FAITH-BASED REHABILITATION IN NIGERIAN PRISONS: AN EMPERICAL ANALYSIS OF MORAL TRANSMUTATION AND RECIDIVISM REDUCTION IN BENIN CITY.

Sunday Oseye OMIGIE (PhD)
Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria
+234 805 421 1827, email: Sunday.omigie@uniben.edu

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Keywords

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Abstract

Research Problem: *Despite various rehabilitation strategies, recidivism remains high in Nigerian correctional facilities, while localized empirical evidence regarding whether religious-based reformation programmes foster moral transmutation and reduce recidivism in Benin City Prisons is scarce.*

Methods/Theory: *Applying a descriptive survey and correlational design, the study sampled a purposive cohort of 115 current and formerly incarcerated persons who participated in faith-based programmes. Data collected via a structured questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics and simple linear regression, guided by Social Learning, Rehabilitation, and Desistance theories as the analytical framework.*

Results: *Religious-based reformation programmes significantly predicted self-reported moral transmutation ($R2 = 0.718$, $F(1, 113) = 287.17$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived recidivism reduction ($R2 = 0.617$, $F(1, 113) = 181.71$, $p < 0.001$), with respondents demonstrating improved moral reasoning, behavioural integrity, and resolve to resist future criminal temptation.*

Conclusion: *Faith-based reformation correlates strongly with perceived moral change and desistance intentions, offering a promising strategy to support sustained desistance within resource-constrained settings like Benin City.*

Key Contribution to Knowledge: *This study provides localized quantitative evidence from Benin City Prisons connecting religious-based reformation to moral transmutation and recidivism reduction, while integrating three criminological theories to explain these underlying pathways.*

Recommendation: *The Nigerian Correctional Service should embed standardized faith-based modules into its rehabilitation framework, supported by structured chaplaincy training—and formalize partnerships with religious organisations for post-release mentorship, while future longitudinal studies verify long-term effects.*

Introduction

In contemporary penal evaluation, recidivism remains the primary metric for measuring correctional efficacy, a standard by which the Nigerian system faces severe strain. Although the Nigerian Correctional Service Act of 2019 sought to shift custodial institutions away from the retributive, containment-centered framework inherited from colonial rule toward reformation and reintegration, a significant gap persists between legal mandates and operational realities. Severe overcrowding, large populations of awaiting-trial detainees, and inadequate psychosocial resources continue to define African custodial environments (Sarkin, 2008), leaving statutory offerings like formal education, counseling, and vocational training severely under-resourced. Consequently, religious programming—delivered predominantly by chaplains, imams, volunteers, and faith-based organizations—has emerged as one of the most accessible rehabilitative interventions in Nigerian facilities. However, whether such interventions foster genuine moral transformation and lower reoffending rates remains an empirical question that policy has historically presumed rather than proven.

Global scholarly discourse provides a substantial, if nuanced, foundation for evaluating faith-based correctional interventions. Early inquiries highlighted strong associations between religious participation, improved institutional behavior, and reduced post-release recidivism (Clear et al., 2000; Johnson et al., 1997; Johnson, 2004). Subsequent evaluations, however, revealed more modest or conditional outcomes once participant selection bias was rigorously controlled (Duwe & King, 2012). Comprehensive reviews caution that assessing whether faith-based initiatives "work" requires looking beyond crude outcome comparisons, given the wide variations in programmatic content, participant motivation, and methodological rigor (Dodson et al., 2011; Sumter, 2006). This empirical ambiguity has redirected academic focus from asking if religion reduces reoffending to examining how it exerts its influence. Notably, Jang and Johnson (2022) articulate a framework of religion as moral reform, positioning character transformation rather than external risk management as the central mechanism of rehabilitation. This perspective aligns with philosophical arguments differentiating moral rehabilitation from purely instrumental, skills-oriented training (Forsberg & Douglas, 2022), as well as qualitative findings showing that religious identity and community support enable incarcerated individuals to sustain a reformed self-concept (Kerley & Copes, 2008; O'Connor & Perreyclear, 2002). Within this framework, moral transmutation—defined as an enduring ethical and behavioral shift marked by internalized virtues like empathy, honesty, and accountability (Vandala, 2019)—serves as the critical conceptual link between faith participation and desistance, though it is rarely measured directly as a primary outcome.

