

Clark University

Clark Digital Commons

Undergraduate Student Research Festivals

Winter Fest 2021

Jan 7th, 12:00 AM

Creating and Attempting Neutrality: Politics and Race in Three Christian Prison Ministries

Morgan Hylton

Clark University, mhylton@clarku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.clarku.edu/asdff>

Hylton, Morgan, "Creating and Attempting Neutrality: Politics and Race in Three Christian Prison Ministries" (2021). *Undergraduate Student Research Festivals*. 10.

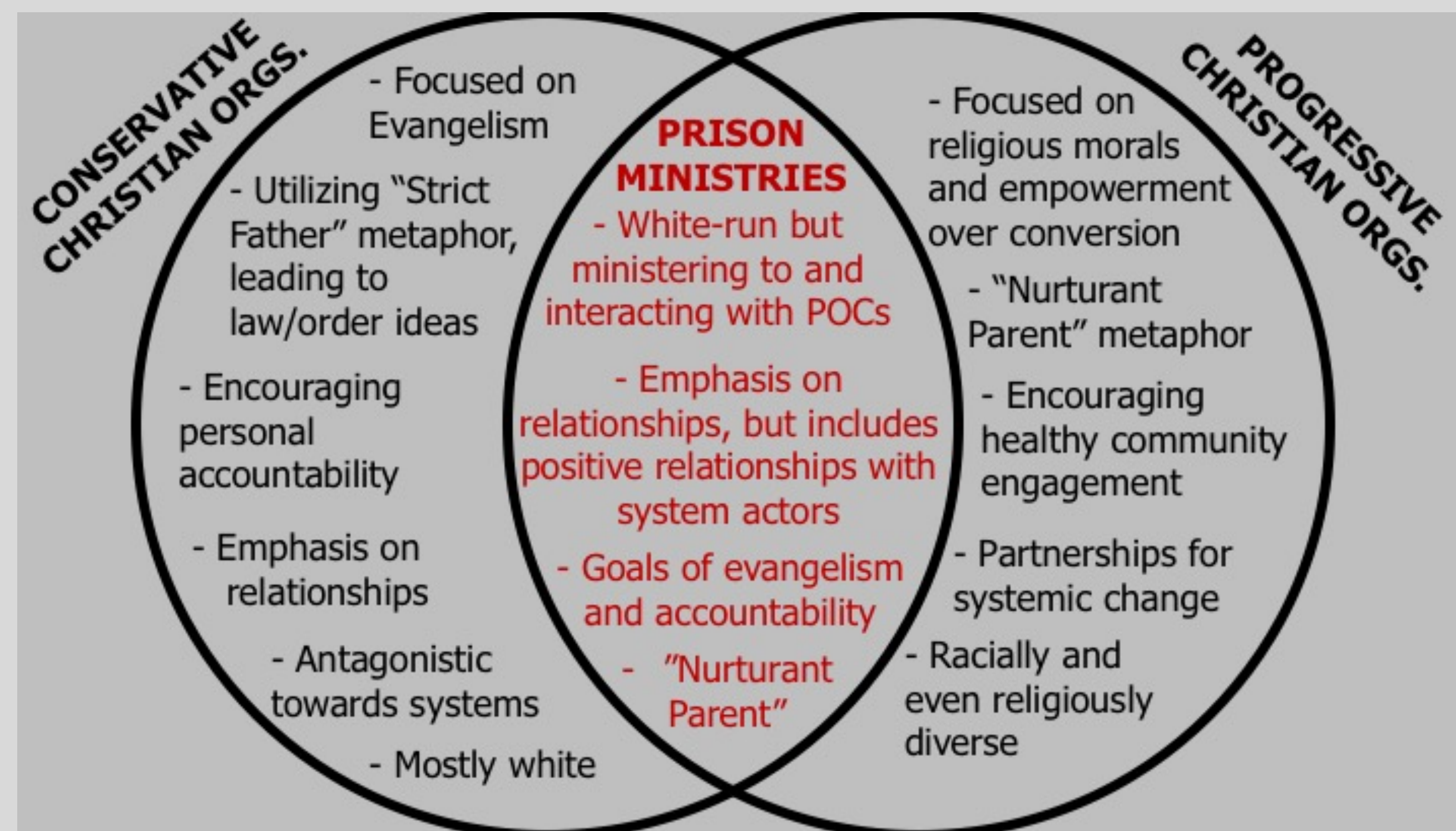
https://commons.clarku.edu/asdff/winter_fest_2021/winterfest2021/10

This Open Access Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conference Proceedings at Clark Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Student Research Festivals by an authorized administrator of Clark Digital Commons. For more information, please contact mkrikonis@clarku.edu, jodolan@clarku.edu, dlutz@clarku.edu.

