MEADVILLE LOMBARD THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL

THE SUPPORT TRIAD:
USING AGRICULTURE AND LIBERAL SPIRITUAL DIRECTION
FOR IMPROVED OUTCOMES FROM CARCERAL PEER SUPPORT

A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO

THE MEADVILLE LOMBARD THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL FACULTY

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MAY 2026

Meadville Lombard Theological School

Doctor of Ministry in Social Justice Leadership

Following the completion of a successful oral exam, this Doctor of Ministry project is awarded a Pass by the Project Committee appointed for Jane E. Davis.

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May 1, 2026

Date Approved

ABSTRACT

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Institution: Meadville Lombard Theological School
Degree Received: Doctor of Ministry
Title: The Support Triad: Using Agriculture and Liberal Spiritual Direction for Improved Outcomes from Carceral Peer Support
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The recidivism rate in New Mexico is much higher than the national average. This project argues that the use of a combination of effective reentry techniques will increase the efficacy of the demonstrated success of these efforts used separately. This research proposes an integrated support triad that brings together three evidence-based practices: peer support, pluralistic spiritual development, and agricultural therapy. Each of these approaches has demonstrated effectiveness when implemented independently, yet each also exhibits limitations. This model positions peer support workers, particularly those with lived experience of incarceration, as facilitators of spiritual development within an ecological, land-based context. In doing so, it offers a holistic, relational, and regenerative framework for reentry that aligns with emerging research on health, wellbeing, and desistance. The work outlines the rationale for this integration, examines the evidence supporting each component, and articulates how their combination can more effectively promote resilience, permit redemption, and support long-term flourishing and desistance.

Dedicated to Rae, Sinéad, and Sade

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CHAPTER 1:

THE PROBLEM

My current and future ministry was born from a jail cell. Growing up Black, gay, female, and poor in the Southern United States, I learned early to survive by logic, discipline, and emotional suppression. An education and career in engineering provided stability but was not in alignment with the Unitarian Universalist values I adopted as a young adult and I struggled to cope with this dissonance. Alcohol became a coping mechanism until it became a crisis. This crisis included incarceration. My own encounters with incarceration, substance use, and the justice system forced a reckoning. In the contemplative environment imposed by my incarceration, through a simple program called Living Free, I confronted the cognitive dissonance between my career and my principles. I chose a new path, a ministry of service to those entangled in the carceral system and those struggling with substance abuse.

My call to service and my personal experience provide the theological and experiential grounding of this research. I have, in following the call to support this population, joined an organization in New Mexico where I support those returning to our communities from incarceration. I now serve as a manager of a program that assists those returning to our communities after imprisonment. The program model involves hiring returning citizens who have displayed successful re-entry and training them in basic case management and peer support so they can guide others who are newly released and struggling to assimilate into community. Through this work, I have become deeply aware of the realities of the current carceral situation.

During my service to this population, I observed that those who are incarcerated are then released into community under the supervision of probation and parole officers with little spiritual development guidance to prepare them for such a major transition. Instead, upon return,

they are assigned a list of predominately temporal requirements. These requirements include the acquisition of such things as: housing, employment, and vital documentation. Often, they will also be engaged with reuniting with the families that they may have been away from for 2 years, 10 years, 25 years, or more. They are tasked with these requirements in a world that looks very different from the world they left and this world is not particularly welcoming to people with an incarceration history. Also, quite often, this population had substance abuse issues when they went into incarceration and some have developed substance use issues while incarcerated.

Added to this are disheartening statistics about the size and future of this population. According to the 2024 New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee, The New Mexico Corrections Department (NMCD), as of FY24, oversees an average population of 5,864 incarcerated individuals. The Probation and Parole division supervises an additional 13.5 thousand offenders. This report adds that 40 percent of those released from prison will return within three years. This is well above the national average. The report goes on to note that recidivism remains high, indicating that skills-building and substance-use recovery programs in prison, as well as programs in the community, are falling short. This committee concludes that reducing recidivism will require a holistic approach that utilizes data and evidence to improve programming in prison, as well as in community supervision and post-incarceration programming.[1]

To address this situation with the New Mexico carceral population, my research aims to promote the creation of reentry programs that provide a deeper, more stable foundation for individuals returning to their communities after incarceration. Though physical needs are

[1] New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee, *Corrections and Reentry: Program Evaluation Report* (New Mexico Legislature, December 9, 2024), https://www.nmlegis.gov/handouts/ALFC%20120924%20Item%209%20Corrections%20Reentry.pdf.

important, successful reentry requires more than meeting physical needs such as education, healthcare, employment, housing, and basic socialization. It also requires healing from the oppression experienced before incarceration and the additional harms accumulated during their time in carceral institutions. This healing is fundamentally spiritual. It involves cultivating purpose, meaning, and resilience, capacities that enable individuals to navigate communities that often did not value them before incarceration and value them even less upon their return.

A disturbing reality is that criminal justice theory identifies several goals of a justice system, including rehabilitation. Research consistently shows that deterrence and prevention are largely ineffective.[2] This indicates that rehabilitation is the least accomplished goal of the current system. Punishment and retribution remain the primary outcomes. The dominant experience of incarceration is not rehabilitation but punishment. Upon release, they enter the community under the supervision of a probation or parole officer and are expected to quickly regain or develop personal efficacy. Yet, they are offered very little in the way of spiritual support for developing this efficacy. Instead, the emphasis is placed on meeting the requirements for basic, temporal reintegration.

The definition of spirituality I am using is: "an aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred."[3] In this sense, spirituality encompasses a wide range of personal beliefs and practices focused on finding meaning, purpose, and connection to something larger than oneself. It's not necessarily

[2] New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee, *Policy Spotlight: Update on Crime in New Mexico and Bernalillo County* (New Mexico Legislature, July 15, 2024), https://www.nmlegis.gov/handouts/ALFC%20071524%20Item%202%20Policy%20Spotlight%20-%20Bernalillo%20County%20Criminal%20Justice%20System%20Update.pdf.

[3] Christina Puchalski, Betty Ferrell, Rose Virani, Shirley Otis-Green, Pamela Baird, and Janet Bull, "Improving the quality of spiritual care as a dimension of palliative care: The report of the consensus conference," *Journal of Palliative Medicine,* 12 no. 10 (2009): 885–904.

tied to organized religion, though it can be. Different forms of spirituality exist, including those rooted in specific religious traditions, like Christianity, Judaism, or Hinduism, as well as those that are more individual and eclectic.

So, how is recidivism a spiritual problem? Its expression is found in many spiritual contexts. The Christian heritage part of my Unitarian Universalist theology has scripture associated with this issue**.** Ezekiel 34:4: rebukes leaders: "You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally." Psalm 147:3 states, in contrast to neglectful leaders: God is described as the one who "heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." My Unitarian Universalist theology tells me that **r**ecidivism is a spiritual problem in that it has a complex relationship with justice, inherent worth, and redemption. These issues involve both the individual and the community. On an individual level, it is about how an individual, after having fallen outside the covenant (law) of their community, addresses justice, finds worth, and finds redemption. On the community level, it is about how a community addresses the justice and covenantal aspects of its community and how it addresses the concepts of redemption of its members who have fallen out of covenant.

An integral part of the spiritual aspect of this issue is that it a justice issue. This problem has a disproportionate impact on marginalized populations. In New Mexico, the incarcerated population consists of a percentage of Native and Hispanic individuals that is disproportionate to the percentage in the state population. This reflects longstanding structural inequities and systemic patterns of over-policing and under-resourcing. As a result, the people returning to the

community from incarceration are often those who have already experienced generational marginalization.[4]

These patterns of marginalization are shaped by social, cultural, institutional, geographic, theological, and socioeconomic forces. Socially, failed reentry destabilizes families and communities. Culturally, incarceration disproportionately affects marginalized populations. Institutionally, the criminal justice system often functions in ways that undermine successful completion of supervision. Geographically, New Mexico's minority-majority population and prison gerrymandering intensify inequities. Theologically, systems that punish without offering redemption violate the inherent worth and dignity of human beings and reinforce the illusion of separation from nature. Socioeconomically, incarceration both stems from and deepens poverty, limiting access to employment and stability.

Another contributing factor to the spiritual nature of this issue is that it involves substance use and disrupted treatment. This involves another intersecting marginalized population. Many incarcerated individuals enter custody with substance use disorders, and some develop new substance use issues while incarcerated due to the availability of illicit substances. Although MOUD (Medication for Opioid Use Disorder) is increasingly provided, it is often offered without accompanying counseling or treatment. Upon release, individuals may lose access to medication, leading to dangerous withdrawal and destabilization.[5]

[4] New Mexico Sentencing Commission, *Profile of the New Mexico Prison Population: FY 2024* (Albuquerque, NM: New Mexico Sentencing Commission, January 2025), https://nmsc.unm.edu/reports/2025/profile-of-new-mexico-prison-population-fy-2024.pdf.

[5] New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee, *Corrections and Reentry: Program Evaluation Report* (New Mexico Legislature, December 9, 2024), https://www.nmlegis.gov/handouts/ALFC%20120924%20Item%209%20Corrections%20Reentry.pdf.

