously peer-reviewed prior to delivery (Colson was encouraged to acquaint himself with the more recent scholarly literature on the origins of crime), the lectures allowed Colson to present himself to audiences in Britain and beyond as an established authority on the subject of criminal justice as well as a committed evangelist.<sup>48</sup> In time, Colson's thinking would become more formalistic and severe, asserting that the human systems of justice that sent men and women to prison ultimately

<sup>43</sup> Michael Alison to Charles Colson, 12 May 1974, Folder 1, Box 1, Charles Colson Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Colson to Michael Alison, 4 June 1974, Folder 1, Box 1, Charles Colson Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; Charles Colson, draft speech to Southern Baptist Convention, no date (c. spring 1979), Folder 47, Box 2, Fred B. Rhodes Papers, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

<sup>45</sup> Alister Chapman, *Godly Ambition: John Stott and the Evangelical Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 91–99, 137–48; Brian Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Billy Graham and John Stott* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 151–79.

<sup>46</sup> John Stott to Douglas Coe, 24 May 1977, Folder 11, Box 206, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; “A Community of Christian Concern,” 9 Aug. 1977, Folder 11, Box 206, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>47</sup> John Stott to Douglas Coe, 24 May 1977, Folder 11, Box 206, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; John Stott to Douglas Coe, 20 Feb. 1978, Folder 2, Box 207, Fellowship Foundation Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>48</sup> Nick Miller to Charles Colson (plus attachment), 20 May 1979, Folder 21, Box 149, Charles Colson Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. The lectures were published in John Stott and Nick Miller, eds., *Crime and the Responsible Community: A Christian Contribution to the Debate about Criminal Justice* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980).

descended from divinely ordained natural law.<sup>49</sup> But throughout the first decade of his ministry, Colson reflected earnestly on the role that could be played by penal reform in reducing the prison population – through the offer of a “second chance” to first offenders prior to incarceration and through restorative justice, probation or community treatment programmes – as well as on the importance of convincing those who continued to be incarcerated of their need to return to God.<sup>50</sup> In the attention he gave to both public policy and the souls of “unreached peoples” languishing in prison, Colson seemed to symbolize the promise of an American evangelicalism recharged with the spirit of Lausanne. His lectures were the best-attended of the series, with over seven hundred people present.<sup>51</sup> Around the same time, Colson was also interviewed by *Third Way*, a British evangelical magazine which aimed to offer a perspective on current issues informed by the Lausanne Covenant.<sup>52</sup> When Colson’s second book, *Life Sentence*, was published in Britain towards the end of the year, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Donald Coggan – a liberal evangelical himself – noted with approval the challenge to Christian conscience presented by the author’s account of his often difficult early ventures in prison ministry: “This is a brave book. Let those who read it with an attitude of cool detachment ask themselves what they are doing for those in our prisons – and at what personal cost.”<sup>53</sup>

### CONTEXT C: THE TRANSNATIONAL PENAL CRISIS

The internationalization of Colson’s prison ministry, then, was dependent upon his access to social capital accumulated by the Fellowship Foundation in Britain as well as in the USA. It was also conditioned by the broad consonance between his personal conviction that systemic social pathologies were unlikely to be solved simply through a chain of individual religious conversions and the new emphasis upon a holistic gospel (soul-winning *and* social-political

<sup>49</sup> Charles Colson, *Justice That Restores* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000); Charles Colson, “Capital Punishment: A Personal Statement,” 11 November 2002, at [www.rutherford.org/publications\\_resources/oldspeak/capital\\_punishment\\_a\\_personal\\_statement](http://www.rutherford.org/publications_resources/oldspeak/capital_punishment_a_personal_statement), accessed 18 July 2016.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Colson, “Towards an Understanding of Imprisonment and Rehabilitation,” in Stott and Miller, 152–78; Charles W. Colson and Daniel H. Benson, “Restitution as an Alternative to Imprisonment,” *Detroit College of Law Review*, 2 (Summer 1980), 523–98.

<sup>51</sup> Tom Cooper, “Summary of the 1979 London Lectures,” Oct. 1979, ref. 3/16/1/1 (London Lectures in Contemporary Christianity), John Stott Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, London.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Colson, “Serving My Sentence,” *Third Way*, July 1979, 10–12.