Three distinct theoretical traditions clarify the mechanisms underpinning this relationship. Social learning theory posits that human behavior is developed and maintained through differential association, imitation, and social reinforcement (Akers, 2009), suggesting that religious initiatives succeed when they displace criminogenic prison subcultures with prosocial peer models and moral norms. Rehabilitation theory, specifically through its moral-reform paradigm, centers behavioral change on shifts in personal conscience and ethical self-understanding (Forsberg & Douglas, 2022; Jang & Johnson, 2022). Complementing these, desistance theory frames the cessation of crime as a process of constructing a prosocial identity through a "redemption script," wherein past transgressions are reinterpreted as transcended obstacles (Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Farrall,

2004; McNeill, 2006). Religious traditions naturally supply frameworks for repentance, forgiveness, and renewal, and empirical evidence links faith participation to the adoption of these transformative scripts and improved community reentry (Said & Davidson, 2021; Stansfield & Mowen, 2018). Integrated together, these theoretical perspectives describe a sequential process wherein social learning and moral reform generate a restructured identity, forming the conceptual chain running from religious programming to moral transmutation and reduced reoffending.

A key limitation of existing literature stems from its contextual origin. The most prominent empirical insights emerge from Western, largely Christian, and voluntary environments, meaning their applicability to a West African setting—where Christianity, Islam, and indigenous traditions dynamically coexist—cannot be taken for granted. Extant Nigerian research has predominantly offered descriptive overviews, treated rehabilitative initiatives as undifferentiated categories, or focused on facilities in other regions (Ezeajughu, 2021; Kofoworola & Mohammed, 2025), rarely isolating faith-based reformation as a distinct variable or examining moral shift as an operational mechanism. Benin City presents an important backdrop for addressing this empirical gap; situated in Edo State, its custodial environment reflects a rich pluralism of Christian, Muslim, and indigenous spiritual practices. This setting is further accentuated by the 2019 legal reforms, whose transformative goals have yet to be systematically evaluated within local custodial contexts.

While scholars like Dodson et al. (2011), Jang and Johnson (2202), and Sumter (2006) have investigated religious programming and recidivism globally, systematic evaluations focusing on moral transmutation and reoffending within Benin City prisons—particularly following the 2019 legislative reform—remain scarce. This study addresses that oversight by gathering localized quantitative data from currently and formerly incarcerated individuals who engaged in Christian and Islamic faith-based interventions, testing the moral-reform framework in an unexamined operational setting. Specifically, the investigation pursues two core objectives: first, evaluating the extent to which faith-based reformation programs influence moral transmutation among inmates in Benin City prisons; and second, establishing the impact of these programs on perceived recidivism reduction among ex-inmates. These objectives are empirically tested against null hypotheses asserting that religious reformation programs exert no significant effect on either moral transmutation or recidivism reduction within this population.

The practical and academic imperative driving this research is urgent. Religious interventions in Benin City currently operate without standardized, evidence-based guidelines, leaving policymakers, correctional administrators, and religious organizations without clear empirical proof regarding whether these initiatives warrant formal integration, sustained public funding, or systemic scaling. Lacking contextual data, correctional authorities risk either underutilizing valuable rehabilitative avenues or institutionalizing unverified programs without clear performance accountability. This study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence from an understudied Nigerian setting, synthesizing social learning, rehabilitation, and desistance theories into a unified explanatory model for the religion–moral change–desistance pathway, and offering practical insights to guide policy on chaplaincy standardization, programmatic design, and post-release community faith partnerships. The subsequent sections outline the research methodology, present descriptive and inferential results, discuss core findings,

and present policy recommendations alongside directions for future research.

1.1 Research Hypotheses

H01: Religious-based reformation programmes have no significant effect on moral transmutation among inmates in Benin City prisons.