Additionally, a multifaceted exacerbation to this spiritual aspect of this problem involves the inherent worth and dignity of the individual and the underlying need for healing[6] from oppression, healing from violations of one's principles, healing from code-switching, healing from family and community separation, and healing from physical and nutritional harm. Incarcerated individuals may experience dehumanization from correctional staff and from other incarcerated individuals. This environment reinforces shame, fear, and internalized stigma. Healing requires addressing the emotional and spiritual wounds created by this oppression. Many individuals experience trauma not only from external events but from violating their own moral principles. Being arrested, incarcerated, or labeled a "felon" can create profound moral injury. The behaviors required for survival in prison, dishonesty, emotional suppression, hypervigilance, or gang affiliation, may conflict with pre-incarceration values. This moral dissonance can produce PTSD-like symptoms that require intentional healing. Also, survival in prison often requires code switching to adopt a behavioral code that discourages trust, vulnerability, and help-seeking. Upon release, individuals must shift to a community-based code that values openness, cooperation, and emotional expression. This transition is psychologically demanding and requires healing support. Additionally, incarceration disrupts family relationships and community belonging. Some individuals maintain contact with loved ones, while others are abandoned or disowned. Rebuilding these relationships, or grieving their loss, requires emotional and spiritual healing. Incarceration often results in diminished access to healthcare, mental health

[6] Prison Policy Initiative, "Research Roundup: Incarceration Can Cause Lasting Damage to Mental Health," *Prison Policy Initiative*, May 13, 2021, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/05/13/mentalhealthimpacts/.

services, proper nutrition, and physical activity. Individuals may return to the community with a need to heal from untreated conditions, worsened health, and nutritional deficits[7].

Furthermore, recidivism is a spiritual problem because it involves desistance as defined in the Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology: "Desistance, which in this context means the process by which individuals move from a life that is crime-involved to one that is not. This is better addressed by other fields that address behavioral change."[8] The psychology of spiritual development addresses behavioral change.[9]

This choice of research topic also begs the question: Why does recidivism matter to my Unitarian Universalist ministry? According to the National Institute of Justice, "Recidivism refers to a person's relapse into criminal behavior, often after the person receives sanctions or undergoes intervention for a previous crime." Since 2010, the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts (AOUSC) has routinely defined recidivism as a return to crime by those who have either served a term of supervised release or probation. The United States Supreme Court (USSC) has used the term recidivism to refer to a person's relapse into criminal behavior, often after the person receives sanctions or undergoes intervention for a previous crime.[10] In the context of this project, I am defining ministry as the profession or duties of my Unitarian Universalist ministry. Recidivism matters to this ministry because this ministry is the work of spiritual development and within this spiritual realm are three concepts commonly associated with spirituality. The three concepts are justice, resilience, and having both personal and community access to

[7] Prison Policy Initiative, "Public Health." *Prison Policy Initiative*, accessed April 6, 2026, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/health.html.

[8] Cecelia Klingele, "Measuring Changes from Rates of Recidivism to Markers of Desistance," *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminolog* 109, no. 4 (2019): 769-817.

[9] Sally Sargeant and Jacqui Yoxall, "Psychology and spirituality: Reviewing developments in history, method and practice," *Journal of Religion and Health* 62, no. 2 (2023): 1159-1174.

[10] Kim Steven Hunt and Robert Dumville, *Recidivism among federal offenders: A comprehensive overview*, United States Sentencing Commission, 2016.

atonement and redemption. I am defining personal redemption as being able to feel that one has atoned and is redeemed and community redemption as being part of a community that will accept that an individual has atoned by having served their time and is now redeemed to the extent that they are now in line with the covenant of the community and deserving of all privileges associated with that covenant. My experience over a decade tells me that a pluralist ministry, such as Unitarian Universalism, is needed because my work with the re-entry population has revealed that it is very common to find people in incarceration who have been damaged by organized religion and, as such, have turned away from more prescriptive religions. The evangelical, more prescriptive religions are more available in incarceration because these faith traditions tend to promote proselytization in places of incarceration. If an individual has had a less-than-positive experience with prescriptive religion, when that person is released into the community, they may already be opposed to religion and opposed to spirituality due to the common confusion over the relationship between religion and spirituality. Therefore, it is important to provide a type of support that guides them in their search for meaning and purpose, rather than providing them with a more prescriptive theology that guides them to more prescriptive spiritual practices.[11] This promotion of the free and responsible search for truth is a cornerstone of Unitarian Universalist principles and values.

In addition to the previous response to the question of why this matters to ministry lies the fact that I came to the Southwest area to fulfill the internship part of my call to ministry. That call is to serve the carceral and recovery population. I had not intended to stay in New Mexico when I came to do my internship, but, within the first month, it seemed that my call was being

[11] Pew Research Center, "Prison Chaplains: Bridging the Gap between Religion and Rehabilitation," *Pew Research Center*, March 22, 2012, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/03/22/prison-chaplains-exec/.

refined. It seemed clear that New Mexico is where I need to be. I'm called to be in this area because it has a large population in need of spiritual support, but even more significantly, it has a larger need for spiritual recognition and acknowledgment. Ministers quite often go into a setting with the intent to help and to use the tools that we have to be of service. However, I am reminded of the adage: if all we have is a hammer, then we then everything looks like a nail. When I came here I sincerely felt that what was needed was a Unitarian Universalist liberal progressive presence, forgetting that a part of my Unitarian Universalist faith is also to respect the beliefs of others and to engage in a free and responsible search for truth. With this in mind and the reminder from my community peer support worker training to seek first to understand rather than to be understood, I noticed a couple of things very clearly. I noticed that Pow-Wows are very common, and Albuquerque is the site of the Gathering of Nations Pow Wow, which is North America's largest Indigenous celebration with a history of over 40 years. Also, when I engaged with the recovery population, almost every recovery event that I attended contained a Pow Wow. I found that Pow-Wows celebrate the circle of life by bringing communities together to sing, dance, and renew kinship bonds and friendships. I also noticed that there are some traditions in New Mexico that are integral to the Hispanic community. One of the major celebrations encompasses Day of the Dead. Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) is 3,000-year-old Mexican holiday blending indigenous Aztec rituals with Catholic All Saints' Day.[12]

As I indicated earlier, the predominant prison population is of Hispanic heritage and Native heritage. Therefore, the theology that has most likely influenced the New Mexico carceral population is a Mexican adaptation of Catholicism and a Native spirituality containing some Catholic practices. So, if one is to provide spiritual support for the carceral population, that

[12] Stanley Brandes, "The Day of the Dead, Halloween, and the quest for Mexican national identity," *Journal of American Folklor*e (1998): 359-380.

support should contain aspects of the theology most influential to that population. This is in-line with my Unitarian Universalist principles and values promoting respect for pluralistic spirituality.

It should be noted here that the thing that is conspicuously missing from the attempts at supporting and healing the carceral population of New Mexico is that they have little consideration for the fact that the primary population is Hispanic and Puebloan Native, heavily influenced by Catholicism. However, Evangelical Christian is the most common theology promoted in the prisons.

My ministerial response, method, and plan to address the New Mexico re-entry issue is as follows. Current interventions, such as peer support, spiritual support, and agricultural therapy, each offer benefits but also have limitations when used alone. Each has demonstrated effectiveness, yet each also has limitations when implemented individually. Though it is not often articulated, each of these addresses a deeper spiritual issue and is grounded in theological concepts. Peer support provides credibility and relational grounding and supports the concept of the inherent worth and dignity of every individual through its underlying message of redemption, but usually does not incorporate deeper spiritual resilience. Spiritual support directly addresses the spiritual as it fosters meaning-making and identity transformation through the search for truth. Agricultural therapy offers embodied healing and connection to land and incorporates the spiritual concepts interdependence, as it reminds us that we are connected to the earth and the universe.

My claim is that integrating these three approaches will combine their individual strengths and components of spirituality and also address their individual shortcomings, creating a more holistic and transformative model of reentry. This integrated approach addresses both the

external and internal needs of returning citizens, thus increasing the likelihood of successful probation, reducing recidivism, and increasing desistance in New Mexico.

The line of reasoning guiding this study is straightforward:

1. Peer support increases the likelihood of successful probation outcomes.
2. Spiritual development further enhances these outcomes by fostering meaning, identity transformation, and resilience.
3. Agricultural engagement is a powerful means of cultivating spiritual development through embodied practice and connection to land.

In naming this supportive combination, I am borrowing from another minister. Her name is, Nadia Bolz Weber and she refers to a load-bearing structure as something that will bear the load when things get inherently heavy, as they will in life and especially in difficult situations. When I consider such a structure, a triangle comes to mind because the triangle is, in fact, arguably the most stable shape. A metaphorical triangle for the reentry population contains peer support, spiritual development, and agricultural grounding. This is a load-bearing support triangle or triad.

Theologically, my Unitarian Universalist beliefs are heavily influenced by another triad, three major concepts: the inherent worth and dignity of every individual, the concept of a free and responsible search for truth, and the interdependence of all that is. The load-bearing support triad is grounded in this theology. The use of peer support reinforces the concept of the inherent worth and dignity of every individual through its underlying message of redemption. Spiritual direction embodies the concept of a free and responsible search for truth, and agricultural therapy shows us the interdependence of all that is and reminds us that we are connected to the earth and the universe.

When considering the demographics of an area where one is going to serve, one must adjust the ministry to the theology of that demographic. The spiritual support I am proposing is grounded not just in my Unitarian Universalist theology but also in the theologies of those I serve. More significantly, because of this, it can be shared and discussed in terms of a common theology and in terms of the theology of those in need of healing. This means that implementation of the support will require listening to, learning from, and enlisting the assistance of those whom I serve.

This research seeks to articulate, support, and operationalize this support triad and this common theology as a pathway toward healing, redemption, and sustainable reentry. In Chapter 2, I provide a body of evidence supporting the efficacy of peer support, spiritual support, and agricultural support. In Chapter 3, I describe my personal observation of a program using these three forms of re-entry support. In Chapter 4, I present the argument as to how this triad effectively heals, redeems, and transforms individuals and communities.