<sup>53</sup> Donald Coggan to Edward England, 20 Nov. 1979, Folder 6, Box 145, Charles Colson Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. On Coggan see Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, 555–56.

involvement) within world evangelicalism. But international audiences were also receptive to Colson's message because the specific mission field in which he worked – prisons – was attracting increasingly anxious attention across Western societies. From the mid-1970s onwards, the sociologist David Garland has argued, Britain and the United States experienced a common “crisis in penal modernism,” marked by new doubts about whether prisons were actually achieving the objective of inmate rehabilitation – and, furthermore, whether the reform of inmate character was a legitimate liberal policy goal.<sup>54</sup> In these two countries – and elsewhere – prison riots and other forms of inmate protest prompted closer scrutiny of the conditions that prevailed in penal institutions, disclosing the pervasiveness of problems like overcrowding, understaffing and outmoded physical estate. It was evident that prisons currently lacked the resources necessary to sustain the liberal hope that they might function successfully as nurseries of inmate reform. In Britain, just as Colson delivered his London lectures and prepared for the publication of *Life Sentence*, a year-long official inquiry into the state of the nation's prison services was coming to the conclusion that, through the use of noncustodial sentences, courts needed to reduce the numbers of offenders sent to prison. The inquiry also recommended that the penal system itself redirect its efforts towards providing inmates with an experience of “positive custody,” to include more purposive work and education opportunities and, where possible, greater engagement with the local communities outside each prison.<sup>55</sup>

Until the 1970s, the British penal system was pretty much a closed world. A narrow, elite circle of Home Office officials, though consulting periodically with academic experts and reputable reform groups like the Howard League, maintained a tight control over the inputs into policy deliberations. Aside from the access granted to official boards of visitors, individual prisons remained largely veiled from public view; they issued no welcome to lay outsiders who wished to scrutinize their work or to the concept of community involvement in their programmes.<sup>56</sup> As in the United States, however, the growing public perception of dysfunction in the prison system broadened the range of actors and agencies seeking to have an influence on penal

<sup>54</sup> David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. 53–74.

<sup>55</sup> Committee of Inquiry into the United Kingdom Prison Services, *Report*, Cmnd. 7673 (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1979).

<sup>56</sup> Mick Ryan, *Penal Policy and Political Culture in England and Wales: Four Essays on Policy and Process* (Winchester: Waterside Press, 2003), 13–42. On boards of visitors see Graham Zellick, “Lay Involvement in Prison Administration: The British Board of Visitors,” *University of Toronto Law Journal*, 27 (1977), 105–18.

policy and practice.<sup>57</sup> Prominent amongst those contributing to the renewed public debate about the state of Britain's prisons and the broader purpose of imprisonment were the churches. In 1977, after three years of study, a working party for the Church of England's Board of Social Responsibility produced a report entitled *Prisons and Prisoners in England Today* which concluded that, as there could be no confidence in its rehabilitative function, imprisonment should be used "as sparingly as possible." The report also encouraged members of the church to explore ways of involving themselves in community service and post-custodial programmes.<sup>58</sup>

However, on the question of how the churches might engage with incarcerated offenders, the report settled for the status quo, with the chaplain of each prison identified as the necessary "focal point" of contact between its inmates and the local Christian community.<sup>59</sup> Sceptics observed that many prison chaplains had become institutionalized and were not always anxious to augment their in-house religious programming with contributions from outside. If the church was to fulfil its responsibilities to prison inmates, chaplains would need themselves to be "encouraged" to accept the involvement of Christian volunteers in their work. "It is too easy to say that the Church has Prison Chaplains, and leave it at that," asserted one extended critique of the report. "Too often, one hears of the Prison Chaplain being totally isolated from local clergy and congregations."<sup>60</sup> The Prison Chaplaincy Service (PCS) itself acknowledged the difficulties it faced in trying to meet the spiritual needs of inmates out of its own resources. In July 1979, Canon Leslie Lloyd Rees, the chaplain general of prisons, noted that its complement of full-time chaplains was significantly under strength; moreover, he was finding it "increasingly difficult" to recruit suitably qualified candidates to positions in the service.<sup>61</sup>

This was a propitious time, then, for Charles Colson and Sylvia Mary Alison to be initiating a religious outreach directed towards British prisons. Within the UK prison system, and also without, confidence in the ability of secular programmes to reform and rehabilitate prisoners was fading fast. The crisis had also stimulated some serious reflection within religious circles

<sup>57</sup> Ryan, 45–74; on the United States see Marie Gottschalk, *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 181.