Creating and Attempting Neutrality: Politics and Race in Three Christian Prison Ministries)

Morgan Hylton '21 – (Sponsor: Professor Jack Delehanty) '

Thesis)



Christian Prison Ministries attempt to construct a political neutrality that is characterized by:

- Emphasizing essential theological truths over personal opinions,
- Agreeing to disagree as staff members,
- Viewing themselves as a model of civility and truth for other Christians, and
- Intentional bridge building between politically, economically, and racially disparate communities.

Because of the political *and* theological diversity of their stakeholders, Christian Prison Ministries' neutrality is not merely "choosing Jesus' side" or even refusing to take a side. Rather, it is a strategic acknowledgement of political and theological differences and the active choice to transcend them for the sake of the ideal of Christian unity.

Acknowledgements)

This project is deeply indebted to Clark University's Steinbrecher Fellowship Program and the generous patronage of Stephen Steinbrecher. Without his generous support, my summer of research would not have been possible. Thank you to the Steinbrecher Family, as well as Professor Nancy Budwig, Toni Armstrong, Michelle Flint, and the rest of the Steinbrecher Fellows for your continued advice and encouragement throughout the course of the summer.

Additionally, I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Jack Delehanty, for his tireless guidance throughout the last year.

Finally, I would like to thank all of my interviewees for their willingness to take time out of their lives to speak with me so candidly and personally. I hope that my findings will be useful as they continue developing their organization and adapting to the difficult changes that 2020 has brought.

Research Subjects and Methodology)

Throughout the course of Summer 2020, I conducted six 45-60 minute semi-structured qualitative interviews with employees at three prison ministry nonprofits, each located in major cities on the East Coast. Three of the interviewees work at Ministry A, two white men and one white woman. Two of the interviewees work at Ministry B, both white men. Finally, one interviewee works at Ministry C, a Black male. At each Ministry, I interviewed the Executive Director first; at Ministries A and B, I also interviewed other employees. These interviewees were recruited through my own personal connections at churches and nonprofits.

In addition to transcribing, coding, and analyzing the interviews, I also conducted a review of literature about Christian social movements and conducted a close-reading of each Ministry's personal website, in order to provide contextualization of the interviewees responses. Because I have personal connections to these individuals and organizations, there are some times where I supplement or contextualize interview references with my own understandings of the ministries specifically, or lived Christian culture as a whole.

Why Neutrality?)

- **Sense of Mission** – Idea that being overtly political is either outside of their religiously mandated calling, or the outside of the mission of their particular organization.
- **Need for Supporters** – Prison Ministries are often financially supported by older, more conservative, white evangelicals, while their volunteer base is younger, more diverse, and less conservative; political neutrality becomes an attempt to keep both bases happy. Additionally, Ministries depend on positive relationships with various government institutions for funding and optimal facility access, and therefore are hesitant to speak in ways that would jeopardize their ability to interact with incarcerated individuals.
- **Fear of American Political Landscape** – Though the reasoning was not fully explained, many interviewees mentioned that they were afraid to post politically explicit things both on their personal social media pages and their Ministry's pages—perhaps because of fear of conflict/backlash, concern that the organization will lose support, or uncertainty of what is correct or "safe" to say. It is unclear how much of the push towards neutrality is driven by the above rational concerns (sense of mission and need for supporters) versus an irrational fear of non-neutral political engagement.

Strategies for Neutrality

- **Relationship Building and "Conversations": Constructing Relationships as Apolitical Spaces**
All of the Ministries studying stated their mission as building relationships with incarcerated individuals, either for evangelistic (A/B) or empowerment (B/C purposes). To them, focusing on loving people within the context of relationships minimizes political, cultural, or racial differences and creates a ripe spaces for "creating conversations"—not conclusions or worldviews—around divisive social issues.
- **Policing Motivations and Language Around Potentially "Political" Issues**
Ministries are very concerned about "mission drift," or straying too far away from the organization's God-inspired mandate. They emphasize that any potentially politically divisive issue or language—i.e: the broad concept of justice—must be explicitly motivated by and articulated as a non-political purpose. For instance, Ministry A's series of posts about Justice (which were initiated following the death of George Floyd) on their website were framed as a Bible study with the purpose of theological edification of its followers, *not* an endorsement of secular, progressive social justice or any particular political agenda. These strategies allow organizations to appear politically aware without taking a side.
- **Multiple, Targeted Messages and Events**
Rather than making blanket statements on their social media or websites, many of the Ministries utilize individualized communications, like personal letters, tailored visits to different churches, raising money through personal contacts (rather than mass calls for funders), and holding different events for explicitly different audiences. These different events allow Ministries to maintain a publicly neutral persona while semi-privately appealing to the political or theological interests of disparate groups.
- **Prioritizing "Necessary Statements" and Avoiding Other Topics of Disagreement**
Each organization engages in the process of prioritizing potentially controversial statements, while minimizing other topics that are "okay" to disagree on. Oftentimes, differences in politics are downplayed while theological controversies are more engaged with.
- **"Political" Actions through "Neutral" Means: Strategic, Private Community Partnerships**
When organizations do engage in activities that might be seen as non-neutral (like testifying in court on bills), they usually do so privately, by directing justice-involved individuals to politically engaged community organizations. These partnerships give organizations some sense of a political outlet—if they so desire—without soiling their own image of neutrality.
- **Refocusing on Children, Family, Child's Rights, and Other "Apolitical" Christian Values**
All three ministries in this study primarily focused on supporting juveniles, young adults, and their families as they navigated the justice system. When faced with potentially political questions, organizations pivoted to focus on the pathos of the Christianized image of children, framing their responses as issues of children's rights. They saw caring for children as an apolitical or neutral value that could unify all Christians, regardless of race, politics, or attitudes towards justice-involved individuals.