CHAPTER 2:

CURRENT RESEARCH

2.1 Peer Support

Peer support plays a significant role in facilitating successful re-entry for individuals leaving incarceration by providing social and emotional support, modeling positive behaviors, and guiding them through the complexities of reintegration. When I first began providing peer support for a Managed Care Organization (MCO), I immediately noticed how differently people responded once they realized I had lived through similar struggles. As soon as that shared experience became evident, their posture shifted, they listened more openly, trusted more quickly, and received my guidance as something authentic rather than clinical. I had seen the same dynamic in self-help and recovery groups: the moment I identified myself as someone who carried similar trauma and history, people lowered their guard. They were no longer speaking to a professional outsider; they were speaking to someone who understood them from the point of view of shared experience.

Clearly, we are not strangers to the value of shared experience as peer support. It is woven into the fabric of our daily lives. It shows up in our families, our neighborhoods, our social circles, and the vocations and callings we pursue. We naturally look for support from those who share our experiences. We look to them for guidance, especially when navigating unfamiliar situations. When we move into a new neighborhood, we learn the norms and expectations by observing and engaging with those already rooted there. When we begin a new job, we rely on coworkers to show us where to park, how to complete administrative tasks, and how to avoid unspoken pitfalls. These everyday exchanges are forms of peer support, grounded in shared experience and mutual learning.

Peer support is now widely integrated across many areas of life, but it is especially prevalent in contexts where individuals face stigma, isolation, or the need for healing. People who have endured experiences that carry social judgment often struggle with diminished self-esteem and a sense of disconnection. In these settings, peer support offers a uniquely powerful intervention. It reduces isolation, normalizes difficult emotions, and provides a relational bridge back into community. A substantial body of research, summarized in widely accepted publications, documents both the conceptual foundations and the demonstrated efficacy of peer support as a mode of healing.

Also, peer support is broadly accepted in Human Services fields. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) released a document that highlights how peer support can be utilized at any point throughout the crisis continuum. It is called the Sequential Intercept Model (SIM). This guidance outlines best practices for integrating peer workers into crisis systems and identifies opportunities for improvement and expansion. SAMHSA's findings consistently highlight the importance of standardized training, clear core competencies, and accessible tools and curricula to ensure that peer support workers can operate effectively and safely within crisis systems.[1]

The paragraphs below explain the intersection between the Sequential Intercept Model and Peer Support Workers (PSWs). It should be noted here that this is not strictly linear and members of the carceral population may loop back through various stages.

Intercept 0 is the community services (pre-justice involvement) stage. This intercept focuses on preventing initial justice system contact. Peer support at this stage may include

[1] Amy Brinkley and Justin Volpe, *Peer Support Services Across the Crisis Continuum*, Publication No. PEP24-01-019, (Rockville, MD, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2024).

community outreach, crisis lines, crisis response teams, support groups, and other community-based services. PSWs help individuals stabilize before problems escalate, reducing the likelihood of future criminal-legal involvement.

Intercept 1 is the law enforcement and emergency services stage. Intercepts 0 and 1 share a prevention focus. At this stage, PSWs collaborate with law enforcement and emergency responders to support individuals whose interactions stem from mental health or substance use challenges. Their presence can de-escalate encounters, provide immediate emotional support, and connect individuals to treatment rather than incarceration.

Intercept 2 is the initial Detention and court hearings stage. This stage includes arrest, detention, arraignment, and pretrial processes. At this stage, PSWs help individuals understand the legal process, including arrest procedures, detention expectations, bail, and pretrial release. They can advocate for individuals with behavioral health needs and connect them to stabilizing services.

Intercept 3 is the stage after adjudication, involving jails and courts. At this stage, in treatment courts (e.g., drug courts, mental health courts), PSWs support participants through the structured requirements of recovery-oriented judicial programs. In jails, PSWs may be incarcerated individuals trained to support peers or external PSWs who visit to provide mentoring, coping skills, and emotional support.

Intercept 4 is the re-entry stage. This intercept focuses on the transition from incarceration back into the community. At this stage, PSWs help returning citizens navigate housing, employment, healthcare, benefits, and other essential services. Their lived experience provides credibility and hope during a period often marked by instability and stigma.

Intercept 5 is the Community Corrections and Supervision (Probation & Parole) stage. At this stage, PSWs assist individuals in meeting supervision requirements, managing stressors, and accessing community resources. Their ongoing support can reduce technical violations and strengthen long-term stability. This should not be considered a terminal stage because individuals may loop back to previous stages depending on their degree of success with supervision and desistance.

In summary, the Sequential Intercept Model illustrates the various points at which individuals encounter the criminal justice system and identifies opportunities for meaningful peer support at each stage. For returning citizens, peers with lived experience offer a critical sounding board for processing guilt, isolation, and the challenges of reentering communities that may not initially welcome their return. Their presence provides hope, models possibility, and demonstrates that successful reintegration is achievable.

Adding to this, a study published in 2018 in the American Psychological Association Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal[2] explored how peer specialists with criminal justice histories enact their lived experience in practice. The researchers found that peers provide alternative, nontraditional forms of support that emphasize companionship, mutuality, and hope. By sharing their pasts, peers "transcended expectations" of what individuals with incarceration histories can achieve, offering clients both inspiration and concrete strategies for overcoming hardship.

This study provides strong qualitative arguments for why peer support, especially from people with incarceration histories, is not just helpful but uniquely effective. The study shows that peers' histories of incarceration, mental illness, homelessness, and substance use become core competencies that enhance service delivery. This directly supports the use of peer support

[2] Stacey L. Barrenger, Emily K. Hamovitch, and Melissa R. Rothman, "Enacting lived experiences: Peer specialists with criminal justice histories," *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal* 42, no. 1 (2019): 9.

by reframing lived experience as a specialized form of expertise that traditional providers cannot replicate.

The study also highlights that peer support specialists play a crucial role in helping returning citizens secure the foundational elements necessary for stability. These supports are often the difference between successful reintegration and rapid destabilization. Peers help individuals navigate bureaucratic systems, complete applications, attend appointments, and overcome the logistical barriers that frequently derail reentry efforts. Their guidance is grounded not only in knowledge of available resources but also in firsthand experience of the obstacles returning citizens routinely face.

This study also observes that peer support contributes to skill development by encouraging participation in educational, vocational, and therapeutic programs. This engagement helps individuals build marketable skills while simultaneously addressing the stigma and emotional burdens associated with returning from incarceration. Peers model persistence, resilience, and self-advocacy. These qualities are essential for navigating environments that may be skeptical or unwelcoming toward people with criminal histories.

Additionally, the study documents how peers frequently serve as a bridge between returning citizens and the justice system, helping to translate expectations, reduce misunderstandings, and support compliance with legal requirements. Their presence can humanize interactions with probation officers, courts, and service providers, reducing the fear and confusion that often accompany these encounters. By enhancing communication and offering emotional grounding, peers help individuals navigate processes that might otherwise feel overwhelming.

More broadly, this study underscores that reentry programs that incorporate peer support consistently demonstrate stronger treatment engagement, higher recovery rates, and reduced rearrest. Peers not only advocate for the individuals they serve but also contribute to broader systemic and policy reforms by elevating the voices and experiences of returning citizens. Their dual role of supporting individuals while informing systems positions them as essential contributors to more humane and effective reentry practices.

Following are two examples of research similar to the Barrenger and colleges research that also address the use of peer support involving marginalized populations with a large intersectionality with the carceral population. One study involves those with mental health diagnoses and the other involves veterans. The first is research paper in the Prison Journal (TPJ), a peer-reviewed academic journal published by SAGE Publishing, written by Portillo, Goldberg, and Taxman[3] The research studied peer support workers, called peer navigators, working with individuals returning from prison who had diagnosed mental illnesses. Their findings reveal that peer workers influence not only client outcomes but also organizational culture and community relationships. The document states, "peer navigators play multiple roles that extend beyond the client level by influencing the organization and its interaction with the community." This broader impact suggests that peer support is not simply an add-on service; it is a structural intervention that reshapes how agencies understand and engage with justice-involved populations. Although the study focused on individuals with mental health diagnoses, its implications extend to the broader returning-citizen population, where trauma and behavioral health challenges are similarly prevalent.

[3]Shannon Portillo, Victoria Goldberg, and Faye S. Taxman, "Mental health peer navigators: Working with criminal justice–involved populations," *The Prison Journal* 97, no. 3 (2017): 318-341.

Additionally, the article identifies three major interrelated roles of peer support within a reentry-focused mental health program. These roles operate at different levels. The operation levels are individual, organizational, and community. and together they illustrate why peers can be transformative in reentry work. At the individual level, peer navigators serve as living examples of successful reentry, especially for clients who share both criminal-justice involvement and mental health diagnoses. The key functions of these peers at the individual level are: to demonstrate that stability, employment, and recovery are possible; to provide "authentic empathy" grounded in lived experience; and to offer practical guidance on navigating life after incarceration. This article noted that clients repeatedly described peers as "inspirational," "a mentor," "someone to look up to," and even "lifelong friends." One client said of Paul, a peer support worker: "He's been out there and done that, and he can walk you through the way you're supposed to live to stay out of the system." At the organizational and community levels, peer navigators connect clients to the web of services required for successful reentry. The key functions of these peers at these levels are: to link clients to housing, benefits, mental health care, employment, and transportation; to navigate bureaucracies that are often hostile or confusing; and to represent the organization in community settings and build partnerships. Together, these roles at the three different levels show that peer navigators are not simply "helpers" or "case aides." They are identity models, trust builders, and systems connectors.

The second study published in Heath and Justice Journal, a peer-reviewed scholarly journal published by Springer Nature and focused on original research related to the health and well-being of justice-involved populations[4] The study examined an intensive peer support

[4] Justeen Hyde, Thomas Byrne, Beth Ann Petrakis, Vera Yakovchenko, Bo Kim, Graeme Fincke, and Rendelle Bolton et al, "Enhancing community integration after incarceration: findings from a prospective study of an intensive peer support intervention for veterans with an historical comparison group," *Health & Justice* 10, no. 1 (2022): 33.

intervention for veterans returning from incarceration. It found significant improvements in healthcare engagement, housing stability, and reduced recidivism. As the document notes, "augmenting reentry support through intensive peer support appears to have substantial benefits for veterans including housing and recidivism." Although focused on veterans, the findings are highly relevant to returning citizens more broadly, given the shared prevalence of trauma, PTSD, and social isolation. The study demonstrates that flexible, relationship-centered peer support can meet the diverse and evolving needs of individuals navigating reentry.