<sup>58</sup> *Prisons and Prisoners in England Today: A Report of the Board for Social Responsibility* (London: CIO Publishing, 1978). <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>60</sup> Bishop's Council for Social Responsibility, Diocese of Coventry, "Prisons and Prisoners: A Working Party Report," no date given (c.1978), HO 263/48, UK National Archives, Kew. See also "Reawakening of Concern about Prisons Is Urged," *Church Times*, 2 March 1979, 4–5.

<sup>61</sup> Leslie Lloyd Rees, "Prison Service Inquiry," 10 July 1979, HO 263/48, UK National Archives, Kew.

about whether the churches as institutions were doing enough to minister to prison inmates and aid their release from the vicious cycle of crime and punishment. Did the surrogate medium of the prison chaplaincy satisfactorily discharge the duty of every Christian to love and care for the sinner? It was amid the vitalizing eddies of such debates that Prison Christian Fellowship began to plant its roots.

## DEVOLUTION OR US DOMINANCE? THE GOVERNANCE OF PRISON FELLOWSHIP INTERNATIONAL

In some respects, by the end of the 1970s, Charles Colson was operating in the mode of the classic American evangelical entrepreneurs – Billy Graham, Bill Bright, Bob Pierce – of a generation before. He saw no reason why what was happening in Britain, with the creation of PCF, could not also happen elsewhere. Christians in Canada, Jordan, Spain and some African states had already been in contact about the possibility of setting up their own national Prison Fellowship ministries.<sup>62</sup> PF's annual report for 1978 observed that the organization would soon need to consider the establishment of an international arm "to assist other countries."<sup>63</sup> Colson's own instinct – consistent with the model offered by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, which closely managed its international offices from its headquarters in Minneapolis – was to remain in firm charge of the process of overseas expansion. As PF moved to establish a ministry in Australia, Colson told Loux that he wanted to ensure "that we keep our control" by setting specific targets for what its Australian representatives were to accomplish.<sup>64</sup>

Yet Colson also seems to have intuited that, in this post-Lausanne era, adopting the older model of directive leadership from the American metropole would limit the enthusiasm for his ministry amongst precisely the pools of indigenous evangelicals that Prison Fellowship needed most to attract: those with the initiative and talent to convert their nation's prisons into a fertile mission field. Moreover, there were wide national variations in how penal systems worked and in their arrangements for meeting the religious needs of prison inmates. Returning from the exploratory London conference organized

<sup>62</sup> Charles Colson to Ralph Veerman, 17 Oct. 1978, Folder 3, Box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; Charles Colson to Gretchen Clabaugh, 8 Dec. 1978, Folder 1, Box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>63</sup> Gordon Loux, "The General Report: The Mystery of Prison Fellowship," Prison Fellowship Annual Report 1978, Folder 37, Box 45, Christian Life Commission Resource Files, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

<sup>64</sup> Charles Colson to Gordon Loux, 14 Aug. 1979, "Memos CWC to GDL 1979" folder, Box 23, Prison Fellowship Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.



by Sylvia Mary Alison in November 1978, Colson observed that he had been “very careful not to appear to be trying to export some American solution to the British problem.”<sup>65</sup> In contrast to the United States, British courts had not recently issued a sequence of judgements upholding the right of prisoners to access religious services of their choice.<sup>66</sup> Where Prison Fellowship USA had been able to bypass the existing system of correctional chaplains and minister to prisoners directly, PCF first would have to negotiate general terms of access with the Prison Chaplaincy Service and then elicit the cooperation of individual prison chaplains for each of its local initiatives. The British experience revealed that no single ministry model would fit all national contexts. This was also the conviction of Sylvia Mary Alison. She argued that, if PF was to extend its operations beyond the United States and Britain, it had to do so in a manner that respected the autonomy and creativity of its international affiliates. Colson could be invited, as he had been for the London conference, to share his vision as a new national ministry began to form, but then he should go home, leaving the task of organization and decisions about specific programmes to those on the ground. Alison told Colson that God “has many flowers in His garden: they are all flowers, but look different. Don’t let’s worry about national variations, as long as Jesus is Head.”<sup>67</sup>