Neutrality's Failure: The Key Role of Race)

In short, neutrality fails because it does not enable or require employees to interrogate their own underlying biases or worldviews. Because most Christian Prison Ministry Leaders are older, white, wealthier, and immersed in a conservative Evangelical Christian setting during their non-professional time, their default modes of speaking and acting are based in a specifically white mode of Christianity. Even when seeking to make their organizations theologically and (especially) politically neutral, their own opinions and identities unintentionally influence their organization: its beliefs (official and unofficial), what it deems "essential" conversations, and the general languages and strategies it uses are based on conservative Christian whiteness. The unexamined force of white conservatism is exacerbated by the occasional intentional choice to privilege the interests of white, conservative supporters due to the ministries' financial needs.

Ministry C: A Progressive Exception)

All three Ministries attempted to perform neutrality, but ultimately fell back on their leaders' individual worldviews; while for Ministry A and B, this lead to conservatism, for Ministry C this slippage caused them to be much more progressive in their politics, theology, and approach. The difference of Ministry C only reinforces the importance of race in how politics, theology, and neutrality is lived out in the Christian Prison Ministry field. While Ministries A and B are led by white men from conservative Evangelical backgrounds, Ministry C is led by a Black man with a background in the religious tradition of Black Protestantism. While Black Protestantism is historically theologically conservative, it is also deeply committed to Progressive social justice causes, particularly racial justice. Thus, while Ministries A and B sometimes articulated a colorblind philosophy as a form of "neutrality," Ministry C was deeply committed to acknowledging the racism of the criminal justice system and empowering their program participants to change it. Thus, when their neutrality failed, it lead the organization in a more progressive direction rather than a conservative one.

In addition to race, there are a few other factors that likely differentiated Ministry C from the others. Ministry C was extremely new—only about 2 years old at the time of the interview—and the leader I interviewed was 10-20 years younger than all other participants in the study. Thus, while Ministries A and B might be stuck in a rut of funding sources or other strategies that they have used for many years, Ministry C is more likely to innovate. At least one of the leaders of Ministry C also attended higher education specifically for nonprofit management and innovation, giving them leadership background and perspective that the leaders of Ministries A and B did not have. Their age and education, coupled with their race and other personal background (like lived experiences of incarceration and homelessness) is likely the reasoning for their more progressive leanings.

Summary of Findings)

Though the sample is too small to be generalizable, these findings provide a critical, unique lived experience of the pervasive conservative/progressive binary, suggesting:

- Christian parachurch organizations might appear to be closely intertwined with a certain political agenda, but their alignment could be unintentional rather than conscious activism;
- At least some Christian parachurch organizations (such as those in the study) are trying to live out a specific form of neutrality that transcends the political binary and allows individuals to maintain their own opinions while using their organization to model civility and unity in the face of racial and political differences;
- Neutrality failed in these ministries because it did not offer strategies to critically review employees' own implicit worldview, rather allowing ministries to slide into their leaders' racial, political, and theological socializations; and,
- The sample is too small to be generalized, but these findings suggest that diverse leadership representations is key to disrupting the conservatism of the Christian Prison Ministry field. '

Selected Sources)

- Bean, Lydia. *The Politics of Evangelical Identity: Local Churches and Partisan Divides in the United States and Canada*. Princeton University Press, 2014.
- O'Brien, John and Eman Abdelhadi. "Re-examining Restructuring: Racialization, Religious Conservatism, and Political Leanings in Contemporary American Life." *Social Forces*, 2020, pp. 1-30.
- Oyakawa, Michelle. "Racial Reconciliation as a Suppressive Frame in Evangelical Multiracial Churches." *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review*, vol. 80, no. 4, 2019, pp. 466-517.
- Ray, Victor. "A Theory of Racialized Organizations." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 84, no. 1, 2019, pp. 26-53.