In addition to this, the study provides strong empirical, practical, and theoretical justification for peer support in reentry. It does this in several distinct ways. The findings from the article indicate that peer support dramatically increases engagement in behavioral health care. The most striking finding is the enormous difference in substance use and mental health treatment engagement: 86% of peer-supported veterans accessed substance use treatment vs. 19% in the comparison group, and 93% accessed mental health care vs. 64% in the comparison group. These differences are statistically significant and substantial. The authors explicitly noted that "Participants in the intervention were significantly more likely to receive substance use treatment and that engagement in mental health services was greater for the intervention group." This demonstrates that peers are uniquely effective at helping returning citizens overcome barriers to care, something traditional reentry staff have struggled to achieve. Additional findings from this article indicate that peers provide intensive, relational, and logistical support that traditional staff cannot. The study documents 435 encounters, with peers offering social and emotional support in 100% of encounters; transportation in 88% of post-release encounters; appointment preparation in 81%; accompaniment to appointments in 65%; and help obtaining

documents, clothing, and basic needs. The authors state: “These types of intensive, social and logistical supports were critical to the success of the intervention.”

Additionally, data from the research indicate that peer support improves long-term stability: housing and recidivism. The outcomes are impressive: 84% of participants released for over a year were in permanent housing; recidivism was 7%, far below that state's average of 17%. From this, the authors conclude: “Augmenting reentry assistance through the use of an intensive peer support intervention appears to have substantial benefits including housing and recidivism.” Arguably, this shows that peer support is not just about emotional encouragement. It produces measurable structural outcomes.

Furthermore, the authors identify that peers leverage lived experience to motivate engagement and model success. The authors highlight that forensic peer specialists: “Have navigated many of the challenges that returning citizens face and serve as an inspirational reminder that recovery is possible.”

The authors clearly highlight that peers support increases engagement in substance use and mental health treatment; provides intensive, flexible, relational support; improves housing stability and reduces recidivism; builds trust and credibility through lived experience; offers continuity across the entire reentry process; and addresses emotional, logistical, and practical barriers

The above examples involved the use of peer support involving marginalized populations with a large intersectionality with the carceral population. The populations were those with mental health diagnoses and veterans. Further research has explored how peer relationships shape participants’ internal experiences involving their confidence, motivation, and sense of agency. The findings underscore that peer support is not merely a service delivery mechanism; it

is a relational process that fosters identity change, resilience, and long-term desistance from crime.

These next two studies move beyond the traditional emphasis on recidivism reduction by examining the subjective, internal changes that occur when returning citizens engage in peer-mentor support. The first of these two studies, is a study published in the Journal of Offender Rehabilitation, a peer-reviewed journal published by Routledge (Taylor and Francis) focused on research involving criminal justice[5]. These authors examined a community-based job training program and found that peer mentorship played a central role in participants' personal transformation. They highlight, "Peer mentorship, structure, and self-empowerment were the most effective aspects of the program.".

The findings provide qualitative evidence that peer support addresses stigma, isolation, and low self-efficacy, as evidenced by the fact that surveys of graduates of the program described peers as uniquely able to understand their struggles without judgment.

Second, the research demonstrates that peer support enhances the effectiveness of evidence-based practices. The study explicitly states that the presence of formerly incarcerated staff increases the impact of cognitive-behavioral and structural components: "If an effective programmatic element is included in a program, the effectiveness of that element might be increased if individuals with a shared history are included in the delivery."

Additionally, the authors found that formerly incarcerated staff created a level of trust that traditional staff could not. Graduates repeatedly emphasized that peers were easier to talk to, more relatable, and nonjudgmental: "They know where I come from, so I felt comfortable saying

[5] E. Matthews, R. Bowman, G. Whitbread, and R. Johnson, "DC Central Kitchen: Peer mentoring, structure and self-empowerment play a critical role in desistance," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 59, no. 1 (2020): 22–43.

or talking about anything with them." Legitimacy emerged because peers embodied the possibility of change. This is a classic "wounded healer" dynamic where lived experience becomes a source of authority and hope.

The second of these two studies was published in the Journal of Social Service Research, a peer reviewed academic journal focusing on social work and social services[6] As this document notes, "the intent of this study was to go beyond the common focus of the use of peer support in mitigating the risks of recidivism." The study found statistically significant improvements in self-esteem, hope, and key dimensions of self-identity, including self-knowledge, self-awareness, and self-reflection. These findings highlight that peer support fosters the internal transformation necessary for long-term prosocial change, a dimension often overlooked in quantitative evaluations of reentry programs.

This article also provides strong empirical and theoretical justification for peer support, especially for returned citizens, by showing that peer mentoring is not only beneficial for mentees but also for mentors themselves. The study found statistically significant improvements across several dimensions of mentor personal development. They demonstrated increased self-esteem, greater hope, and deeper self-knowledge, along with enhanced self-awareness and capacity for self-reflection. They also showed measurable growth in their ability to engage in self-care, indicating a broad and meaningful pattern of psychological and emotional strengthening. The authors write that the training "revealed a statistically significant improvement in subjective factors, including self-esteem, level of hope, and elements of self-identity change behaviors." These subjective factors are widely recognized in desistance

[6] Mayra Lopez-Humphreys, and Barbra Teater, "'It's what's on the inside that counts': A pilot study of the subjective changes among returned citizens participating in a peer-mentor support initiative," *Journal of Social Service Research* 46, no. 6 (2020): 741-755.

research as drivers of long-term behavior change. By showing that peer mentors themselves experience these shifts, the study demonstrates that peer support is a powerful tool for identity transformation. Additionally, the authors note that returned citizens often carry trauma and stigma, and that peer support addresses the internal injuries of incarceration, which can increase stressors that cause a relapse into old patterns and behaviors.

Also based on this evidence, the study argues that peer mentors should be treated as "community assets to be resourced, rather than merely liabilities to be supervised." This is a powerful policy argument for integrating peer support into reentry systems. This study supports peer support by showing that returned citizens benefit from generative helping roles.

The above two studies speak to the spiritual concept of the search for truth as it presents as meaning-making, and the search for meaning, identity, and purpose. This search applies to both sides of the peer relationship.

An additional study was published in the International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, a peer-reviewed journal Published by SAGE publishing and focusing on criminology and the treatment of offenders. [7] This qualitative study examined how peer reentry specialists use their lived experience to support clients across multiple life domains. As this work notes, "results from this study suggested that peer reentry specialists leveraged and applied lived experiences to support client reentry." Peers assisted clients in accessing substance use and mental health treatment, securing housing, and obtaining employment, often functioning similarly to case managers but with the added credibility of shared experience. The study concluded that peers have the potential to reduce recidivism by addressing the underlying factors

[7] Jennifer M Reingle Gonzalez, Rachel E Rana, Katelyn K Jetelina, and Madeline H Roberts, "The value of lived experience with the criminal justice system: A qualitative study of peer re-entry specialists," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 63, no. 10 (2019): 1861-1875.

that contribute to criminal behavior. This study also identified that peers improve housing outcomes, one of the strongest predictors of recidivism. Housing is repeatedly identified as the most urgent and difficult need. Peers' lived experience helps them empathize and advocate effectively. One peer shared, "Being homeless is not easy and I was homeless for two years. Finally, we were able to get her into an apartment and it's an amazing transformation." The article concludes, "Peers leveraged their lived experiences to locate housing, to address the problems that lead to crime and rearrest." This directly supports peer support as a recidivism-reduction strategy.

This study highlights that peers model a new identity and inspire hope. Peers describe how their own transformation becomes a catalyst for clients' belief in their own possibility: "Makes someone an amazing person because they have lived it, overcame it, and now they're giving back." This supports peer support as a mechanism of identity reconstruction, a core element of long-term desistance. Uniquely, peer specialists use intentional self-disclosure to create authentic, non-hierarchical relationships, something the authors identify as a defining mechanism of peer support. One peer said, "I cannot do my job without disclosing… I would be just like every other clinician." This supports peer support by showing that shared experience is the gateway to engagement, especially for people who distrust systems due to trauma, coercion, or criminal justice involvement. Peers serve as living proof that recovery and desistance are possible, something traditional providers cannot model. One peer said, "Here I am, and if I'm here, you can also do the same thing." Another noted that seeing a formerly incarcerated worker before release showed him "they can do the same thing. They do not have to panic when they come out." This supports peer support by demonstrating that hope is transmitted through identification, not instruction.

The article champions peer support by demonstrating that lived experience itself functions as a form of expertise, and that disclosure and authenticity are essential for building trust. It shows that peers are able to engage people whom traditional providers often struggle to reach, and that hope is transmitted most effectively through identification rather than instruction. The findings also emphasize that peer support reduces coercion, enhances dignity, and that peers with incarceration histories offer unique and irreplaceable contributions to the healing process. This study revealed a spiritual underlayment of inherent worth and dignity where peers on both sides were able to benefit from the self-disclose of the peer support workers and find value in even their punitive life experiences. Cumulatively, the research reviewed in this subsection demonstrates that peer support is not merely an adjunct to reentry services but a transformative intervention that reshapes both individual trajectories and system-level practices. Research has shown that peer support can lead to lower recidivism rates, increased engagement with services, and improved psychological well-being. The collective findings across diverse studies — spanning mental health, employment programs, veteran reentry, and general returning-citizen populations — consistently affirm this conclusion.