The structure of Prison Fellowship International, established in late autumn 1979, evolved to strike a balance between Colson’s instinct for control and Sylvia Mary Alison’s faith in the genius of localism. The organization – comprising thirty-two national ministries by 1987 – was jointly owned by its affiliates, with American influence on its board restricted to five members out of twelve.<sup>68</sup> This framework, Alison believed, would “allow individual countries to develop their own way, and not have an American pattern

<sup>65</sup> Charles Colson to Gretchen Clabaugh, 8 Dec. 1978, Folder 1, Box 11, Prison Fellowship Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>66</sup> On US court judgements see Oliver, “Hi, Fellas. Come on in,” 744–45; Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 96–132. On the British regulatory context see James A. Beckford and Sophie Gilliat, *Religion in Prison: Equal Rites in a Multi-faith Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 89.

<sup>67</sup> Sylvia Mary Alison, “Some Thoughts about Setting Up P.F. in Different Countries, Notably Canada and Australia,” Oct. 1979, Sylvia Mary Alison Papers (in Alison family’s possession).

<sup>68</sup> Alan Hewitt, “The International Scene,” *Prison Fellowship Northern Ireland Newsletter*, Autumn 1987, Folder 11, Box 157, Charles Colson Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; “Minutes of the Meeting of the Trustees of Prison Christian Fellowship,” 17 Nov. 1981, Board Minutes, Prison Fellowship England and Wales Archives (in possession of Prison Fellowship England and Wales), London; “Prison Fellowship International Financial Report: Years Ended December 31, 1983 and 1982,” Folder 5, Box 61, Prison Fellowship Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

imposed on them.”<sup>69</sup> However, in order to guard against the creation of counterfeit PF operations or the takeover of existing affiliates by unbiblical forces (such as adherents of the Unification Church), national ministries were required to apply to PFI for charter status and share with it their member mailing lists and financial accounts.<sup>70</sup> PFI also created a fund to help seed new ministries, offering grants for PF start-ups in the Third World, loans for everywhere else. The expectation was that chartered affiliates, once they were firmly established, would donate 5 percent of their annual budgets back to PFI, affirming the principle of common ownership.

There was the rub, however. Even as their overall numbers increased, individual national affiliates rarely had enough money left over from resourcing their own operations to contribute substantially to the central PFI budget. In 1983, PFI received over \$358,750 in support from Prison Fellowship USA; donations from other member countries totalled only \$6,272.<sup>71</sup> In Britain, PCF itself led a hand-to-mouth financial existence for much of the early 1980s, some months barely covering payroll; the crisis was only eased in 1983 by a \$10,000 loan from its American cousin and a sizable grant award from the Jerusalem Trust.<sup>72</sup> On the occasions in subsequent years when Sylvia Mary Alison would complain to Colson that he was treating PFI in a proprietorial fashion, he would deny the charge but also point out that all but a fraction of the organization’s income had been raised in the United States, often from donors he knew personally: “So I do feel a great responsibility to insure that the ministry is well managed and well run.”<sup>73</sup>

PFI’s financial flows, then, tended to be centrifugal, but there is evidence of a genuine two-way exchange in programme ideas between the American core and its family of affiliates. Some key ministry initiatives such as in-prison

<sup>69</sup> “Minutes of a Meeting of the Trustees of Prison Christian Fellowship,” 19 May 1982, Board Minutes, Prison Fellowship England and Wales Archives (in possession of Prison Fellowship England and Wales), London.

<sup>70</sup> “Minutes of the Meeting of the Trustees of Prison Christian Fellowship,” 17 Nov. 1981, Board Minutes, Prison Fellowship England and Wales Archives (in possession of Prison Fellowship England and Wales), London.