In summary this study provided measurable positive results from the human interaction and support however, these interactions qualify as evidence of the spiritual concepts of inherent worth and dignity, interdependence, and the search for truth. The fact that people respond positively to interactions with those with whom they feel an empathetic connection implies that their success is dependent on the success of others and this is the tangible evidence of the spiritual concept of interdependence.

2.2 Spiritual Support

Most of the studies in the previous section of this chapter did not directly address the underlying spiritual aspects of peer support. However, this subsection will spotlight the evidence for the efficacy of the use of spiritual support in re-entry. A central aim of this project is to restore what trauma often strips away: the sense of oneself as a spiritual being with a birthright to respect and belonging. Spirituality can be seen as a lost birthright for trauma-impacted individuals. Many returning citizens have relinquished this birthright due to harmful religious experiences, shame, or systems that define them solely by their offenses. SAMHSA recognizes spirituality as a core dimension of wellness, describing it as the aspect of life concerned with meaning and purpose. Without this foundation, individuals rely solely on the external resources of people, places, and things. These external resources are inherently fallible and temporary. Spiritual grounding, by contrast, offers stability that is intrinsic, enduring, and resilient.

First, to identify some basics related to spirituality in this context, spirituality encompasses a wide range of practices and experiences: meditation, prayer, time in nature, artistic expression, community involvement, social justice work, and quiet reflection. Spiritual experiences may include awe, wonder, sacredness, or a sense of profound interconnectedness. These practices support mental and physical well-being, enhance self-understanding, and help individuals navigate existential questions about identity, purpose, and belonging. Spirituality is often misunderstood or conflated with religion, yet the two are distinct but related. Religion typically refers to an organized system of shared beliefs and practices, while spirituality is a more personal search for meaning, purpose, and connection to something larger than oneself. In the context of this research, by “spiritual” I mean the human sense of and search for meaning,

purpose, and connection to something larger than oneself. This broader understanding of spirituality is essential when considering its role in healing, recovery, and reentry.

Furthermore, in both carceral and recovery settings, spirituality consistently emerges as a powerful catalyst for healing. Individuals benefit from the spiritual in their efforts at healing of any sort, particularly when they connect with something beyond themselves. This connection supports processes of atonement, redemption, and the release of shame, all of which are central to long-term transformation. The Serenity Prayer, often repeated in recovery circles, captures this spiritual orientation: acceptance of what cannot be controlled, courage to change what can be changed, and wisdom to discern the difference. While simple, this framework reflects a profound spiritual truth: healing requires both surrender and agency. It reminds individuals that they are part of something larger, that life contains forces beyond their control, and that their own growth remains within reach.

Given the supportive potential of spirituality, it plays a significant role in successful reentry by fostering resilience, purpose, and prosocial behavior. It helps individuals cope with stress, reduces reliance on substances, and supports the development of a new identity beyond the label of "offender." Spirituality encourages forgiveness, responsibility, and moral reform, all essential components of desistance. Faith-based and spiritually oriented programs also create community, accountability, and belonging. These networks provide acceptance and support, reducing isolation and offering alternatives to criminal behavior. Research consistently links spirituality to improved mental health, increased happiness, greater resilience, and overall well-being, all of which are vital for reentry success. A substantial body of literature affirms the role of both spiritual and religious support in promoting desistance and well-being among returning citizens.

As mentioned previously, Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber's metaphor of a "load-bearing structure" captures the essential role of spiritual grounding during crisis. In *The Corners*, she describes spiritual foundations as prayer, sacred texts, and relationship with the divine as the internal framework that holds a person upright when everything else is shaking. This structure: provides resilience in times of fear and instability; anchors identity in something unshakeable; and supports recovery, sobriety, and emotional integrity. This metaphor resonates deeply with the reentry experience, where individuals face uncertainty, stigma, and the emotional wilderness of rebuilding a life.

A prime example of research supporting this concept is the study published in Crime and Delinquency Journal, a peer-reviewed journal, published by SAGE Publications and focused on issues involving the criminal justice system.[8] This research found that religiosity is positively associated with prosocial identity and negatively associated with criminal thinking. These are core psychological drivers of desistance. From this study, it was concluded that as religiosity increased, criminal thinking decreased."

Furthermore, the study shows a clear relationship between religiosity and perceived social support: "Religiosity was positively associated with perceived social support." This is significant because social support is one of the most powerful buffers against relapse into crime, homelessness, and substance use. Faith communities often provide accountability, belonging, mentorship, and emotional and practical support.

Additionally, the study found that spirituality supports behavioral stability inside prison, an important precursor to reentry success. Duwe and Johnson provide empirical evidence that

[8] Grant Duwe, and Byron R. Johnson. "New insights for 'what works'? Religiosity and the risk-needs-responsivity model," *Crime & Delinquency* 71, no. 1 (2025): 118-143.

spirituality builds prosocial identity; reduces criminal thinking; increases social support; helps metabolize trauma; stabilizes behavior; and reduces misconduct and recidivism when aligned with identity and support needs.

Additionally, another study, by different authors published in The Journal of Quantitative Criminology, a peer-reviewed journal, published by Springer and focused on quantitative methods in criminology[9] offers some of the clearest empirical evidence that religious support after release is not merely comforting, it is behaviorally protective. This study found that increases in religious support after release protect against substance use and, when combined with baseline religious involvement, reduce offending. Tailoring support to an individual's spiritual meaning-making enhances reentry outcomes. The authors state that, "Findings show that within-individual increases in religious support protect against substance use post-release" This is crucial: it is not just having been religious in prison that matters. It is the ongoing, strengthening spiritual engagement during reentry that supports sobriety. The article explains that spirituality plays a central role in building self-worth, fostering acceptance, strengthening coping skills, nurturing hope, and supporting emotional regulation. These are exactly the internal capacities that buffer against relapse.

Also, the authors note, "Acceptance, self-esteem, empathy, and future hope are all important precursors to change and may be increased by participation in faith-based programs." The article repeatedly emphasizes that spirituality facilitates identity change, which is foundational for long-term desistance. The article states, "Character development that includes a religious or spiritual dimension may facilitate an identity transformation along existential and

[9] Thomas J. Mowen, Richard Stansfield, and John H. Boman IV, "During, after, or both? Isolating the effect of religious support on recidivism during reentry," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 34, no. 4 (2018): 1079-1101.

cognitive dimensions." The authors highlight that spirituality expands prosocial networks, connects individuals to supportive communities, provides moral frameworks that guide behavior, and offers a deep sense of hope and purpose. All of these are essential for desistance.

The article also emphasizes that spirituality offers prosocial peers, community belonging, emotional support, coping strategies, and structured activities: "Religiosity is especially important as it provides a form of social support and coping by connecting individuals to prosocial peers and the faith community."

The article further notes that spirituality helps individuals cope with adversity, maintain hope, manage negative emotions, and navigate uncertainty: "This positive self-identity can serve as a coping mechanism against negative emotions and circumstances, assisting recovering individuals to deal with problems without the use of drugs or alcohol."

The research in this section demonstrates that spirituality, broadly defined, is a powerful protective factor in reentry. It supports identity transformation, emotional healing, resilience, and prosocial behavior. It offers meaning where systems often offer only surveillance, and it restores dignity where stigma has taken root. Whether expressed through religion, nature, art, meditation, or community, spirituality provides the "load-bearing structure" necessary for individuals to rebuild their lives after incarceration.

While spirituality offers a profound source of meaning, resilience, and identity reconstruction for returning citizens, subsection 2.3 will introduce a way in which spiritual, emotional, and peer-based strengths must be supported to produce lasting change.

2.3 Agricultural Support

This subsection will consider the evidence for the efficacy of the use of agricultural re-entry support. In this section of the chapter, I will discuss research supporting the fact that agriculture offers a powerful way for peer support workers and the peers they support to find spiritual grounding by connecting them to the natural cycles of life. This connection fosters qualities such as patience, humility, and purpose. The work of peer support can be demanding, involving deep empathetic engagement with others' traumas and challenges. By working with the earth, peer support workers can find a restorative counterbalance to their intense mental and emotional labor, drawing strength from the predictable rhythms of nature and the tangible results of their care and effort.

Integrating agriculture into a peer support worker's life offers a restorative, grounding practice that goes beyond mere stress relief. By engaging with the earth's cycles, practicing mindful labor, and participating in a communal ecosystem, peer workers can cultivate the patience, resilience, and spiritual depth needed to sustain their compassionate work with others. It is plausible that bringing these three parts together, by providing peer support through peer support workers trained in agricultural, ecology-based spiritual development, would produce a greater reduction in recidivism. Simply watching how things grow, go through seasons, die, and return as new seeds are planted and new things emerge. It seems to be a wonderful analogy for what we go through in our lives as we move through seasons of struggle, rebirth, and renewal. Agricultural work naturally fosters qualities essential for healing and desistance: patience, humility, attentiveness, and reverence for life. The repetitive tasks of planting, weeding, watering, and harvesting mirror meditative practices, helping individuals regulate emotions,

reduce stress, and cultivate presence. These practices offer a restorative counterbalance to the emotional intensity of peer support work and the psychological strain of reentry.

Agriculture also offers a uniquely powerful form of healing, identity reconstruction, and vocational development for returning citizens. Unlike many traditional reentry interventions, agricultural engagement integrates physical activity, meditative practice, ecological awareness, and community participation. Agriculture is an excellent choice for both vocational and spiritual development because it encourages a meditative state through repetitive tasks, connects individuals to the cyclical nature of life and death, and provides a profound sense of purpose and gratitude. This combination of grounding, rhythm, and meaning makes agricultural work particularly well-suited to the needs of individuals navigating the challenges of reentry. Integrating agriculture into peer support work creates a holistic model that addresses the emotional, spiritual, and practical needs of returning citizens. Research strongly supports the idea that bringing these three parts together would produce a greater reduction in recidivism. Agricultural environments provide sensory engagement with the earth that helps reduce anxiety and dissociation, while the meditative and grounding nature of the work calms the nervous system. They connect individuals to the cycles of life and impermanence, supporting deep meaning-making, and the communal labor involved strengthens social bonds and a sense of belonging. These environments also offer visible, tangible accomplishments that reinforce self-efficacy and personal agency.

A study published in the Journal of Offender Rehabilitation[10] provided an example of research documenting the impact of agricultural and horticultural programs on incarcerated and

[10] Jay Stone Rice, and Linda Lremy, "Impact of Horticultural Therapy on Psychosocial Functioning Among Urban Jail Inmates," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 26, no. 3–4 (1998): 169–91, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J076v26n03_10.

formerly incarcerated individuals. In a study documenting results from a program called the Garden Project, participants demonstrated a stronger desire to seek help after release and reported the greatest decrease in drug use. These findings suggest that agricultural engagement enhances help-seeking behavior.

This study demonstrates that horticultural therapy supports re-entry because it directly addresses the psychological wounds, developmental disruptions, and environmental stressors that shape the lives of incarcerated people. The study shows that gardening is not simply an activity, it is a therapeutic, identity-building, and restorative intervention that improves functioning during incarceration and supports healthier transitions back into the community.

The authors cite research showing that restorative environments increase the desire to start new projects. They write, "Patients who participated in restorative activities were more likely to begin new projects after leaving the hospital." The authors argue that inner-city environments themselves contribute to trauma, and that horticulture intervenes at both levels by healing the person, healing the community, and reconnecting individuals to land, nature, and meaning. They add, "The Garden Project shows how horticultural therapy may help create greener environments while cultivating healthy self-development."

Additionally, a notable University of San Francisco capstone thesis[11] highlights the transformative potential of agricultural reentry programs. With respect to formerly incarcerated people, Jefferson writes that such programs "empower them to make a difference within the communities they caused harm" and help participants develop a sense of self, purpose, and agency. These programs embody a strengths-based approach, viewing participants as "people

[11]David J. Jefferson, "Planting seeds for success: An evaluation of agricultural reentry programming for formerly incarcerated individuals" (M.A. thesis, University of San Francisco, 2021), 56, https://repository.usfca.edu/capstone/1201.

full of potential and promise," and fostering entrepreneurship, community advocacy, and food justice leadership.

Also, evaluations from the research show that agricultural re-entry programs reduce impulsivity, aggression, anxiety, depression, irritability, and substance-use cravings. Also noted from this research was that agricultural reentry programs increased confidence, sense of responsibility and purpose, and pride in producing something valuable. Evaluations documented improved teamwork and communication, positive relationships with staff, peers, and community partners, and trust-building through shared labor.

The research also notes that agricultural programs typically emphasize tangible progress (planting, tending, harvesting), which supports the observation that horticulture helps participants practice new life patterns, replacing chaotic or survival-driven habits with grounded, future-oriented routines.

The research further notes that evaluations list that agricultural programs address the employment barrier to re-entry in that they provide increased job skills (equipment use, irrigation, soil science, logistics) and credentials needed for agriculture, landscaping, food systems, or green industries.

The research also shows that agricultural reentry evaluations frequently highlight renewed optimism and a sense of contributing to something larger. Jefferson's research also identifies that many evaluations report lower reincarceration rates, longer periods of community stability, and improved compliance with supervision.

In summary, Jefferson's research argues that evaluations of agricultural reentry programs support horticulture in reentry because they demonstrate that: Horticulture is not merely an

activity; it is a multidimensional intervention that simultaneously repairs identity, stabilizes emotions, builds community, cultivates meaning, and strengthens practical life skills.

Another research project, from the Agriculture and Human Values Journal, the Official Journal of Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society (AFHVS), a peer-reviewed journal, published by Springer[12] concluded that garden and green-job programs create "therapeutic safe spaces," build community, foster agency, and reshape identity.

One of the article's strongest observations is that gardening helps people reclaim their humanity in a system designed to erase it. A Seeds of Freedom Program participant says the garden helps: "keep your personhood within your prisonhood." Staff echo this: "I treat them like a human being, not a number." This supports horticulture in re-entry by enabling people to see themselves as caregivers, contributors, and creators, not offenders. This is an obvious example of the theological concept of the inherent worth and dignity of the individual.

Another thesis research project on participants in the GreenHouse and GreenTeam programs[13] reported that horticultural training provided a positive influence, meaningful employment pathways, and supportive networks. Recidivism rates were significantly lower than state averages, and participants credited the programs with helping them reconnect to community and purpose. The thesis provides empirical, qualitative, and theoretical support for horticulture as an effective reentry intervention. The GreenHouse survey data shows overwhelmingly positive personal transformation among participants. A full 95.3 percent reported increased skill development after their greenhouse work, noting noticeable changes in their abilities and a

[12] Amanda Micek, "Growing behind and beyond bars: an examination of prison gardens and reentry green jobs programs," *Agriculture and Human Values* 42, no. 3 (2025): 1865-1880.

[13] Alison Laichter, "Reentry and the role of bridged programming: Reconnecting former prisoners and their communities" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2008).

growing interest in further learning. Similarly, 90.7 percent reported increased skill development after garden work, and the same percentage indicated that the new knowledge they gained was "important" or "very important." Participants also described meaningful shifts in their personal development, including increased self-confidence, greater patience, and improved emotional regulation.

These findings support horticultural re-entry by showing that horticulture is not just an activity. It is a vehicle for identity reconstruction, a core component of desistance theory. The thesis repeatedly highlights horticulture as a therapeutic environment that supports emotional regulation, stress reduction, and meaning-making. Participants consistently described horticulture as calming, grounding, and transformative; 46% reported feeling "relaxed and less anxious" after garden work, and 42% said they felt "energized and strong and clear-headed." The thesis also provides evidence that horticulture strengthens social bonds and community connections. Interviews showed that horticulture fosters trusting relationships with staff ("They treat you with dignity. They care.") and positive community identity ("People in my neighborhood know what I do. I feel like I'm part of the city.") Participants repeatedly described horticulture as a way to reconnect with community, experience dignity, and be seen as contributors rather than offenders.

This thesis also noted quantitative evidence of reduced recidivism. Nationally, 21.5 percent of people are reconvicted within one year, yet the data show that participants in the GreenHouse and GreenTeam programs experience significantly lower rates. Individuals who participated only in GreenHouse had a one-year reconviction rate of 14.5 percent, while those who engaged in both GreenHouse and GreenTeam showed an even lower rate of 10.2 percent. In addition to these measurable outcomes, the thesis argues that horticulture connects people to

place, provides continuity from incarceration to community life, offers a stable and supportive social environment, and fosters a sense of purpose and contribution.

In summary, the thesis supports horticultural re-entry by showing that horticulture:

Contribution	**Evidence**
Builds skills & confidence	95%+ report skill growth
Supports emotional healing	Participants describe calm, clarity, hope
Strengthens relationships	Staff and peer bonds described as “family”
Reduces recidivism	Rates far below state and national averages
Provides employment	Immediate jobs + long-term careers
Rebuilds identity, community, connection	Participants feel pride, purpose, and belonging

The research cited in this section demonstrates that agricultural engagement offers a multidimensional pathway to healing, identity reconstruction, and successful reentry. It integrates spiritual grounding, emotional regulation, vocational training, and community building. Research consistently shows that agricultural programs reduce substance use, improve psychological well-being, strengthen social bonds, foster purpose and agency, support employment and entrepreneurship, and, in many cases, contribute to lower recidivism. Agriculture reconnects individuals to the earth, to community, and to themselves. It offers a living metaphor for transformation: seeds planted in broken soil can grow into something strong, nourishing, and new. For returning citizens, many of whom have been uprooted, confined, and disconnected, agricultural support provides not only skills and structure but also a profound sense of belonging and possibility.

In summary, taken together, the three domains explored in this chapter, peer support, spiritual support, and agricultural support, reveal a shared truth. Successful reentry is not achieved through material resources alone, nor through surveillance-driven systems, but through interventions that honor the full humanity of returning citizens. Each subsection has demonstrated that healing and desistance emerge most powerfully when individuals are supported relationally, spiritually, and ecologically. Peer support can lead to lower recidivism rates, increased engagement with services, and improved psychological well-being, and this same pattern of transformation appears across spiritual and agricultural interventions as well. Peer support provides the relational foundation for change. Peers offer authenticity, credibility, and lived wisdom that traditional professionals cannot replicate. They model possibilities, reduce isolation, and help individuals navigate the emotional and structural challenges of reentry. Their presence communicates a simple but radical message: transformation is possible because someone who has walked the same path is now walking beside you.

Spiritual support deepens this transformation by grounding individuals in meaning, purpose, and identity. Spirituality, broadly defined as the search for connection to something larger than oneself, restores what trauma and incarceration often strip away: dignity, belonging, and hope. Spirituality is “the ultimate load-bearing structure” that many people have been missing. Whether expressed through prayer, meditation, nature, art, or community, spirituality provides the internal scaffolding necessary for healing, forgiveness, and moral renewal.

Agricultural support complements these relational and spiritual dimensions by reconnecting individuals to the rhythms of the natural world. Agricultural work offers meditative repetition, visible accomplishment, and a living metaphor for growth, decay, and renewal. As your document states, “Agriculture is an excellent choice for both vocational and spiritual

development because it encourages a meditative state and provides a profound sense of purpose and gratitude." Research on horticultural therapy and green reentry programs shows improvements in mental health, reductions in substance use, strengthened social bonds, and, in many cases, lower recidivism. Agriculture grounds individuals in patience, humility, and stewardship, qualities essential for sustained desistance.