<sup>71</sup> “Prison Fellowship International Financial Report: Years Ended December 31, 1983 and 1982,” Folder 5, Box 61, Prison Fellowship Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>72</sup> “Notes of Special Trustees Meeting,” 29 Nov. 1982, Board Minutes, Prison Fellowship England and Wales Archives (in possession of Prison Fellowship England and Wales), London; “Minutes of a Trustees Meeting,” 10 Jan. 1983, Board Minutes, Prison Fellowship England and Wales (in possession of Prison Fellowship England and Wales), London.

<sup>73</sup> Sylvia Mary Alison to Charles Colson, 22 Nov. 1996, “PF & PFI Archives” folder, Prison Fellowship England and Wales Archives (in possession of Prison Fellowship England and Wales), London; Charles Colson to Sylvia Mary Alison, 3 Dec. 1996, “PF & PFI Archives” folder, Prison Fellowship England and Wales Archives (in possession of Prison Fellowship England and Wales), London.

seminars or the Sycamore Tree Project, a restorative-justice programme, were pioneered in the US and then journeyed outwards through the PFI network to be implemented in other countries. In the opposite direction, having been conceived in Britain, travelled the Alpha course, including a variant – Prison Alpha – specifically tailored for use in penal settings. The original Alpha course was developed at Holy Trinity, Brompton, where the Alisons were regular worshippers.<sup>74</sup> Holy Trinity’s team of pastors started taking the course into British prisons in 1994.<sup>75</sup> A couple of years later, Prison Fellowship England and Wales decided to train its own volunteers to deliver Prison Alpha, with the two ministries beginning a close collaboration.<sup>76</sup> In 1999, having been endorsed by Governor George W. Bush, Prison Alpha was piloted in a Texas state penitentiary; at its international convocation in Bulgaria, PFI adopted the course for worldwide use.<sup>77</sup> Around the same time, in another Texas prison, Prison Fellowship USA was trialling the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI), under which the organization was handed responsibility for running a separate residential unit with the aim of reforming prisoners through conversion to Christianity and preparing them for release by means of a curriculum focussed jointly on practical skills and the inculcation of biblical values. This too had been modelled on practices developed outside the USA. The once-common concept of a correctional facility run on religious principles had been revived in Brazil during the 1980s by the Association for the Protection and Assistance of the Convicted (APAC), which was invited by the Brazilian government to administer the Humaitá prison in São José dos Campos.<sup>78</sup> The low recidivism rates reported for former inmates of Humaitá, and those of other jails with APAC programmes,

<sup>74</sup> Stephen Hunt, “The Alpha Programme: Some Tentative Observations of State of the Art Evangelism in the UK,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 18 (2003), 77–93.

<sup>75</sup> Charlie Burton, “Alpha Males,” *GQ*, June 2014, at [www.gq-magazine.co.uk/comment/articles/2014-05/28/alpha-christian-prisons-organisation-interview/viewall](http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/comment/articles/2014-05/28/alpha-christian-prisons-organisation-interview/viewall), accessed 24 June 2014.

<sup>76</sup> “Meeting of the Trustees,” 3 Feb. 1997, Board Minutes, Prison Fellowship England and Wales Archives (in possession of Prison Fellowship England and Wales), London; Paul Cowley to Peter Walker, 13 Aug. 1997, “PF & PFI Archives” folder, Prison Fellowship England and Wales Archives (in possession of Prison Fellowship England and Wales), London.

<sup>77</sup> Deann Alford, “Evangelism: Prison Alpha Debuts in Texas,” *Christianity Today*, 4 Oct. 1999, at [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1999/october4/9tbo28.html?start=2](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1999/october4/9tbo28.html?start=2), accessed 24 June 2014; Michael Green, “Reflections on a Three Day Mission in Dartmoor Prison,” no date given (c.1999), untitled folder, Prison Fellowship England and Wales Archives (in possession of Prison Fellowship England and Wales), London.