What emerges from this chapter is a holistic vision of reentry that integrates relationship, meaning, and embodiment. Peer support addresses the need for connection; spirituality addresses the need for purpose; agriculture addresses the need for grounding and renewal. Each domain reinforces the others, creating a multidimensional framework that supports both internal transformation and external stability. This integrated approach stands in stark contrast to fragmented, punitive, or purely material models of reentry, which often fail to address the deeper wounds and existential questions that shape human behavior.

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that reentry succeeds when individuals are supported as whole people, emotionally, spiritually, socially, and ecologically. Healing is not linear, and transformation is not achieved through programs alone. It emerges through relationships that honor lived experience, practices that cultivate meaning, and environments that reconnect individuals to the cycles of life. By integrating peer support, spiritual grounding, and agricultural engagement, reentry systems can move beyond risk management toward genuine restoration, dignity, and long-term flourishing.

CHAPTER 3:

PLANTING JUSTICE

I have provided much evidence of the efficacy of the support triad using peer support, spiritual development, and agriculture. I have also researched the existence of examples of the implementation of this triad. The closest I found was the "Care Farm" concept, a concept currently implemented primarily in the Netherlands[1] and the United Kingdom.[2]

To better understand this concept, I chose to implement actual engagement and first-hand experience. To do this, I researched places in the United States where this care farm concept was being implemented[3] and I located a care farm listed as engaging with re-entry. It is called Planting Justice. It provides the supports indicated in the support triad. It has a space where the re-entry participants work in a supportive agricultural environment where their individual incarceration stories are openly shared with the intent of providing mutual support for healing and motivation.

The opening pages of the Planting Justice website clearly state the intent: "Our purpose is to empower people impacted by mass incarceration and social inequities with the skills and resources to cultivate food sovereignty, economic justice, and community healing. Of the 140 formerly incarcerated people who've had full-time jobs at Planting Justice, only two have gone back to jail. This is 57 less than you would expect with the California statewide average of 41.9% (as of 2019). Our model for decarceration works, and it shows that people who are

[1] Jan Hassink, Willem Hulsink, and John Grin. "Farming with care: the evolution of care farming in the Netherlands," *NJAS-Wageningen Journal of Life Sciences* 68 (2014): 1-11.

[2] Chris Leck, Nick Evans, and Dominic Upton, "Agriculture–Who cares? An investigation of 'care farming' in the UK," *Journal of Rural Studies* 34 (2014): 313-325.

[3] Care Farming Network, "*Who We Are,*" Accessed April 5, 2026, https://carefarmingnetwork.org/about/who-we-are/.

incarcerated can successfully come home, heal, and stay with their families and communities. Planting Justice is proving that we can end the cycles of incarceration that continue to impact primarily people of color, causing multigenerational poverty and suffering. We work to create opportunities for dignified, living-wage work, rooted in connection with the land, and holistic wellness support."[4]

Planting Justice is located in Oakland, California. Oakland has a history of being a progressive city, standing up for the rights of its communities at all costs. Chosen as the western terminus of the first transcontinental railroad, in1869 Oakland began developing its harbor. After the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, it received a large influx of refugees, which boosted its population significantly. The 8.25-mile-long San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge to San Francisco opened in 1936 and military and naval installations, built in the 1940s, stimulated further population growth and heavy and diversified industrial expansion. Notable was the influx of African Americans seeking work in the city's factories during World War II. By 1960, however, the city was in decline. The population, having reached a peak of about 385,000 in 1950, began to drop, and inner-city areas were beset by poverty, urban blight, and crime. Racial tension grew in Oakland's large African American community. The Black Panther Party of Self Defense originated there in 1966. Though the Party officially disbanded in 1982, over the course of 16 years, the Panthers created over 65 documented survival programs like the breakfast and lunch program for school children, and free health clinics and sickle cell anemia testing. The Panthers advocated for health care, affordable housing, education, and political control through local elections.[5]

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[4] Planting Justice, "About Us," accessed March 5, 2026, https://plantingjustice.org/pages/about-us.

[5] Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "*Oakland,*" accessed March 22, 2026, https://www.britannica.com/place/Oakland-California.

I went to Planting Justice to take note of both the positive and negative aspects of David Jefferson's capstone project addressed in Chapter 2. I intended to observe and explore that process and to note any other aspects that seemed relevant to the environment and the experience.

As I approached the Sobrante Park neighborhood of East Oakland where Planting Justice is located, I noted industrial warehouses, fenced lots, and the occasional house surrounded by storage yards, and rail lines with homeless encampments clustered beneath the elevated tracks. I noted corner stores and liquor stores, no grocery stores, clearly a food desert. When I arrived within a few blocks of the Planting Justice address, 319 105th Ave, I noted a Buddhist temple two blocks down. Only in these last few blocks did residential streets appear, indicating a community that persists despite decline and neglect. The site sits in the shadow of the Nimitz Freeway and its location and fencing made it unobtrusive.

Near the entrance to the fencing were flags, some made with orange prison jumpsuits, all printed with messages such as "build gardens, not prisons." I stepped inside the fence to the 2-acre nursery site near the intersection of San Leandro and 105th. This was my first glimpse of the boasted 1000 varieties of edible fruit trees and plants. It was immediately clear that it is a shared property that hosted other organizations who do workshops on sustainable and regenerative agriculture.

Amidst the diverse planting areas, I stood for a while trying to take it all in before a man approached me and welcomed me. There was no indication as to whether he was staff, participant, or volunteer. He introduced himself by name and shared that he had formerly worked in a prison gardening program run by this same organization. I introduced myself and explained that I had called and made arrangements to visit. He clearly had no knowledge of this

arrangement but seemed very impressed that I had driven from New Mexico to observe the site with hopes of doing something similar. He pointed down the street and told me that I should also visit another organization right down the road called Homies Empowerment. He shared that Homies Empowerment does vegetable stands with the things they grow. As we walked and talked, he shared some details about the plants on the property. I asked him about another similar organization called “Land Together” I had read about in the area. I shared that I had been unsuccessful with making an appointment to visit Land Together. I shared that I had attempted to go to the address listed and found that it is just a place where they get their mail it's not a physical location of any type of farming or programming. He knew of the program and said that the staff of that program now works from home and they do individual projects around town with no real central location. He then introduced me to other people we passed. I spoke to people who identified themselves as staff, employees, re-entry program members, and volunteers. In these conversations, I found that, in addition to the nursery business, Planting Justice teaches gardening and food sovereignty to students and distributes fresh produce and free trees. I also found that from this 2-acre lot, Planting Justice sells many varieties of plants, many of them hard to find, and suitable for a range of climate zones. Planting Justice ships them across the continental United States. Sometimes demand has exceeded the nursery’s capacity.

After our discussion on the nursery’s capacity, they then encouraged me to roam around but they asked me to avoid the areas where classes were being held by other community organizations. I roamed for a while and saw outdoor classes, cooking in a large tent, green houses, and row after row of fruit trees, including apples, figs, Asian pears, pomegranates, and many more plants unfamiliar to me. The space was full life: plants, people, cats, and various pollinators.

Finally, I met someone who was clearly an administrative person. She apologized that the re-entry coordinator was away that day and invited me to the office area. The office consisted of two shipping containers. She requested my contact information and shared some more details about the organization. She shared that Sol Mercado, the re-entry coordinator had made *Sol in the Garden*, a short documentary also called "The Power of Nature in Healing"[6]. This is a film where filmmakers Débora Souza Silva and Emily Cohen Ibañez trace the historical connections between growing food and freedom, and give insight into what it takes for someone to find forgiveness.

She also shared a NY Times article about Gavin Raders, one of the founders of Planting Justice.[7] The article added some surprising background information including the fact that Planting Justice is noted as a business that very successfully generates revenue to subsidize the group's core mission: hiring former inmates, many from nearby San Quentin State Prison, and giving them a "family sustaining" wage, along with health benefits and a month of paid leave annually. The article noted some origin information: "The group's founders, Gavin Raders, 35, and Haleh Zandi, 34, established an orchard on a weedy, vacant lot in this area of stubborn poverty, where the pruning is serenaded not by birds but droning trucks from the adjacent freeway, signs warn visitors that they have entered a pesticide- and soda-free zone and roving horticulturalists hired by well-off clients install beehives, fruit trees, chicken coops, massive barrels for harvesting rain water and "laundry to landscaping" systems that funnel used washing machine water into the garden. The money helps subsidize pro bono edible landscapes in low-income neighborhoods."

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[6] Justine Simons, "*Sol in the Garden,*" *TIME*, October 5, 2023, https://time.com/6320122/sol-in-the-garden/.

[7] Michael Corkery, "Kale, Not Jail: Urban Farming Nonprofit Helps Ex-Cons Re-enter Society," *New York Times*, May 17, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/17/business/urban-farming-exconvicts-recidivism.html.

As I attempted to say my goodbyes, they repeatedly asked me to stay for lunch, which they described as a common practice for visitors, and emphasized that much of the food being served is grown on-site. I took a few samples as I shared my gratitude and my intent to take the advice to visit Homies Empowerment.

I drove a few minutes down the road past warehouses and encampments of unhoused people to a side street with a sign declaring Homies Empowerment behind a wall of shopping carts, duffle bags, backpacks, bedding and other possessions common to those who live on city streets. Behind this wall was a garden that spanned no more than four city lots. I walked to the gate, and a young man approached me and asked if I wanted something to eat. I told him that I had just eaten but wanted to visit because I had heard of this place from the folks at Planting Justice and that I had driven from New Mexico to get ideas on how to serve the re-entry population. He immediately identified as part of that population and asked me to sit and talk. I followed him into the garden to a bench beside a dog and a couple of chickens.