<sup>78</sup> For the history of APAC and IFI see Jonathan Burnside with Nancy Loucks, Joanna R. Adler and Gerry Rose, *My Brother’s Keeper: Faith-Based Units in Prisons* (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2005).

attracted international attention.<sup>79</sup> In 1989, APAC changed its name to Prison Fellowship Brazil and became a charter member of PFI.<sup>80</sup> Prison Fellowship USA started exploring the possibility of bringing the APAC model to the United States.<sup>81</sup> By 2002, it had succeeded in opening IFI prison units in four American states: Texas, Iowa, Kansas and Minnesota.<sup>82</sup>

## NEGOTIATING ACCESS: THE ECUMENICAL STYLE OF PRISON FELLOWSHIP INTERNATIONAL

In its early efforts to gain access to the federal prison system in the United States, PF's distinct identity as an evangelical Protestant organization presented no particular difficulty, because evangelical inmates were held to have the same right to religious provision as inmates belonging to other churches and faiths. But that identity, had it remained emphatic and hard-edged, would have proved incompatible with the goal of expanding PF's ministry overseas. In England and Wales, the Prison Chaplaincy Service, which functioned as both the gatekeeper to and monopoly supplier of religious programming for inmates, was initially very suspicious of Prison Christian Fellowship. The service had no objection to the Alisons and their associates organizing local groups to pray for the work of the chaplains in each prison, but PCF volunteers would not be permitted to minister to inmates directly.<sup>83</sup> The British chaplains were probably aware that Colson had publically called into question the effectiveness of their counterparts in American prisons and that Prison Fellowship USA had also cooperated with the Federal Bureau of Prisons in experiments with religious provision that did away with the role of the state-employed chaplain, relying instead on a pastor appointed and funded by PF itself.<sup>84</sup> As the Bishop of Southampton, who had pastoral responsibility for the chaplaincy service, informed the Archbishop of Canterbury, there were "certain worries" about PCF: "They are a high-powered evangelical group who are not content with being a prayer fellowship and want to do other things."<sup>85</sup> Colson himself acknowledged the British chaplains' concerns "that we might get in their way or take over their responsibilities."<sup>86</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Angus Creighton and Ken Rennie, "A.P.A. C. (Brazil) Prison Regime: Feasibility in the SPS," April 1995, "ST" folder, Prison Fellowship England and Wales Archives (in possession of Prison Fellowship England and Wales), London. <sup>80</sup> Burnside, 7.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 240–42. <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 250. <sup>83</sup> Alison, *God Is Building a House*, 80.

<sup>84</sup> Oliver, "Hi, Fellas. Come on In," 753–56.

<sup>85</sup> "Note to the Archbishop," 15 Sept. 1982, Folder 228, Main: 1982, Robert Runcie Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, London.

<sup>86</sup> Charles Colson, "Serving My Sentence," *Third Way*, July 1979, 12.

Rather than cast their disquiet in terms of their own self-interest, however, the chaplains made a stand on the principle of religious inclusiveness: they demanded assurances that PCF's mission to evangelize British prisons would conform to the spirit of Christian ecumenism and cooperation that characterized the PCS's own provision of religious services to inmates.<sup>87</sup> Although PCF already had a Catholic, Lord Longford, on its board of trustees – it pointedly added another in 1981 – it took over three years of diligent courtship, the appointment of a more sympathetic chaplain-general, and some personal representations from the Alisons to the Archbishop of Canterbury before the denominational heads of the PCS were prepared to attest to the fellowship's "ecumenical character" and commend its work to chaplains and governors "as a supplement to the ministry of the Church in Prisons and Youth Custody."<sup>88</sup> Only then were PCF volunteers afforded access to prisons in England and Wales, with a programme of in-prison seminars beginning in 1984.<sup>89</sup>

PFI's embrace of an ecumenical identity was the necessary cost of it doing business in many religious markets overseas, but, through the 1980s and 1990s, the organization seems to have embraced that identity with ever-increasing enthusiasm. In 1983, following the establishment of Prison Fellowship Northern Ireland, Belfast was chosen as the site for PFI's first major international symposium. The theme, "Reconciliation ... in Christ," pointed towards both the traditional goal of evangelism (bringing the individual into the Kingdom of God) and PFI's comprehension of its ministry's broader purpose: to transcend and heal the wounds in the Body of Christ by engaging different social and religious groups in the common enterprise of sharing God's love with those in prison. Even in Belfast, a city toxic with sectarian tensions, a start had been made. PFI declared, "we have witnessed in our

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, P. L. Ashford to Peter Timms, 14 Sept. 1982, Folder 228, Main: 1982, Robert Runcie Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, London.

<sup>88</sup> For the addition of another Catholic to the PCF Board of Trustees see "Minutes of the Meeting of the Trustees," 17 Nov. 1981, Board Minutes, Prison Fellowship England and Wales Archives (in possession of Prison Fellowship England and Wales), London; for evidence of the attitude of the new chaplain-general, Percy Ashford, see P. L. Ashford to Gordon Loux, 21 July 1982, "Gordon Loux European trip 7/82" folder, Box 63, Prison Fellowship Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; for the Alisons' contacts with Lambeth Palace see Michael Alison to Robert Runcie, 23 July 1982, Folder 228, Main: 1982, Robert Runcie Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, London; Robert Runcie to Michael Alison, 27 July 1982, Sylvia Mary Alison Papers (in Alison family's possession) and Sylvia Mary Alison to Robert Runcie, 2 Dec. 1982, Folder 228, Main: 1982, Robert Runcie Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, London; for the PCS statement see P. L. Ashford, R. Atherton and W. Davies, no date given (c. Dec. 1982), Folder 228, Main: 1982, Robert Runcie Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, London.

<sup>89</sup> Alison, *God Is Building a House*, 67.

symposium and in the community around us God's reconciling power at work as people from diverse racial, cultural, social and church backgrounds have spoken to each other with integrity and listened to each other with respect."<sup>90</sup> In 1990, in the wake of PFI's expansion into Latin America and as the fall of the Berlin Wall opened up a whole new mission field in Eastern Europe, Charles Colson observed that one of the organization's key tasks was "to bring together people" from different traditions – Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox – "to be one Fellowship with a Christian background." Indeed, he went on, "I do not know any other ministry that has busied itself so much about it than our Prison Fellowship."<sup>91</sup> Colson himself was an enthusiastic participant in the consultations between evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics that produced the 1994 statement "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." The statement argued for the reduction and elimination of conflict between the two communities and a new era of cooperation in the Christianization of the world: "we are called and we are resolved to explore patterns of working and witnessing together in order to advance the one mission of Christ."<sup>92</sup>

Prison Fellowship USA suffered a significant attrition in financial support from conservative Protestant donors as a result of Colson's commitment to a mission goal in common with the Catholic Church. But its attachment to ecumenism had always been discretionary and contextual. In the United States, there was little honouring of the principle in relation to non-Christian faiths; the organization saw itself as engaged in a hostile competition with the Nation of Islam as both ministries worked to claim the spiritual allegiance of African American prisoners.<sup>93</sup> Its approach to the reform of individual inmates, moreover, remained distinctly evangelical, emphasizing conversion, atonement and the moral value of Bible study.<sup>94</sup> In his own later writings, Colson sought to etch a bold, sharp boundary between

<sup>90</sup> PFI news release, "Symposium Considers Plight of World's Prisoners," July 1983, "Belfast" folder, Box 147, Prison Fellowship Papers, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>91</sup> Charles Colson, address to the Prison Fellowship International conference, Draveil, France, 23 March 1990, conference transcript, Sylvia Mary Alison Papers (in Alison family's possession).

<sup>92</sup> "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," *First Things*, May 1994, 15–22. For an account of Colson's involvement see Jonathan Aitken, *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed* (London: Continuum, 2005), 378–88; Damon Linker, *The Theocons: Secular America under Siege* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 81–110.

<sup>93</sup> Amy Kaslow, "Nation of Islam Extends Its Reach behind Prison Walls," *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 May 1996, at [www.csmonitor.com/1996/0520/052096.feat.cover.1.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/1996/0520/052096.feat.cover.1.html), accessed 18 July 2016.