As the chickens, the dog, and I listened, he gave a sermon on Homies Empowerment. The sermon clearly had a liberation theology theme. The topic was mutual salvation of the unhoused population and the community by getting people started with the idea of being able to grow their own food. He gave me some history of the organization as we sat looking at what he told me was a mural of the founder painted on a cinder block wall along one side of the site. He told me that the founder had carried a message to the community encouraging them to get land and not focus on renting, to get land so that they owned something. He said the founder taught that they had to get used to growing their own food to get in contact with the earth and the universe such that they could feel more empowered after having come from a situation where they had no power.

We followed his sermon on empowerment with a discussion of the problems of gangs and drugs in the neighborhood. In that discussion, we found that we had the shared consciousness of life in recovery. After talking for over two hours, we wished each other well, and I departed as I struggled for some way to make sense of my Oakland experience.

I have since summarized the learning from this experience: I had made the trip to Oakland to observe and explore an organization that came close to implementing the support triad so that I could observe this firsthand. However, during my trip to Planting Justice, I discovered that the triad provides more than I had expected. Planting Justice not only serves as an example of the positive outcomes of implementing the support triad, but it also demonstrates that doing so reaps benefits larger than successful re-entry. What I found was an example of what becomes possible when healing work is grounded in theological principles. It shows that when we honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person, nurture meaning-making, and recognize the interdependent web of existence, we create a setting where both individuals and communities can heal and thrive.

Planting Justice brings together diverse groups—returning citizens, youth, educators, community organizations, unhoused neighbors, and those experiencing food insecurity. It brings them into a shared space of learning and mutual support. This work is not merely transactional but relational, rooted in the belief that healing expands when it is shared. Planting Justice stands as a powerful illustration of the triad. It affirms dignity, cultivates meaning, and strengthens the web of relationships that sustain life. Its success illustrates that when programs are grounded in theological principles, they do more than address individual needs. Planting Justice shows that the triad is effective and reaps profound benefits.

CHAPTER 4:

THE SUPPORT TRIAD

This project grows out of my lived experience, my ministry, and my daily work with people returning to our communities after incarceration. Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that recidivism in New Mexico is not simply a matter of failed resources. It is a lack of spiritual support. It involves identity, meaning, belonging, and redemption. The high rate of recidivism in New Mexico reflects lack of support for the healing required for people to rebuild their lives after incarceration.

As I noted in Chapter 1, the challenges facing returning citizens in New Mexico are multidimensional and include the generational marginalization of Native and Hispanic communities. They also include the psychological, emotional, and moral injuries that incarceration produces. People leave prison with untreated trauma, disrupted family relationships, diminished access to healthcare, and a profound sense of disconnection from themselves and their communities. However, the most significant gap in the current system is spiritual. Individuals are expected to reenter society and quickly demonstrate personal efficacy, responsibility, and emotional stability, even though they have received almost no support in cultivating the inner resources required for such transformation. The dominant spiritual programming available in prisons is often very prescriptive in its tenets and ignores the theological backgrounds of the population.

Chapter 2 examined three interventions that have each demonstrated effectiveness: peer support, spiritual support, and agricultural or horticultural therapy. Each of these approaches addresses a piece of the reentry puzzle. Peer support is powerful because it is grounded in shared experience. When someone realizes that the person sitting across from them has walked a similar

path, something shifts. Trust becomes possible. Shame is lessened. Peer support affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every individual and models the possibility of redemption. Yet, peer support programs often lack a deeper spiritual framework and may not address the identity transformation required for long-term desistance.

Spiritual support helps individuals make meaning of their experiences, heal moral injury, and cultivate resilience. It provides a framework for understanding suffering and finding hope. However, in New Mexico, spiritual care in carceral settings is often prescriptive and disconnected from the Indigenous and Mexican-Catholic traditions that shape the lives of many members of this population. As a result, spiritual support is often experienced as irrelevant or even harmful. Agricultural engagement, meanwhile, offers embodied healing. Working with soil, plants, and ecological cycles reduces stress, fosters patience, and reconnects individuals to the land. It is a practice that resonates deeply with both Indigenous cosmologies and the agricultural traditions of Hispanic communities. Yet, agricultural programs rarely integrate explicit spiritual development or peer support.

Taken together, peer support, spiritual support, and agricultural or horticultural interventions reveal both the strengths and the limitations of current reentry efforts. Each is effective, but each is incomplete. What is missing is a model that brings them together in a way that honors the holistic health of returning citizens. The proposed Support Triad integrates peer support, spiritual development, and agricultural engagement. I borrow the metaphor of a load-bearing structure from Nadia Bolz-Weber because it captures the reality that reentry is heavy. People carry the weight of trauma, shame, systemic oppression, and the expectations of a community that may not welcome them back. A stable structure is needed, one that can hold this weight. The triad functions as a load bearing structure. Peer support provides relational

grounding. Spiritual development supports meaning-making, transformation, and healing. Agricultural engagement offers embodied healing and reconnects individuals to land, community, and the rhythms of life. These components are not separate. They reinforce one another. Peer support creates the trust necessary for spiritual exploration. Spiritual development deepens the significance of agricultural practice. Agricultural engagement grounds spiritual insights in the body and in the earth. Together, they form a regenerative cycle of healing.

Furthermore, this model is grounded not only in Unitarian Universalist theology but also in the theologies of the people I serve. Indigenous spiritualities emphasize relationality, cyclical time, and connection to land. Mexican-Catholic traditions emphasize ritual, and communal identity. Agricultural spiritual practice fits with both traditions. The triad does not impose a prescriptive theology. Instead, it invites individuals into a pluralistic, exploratory process that honors their agency and cultural identity. It is a model that listens first, learns from the individual and the community, and builds from the spiritual resources already present in New Mexico.

By reframing reentry as a process of healing, redemption, and reconnection, the Support Triad aligns with research on desistance, which emphasizes identity transformation, social bonds, and the development of prosocial behavior change. It also aligns with regenerative agricultural principles, which identify healing as relational, cyclical, and grounded in the land. This model challenges the punitive practices of the current system and offers a vision of justice rooted in dignity, interdependence, and the possibility of transformation. It supports that successful reentry requires more than meeting material needs. It requires cultivating the spiritual development necessary for resilience, belonging, and flourishing.

In conclusion, this dissertation argues that integrating peer support, spiritual development, and agricultural engagement offers a powerful and culturally competent

framework for addressing New Mexico's reentry problem. The Support Triad is grounded in evidence, shaped by lived experience, and aligned with the theological and cultural traditions of the population it seeks to serve. It offers a regenerative model of reentry that acknowledges the full humanity of returning citizens and supports their transformation and resultant healing, redemption, and sustainable desistance.

I concluded several additional things emerged from this research. One is that three major tenets of my Unitarian Universalist theology are intrinsic to the support triad. These tenets are the inherent worth and dignity of the individual, the free and responsible search for truth, and the interdependence of all existence. Peer support provides credibility and relational grounding and supports the concept of the inherent worth and dignity of every individual through its underlying message of redemption. Spiritual support directly addresses the spiritual as it fosters meaning-making and identity transformation through the search for truth. Agricultural therapy offers embodied healing and connection to the land and incorporates the spiritual concept of interdependence, as it reminds us that we are connected to the earth and the universe.

I also noted that the three tenants are not only present in the triad but also in our attempts to bring together two potentially opposing sides of the re-entry problem. It is now clear to me that inherent worth and dignity apply, not only to the carceral population, but, also to the officers. I work not only with our participants but also with the probation and parole officers and I'm finding that our relationship with them is improving. I found that I also provide pastoral care to the officers out of respect for their inherent worth and dignity.

It has also become apparent from this project that in respecting my Unitarian Universalist acknowledgment of the respect for pluralism that I am more aware of the concepts that run through most spiritual traditions. Inherent worth and dignity, interdependence and the search for

truth are things of central focus regardless of the spiritual tradition for which I am called to provide pastoral care and spiritual direction. This is true regardless of whether it be a traditional religion or a form of the melding of spiritual traditions that has occurred here in New Mexico. This highlights the idea that we need to focus on the things that are common to the various traditions rather than the differences.

Yet, another conclusion presented itself during my visit to Planting Justice. When we create social justice, even on a small scale, the waves spread out into the larger community. It spreads and replicates itself not just in the way of providing sustenance in the form of re-entry support and food but also by way of providing a testament to the interdependent web of all existence. I saw this in Oakland with Planting Justice having started in a neighborhood struggling to maintain some sort of vitality and providing this little island of social justice. This care garden for returning citizens is having a positive effect on the neighborhood, not just the individuals there, but the entire neighborhood around the nursery. Its impact is going beyond the reentry population to the unhoused population and to addressing issues like the food desert. It exemplifies interconnectedness with a demonstration that small seeds of hope, justice, love, and redemption take root, replicate, and spread. They provide sustenance in a food desert and address other injustices around the plight of the unhoused population striving to survive in a once residential neighborhood, a neighborhood abandoned in favor of industrialization at the sacrifice of ecological balance.

The final conclusion is the emergence of a plan for the next stage of this project. The next stage of this project is to implement a pilot program. I have 6.2 acres of land east of the Sandia Mountains of New Mexico. I have the support of a professional horticulturalist with specializations in regenerative agriculture and permaculture and a master's degree in geography

and environmental studies with focus on habitat restoration and native pants of the Southwest. I am also part of a peer collaborative created to provide support for those in New Mexico who engage with peer support of various types. The next step is to approach peer support workers belonging to this collaborative to determine what soft skills are needed in terms of spiritual support and agricultural therapy. I will then start by building load-bearing structures for the supporters, the peer support workers themselves. I have already begun some informal spiritual development with a few of these peer support workers and discussed this project. I will start with a pilot program for introducing the peer support workers to group spiritual direction and to basic practices for agricultural therapy. I will get their feedback. With this I will proceed with the refinement of lesson plans and work to spread the use of the support triad throughout New Mexico.

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