<sup>94</sup> Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *Prison Religion: Faith-Based Reform and the Constitution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 64–93.



evangelical Christianity and a mainstream culture that he regarded as morally chaotic and spiritually adrift by describing the necessary, systematic elements of a biblical worldview.<sup>95</sup> For as long as Prison Fellowship USA operated in an open marketplace of prison religion, its particularism offended no constitutional principles, but the creation of IFI units under the aegis of the state made such methods more contentious. In 2006, a federal judge ruled that the InnerChange programme in Iowa was “pervasively sectarian” and that, because the alternative therapeutic programmes available to inmates were not nearly as well resourced, the Iowa Department of Corrections was thus involved in an unconstitutional endorsement of Prison Fellowship USA’s evangelical system of thought.<sup>96</sup> Across the Atlantic, Prison Fellowship England and Wales was looking to run its own experiment with the APAC model, but there was strong debate internally about the aims of such a unit: should it simply try to introduce inmate participants to the principles of a Christian life in the ecumenical manner of Prison Alpha, or actually emulate InnerChange in seeking early conversion, genuine repentance and the inculcation of an evangelical Christian mindset by the end of the programme?<sup>97</sup> At a time when the Prison Chaplaincy Service was extending its definition of ecumenism to ensure that it treated Christian and non-Christian faith traditions with equal respect, the outcome of this debate mattered.<sup>98</sup> In 2006, after a year of operation, a pilot InnerChange programme established by PFEW at Dartmoor Prison was shut down on the grounds that its content was incompatible with the ethos of a multi-faith chaplaincy. Georgina Wates, PFEW chair, observed that “we don’t fit in with the multi-faith agenda. They think we should be teaching a bit of every religion and that what we’re teaching offends other faiths. If we teach Jesus is the Son of God, of course it is going to offend people.”<sup>99</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* (London: Marshall Pickering, 2000).

<sup>96</sup> *Americans United for Separation of Church and State, et al. v. Prison Fellowship Ministries, et al.*, 432 F. Supp. 2d 832 (2006).

<sup>97</sup> Georgina Wates to Peter Walker, 26 Nov. 2002, “ST” folder, Prison Fellowship England and Wales Archives (in possession of Prison Fellowship England and Wales), London; Georgina Wates to Trustees, 25 April 2003, attached with “Minutes of Meeting of the Trustees,” 14 April 2003, Board Minutes, Prison Fellowship England and Wales Archives (in possession of Prison Fellowship England and Wales), London.

<sup>98</sup> On the PCS see Beckford and Gilliat, *Religion in Prison*, 25–34; William Noblett, “A Multi-faith Prison Chaplaincy: A Paradigm Shift?” *Crucible*, July–Sept. 1999, 154–67.

<sup>99</sup> Jonathan Petre, “Prison Service Axes Christian Course,” *Daily Telegraph*, 8 July 2006, at [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1523355/Prison-service-axes-Christian-course.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1523355/Prison-service-axes-Christian-course.html), accessed 30 June 2014.

## CONCLUSION

The Dartmoor InnerChange experiment failed in part because PFEW had overwritten the principle established by its own founder, Sylvia Mary Alison, that ministry initiatives by PFI affiliates should be sympathetic to local conditions. PFI had not been intended to function as a mechanism for universalizing the American evangelical example. It was itself a product of transatlantic exchange, as Charles Colson's British interlocutors nourished his interest in solutions to crime that integrated conversionism and intelligent policy reform, modulated his message to conform to the post-American spirit of the Lausanne movement, and insisted that the globalization of his ministry would be more securely advanced by devolving the responsibility for growth to national affiliates than by relying on his own personal mastery of the political arts. Moreover, in many regions of the world, official clearance for in-prison programmes and the staffing of an effective ministry were dependent upon Prison Fellowship committing itself to Christian ecumenism and working through indigenous Catholic or Orthodox clerics and lay volunteers. The organization embraced an ecumenical identity with a measure of genuine enthusiasm, Colson asserting that the broader goal of Christianization more faithfully reflected God's purpose on Earth than any effort by evangelicals to remain untainted in their associations. Yet, as the experiences with InnerChange demonstrated, a residual tension persisted: between the principle of self-determination and the appeal of American leadership, between the ethos of inclusiveness and the force of evangelical conviction. InnerChange may have emerged from an engagement with Catholic partners in Latin America, but the model was attractive to Prison Fellowship because it offered an opportunity to expose prison inmates, without pluralist diversions, to a totalizing evangelical vision of what God wanted them to be. Against the evidence of Prison Fellowship's commitment to the devolution of authority and to co-creativity in its relations with global affiliates, the IFI programme told its captive subjects that there was only one righteous way of being in the world.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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