H02: Religious-based reformation programmes have no significant effect on recidivism reduction among ex-inmates in Benin City.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Religious-Based Reformation, Moral Transmutation and Recidivism

In this study, religious-based reformation is defined as a structured framework of correctional activities—comprising worship, scriptural engagement, prayer groups, pastoral or imam-led counseling, and access to devotional literature—whereby religious institutions aim to transform the character and conduct of incarcerated individuals. This process finds its primary conceptual foundation in the work of Jang and Johnson (2022), who framework religion-based rehabilitation as a mechanism of moral reform. Such a perspective aligns directly with the typology established by Forsberg and Douglas (2020), which distinguishes between instrumental rehabilitation (centered on skill acquisition and employment) and moral rehabilitation (focused on ethical identity and character development). Consequently, religious-based reformation extends beyond mere attendance at religious services; it represents a targeted program grounded in the premise that behavioral change is driven through the moral conscience rather than through risk-management protocols or technical training.

Serving as the anticipated goal of religious-based reformation, moral transmutation denotes a profound ethical and behavioral metamorphosis through which individuals internalize virtues like empathy and accountability to foster lasting character transformation (Vandala, 2019). While this concept converges with the moral-reform framework articulated by Jang and Johnson (2022), it remains distinct from broader desistance. Specifically, moral transmutation focuses on an internal realignment of personal values, remorse, and moral reasoning, rather than simply measuring the cessation of criminal activity. Within the scope of the present study, this construct is evaluated through participants' subjective assessments of remorse, moral discernment, interpersonal honesty and integrity, a peaceful disposition, and a fundamental shift in core values.

In contrast, recidivism operates as a behavioral and institutional metric that lacks uniform measurement across the literature relevant to Nigeria. Existing empirical estimates vary significantly, ranging from national rates between 40% and 50% (Kofoworola & Mohammed, 2025), to approximately 47% within three years post-release (Garba, 2025), and between 45% and 52% within a two-year window (Nigerian Correctional Service, 2025); these discrepancies highlight how divergent definitions and tracking intervals obscure standardized comparisons. This methodological limitation mirrors broader gaps in correctional research identified by Milićević (2024), particularly regarding the precise tracking of metrics like parole violations. Furthermore, foundational desistance literature conceptualizes the termination of criminal behavior not merely as the absence of re-conviction, but as an ongoing process of personal identity reconstruction (Maruna & Farrall, 2004; McNeill et al., 2012). Given that this investigation draws upon survey data from

current and formerly incarcerated individuals, recidivism reduction is operationalized as perceived recidivism reduction, measured through personal resolve to resist crime, anticipated pro-social relationships, livelihood readiness, disengagement from criminal networks, and the perceived necessity of ongoing religious engagement following release

2.2 Faith-Based Programmes in Correctional Settings

Scholarship on faith-based correctional interventions initially centered on their capacity to lower recidivism rates, as exemplified by Dodson et al. (2011), who provided an evidence-based assessment regarding whether faith-based programmes work, and Sumter (2006), who evaluated faith-based prison programmes from a correctional policy standpoint. Prioritizing outcome evaluation over descriptive accounts, both studies demonstrate that assertions of efficacy demand rigorous methodological scrutiny before guiding policy decisions—a critique particularly salient in Nigeria, where interventions are frequently adopted based on perceived moral value rather than empirically evaluated outcomes. Contemporary research has shifted from questioning whether religion matters to investigating how it matters. Stansfield and Mowen (2018) examined religious involvement through the lenses of moral community and social ecology in the study of re-entry, embedding religious influence within post-release social environments. Using a mixed-method design to evaluate the role of religion in desistance and reentry, Said and Davidson (2021) integrated outcome measurement with participants' qualitative accounts. Meanwhile, Jang and Johnson (2022) proposed a moral-reform account wherein religion aids rehabilitation by transforming conscience and self-understanding. Although these studies collectively indicate that religious involvement correlates with pro-social change, they emphasize distinct mechanisms: Stansfield and Mowen (2018) highlight community and social context, Said and Davidson (2021) emphasize narrative and reentry experience, and Jang and Johnson (2022) focus on moral character.

Despite these insights, two critical limitations characterize this body of literature. First, the majority of research has been conducted in Western settings (Stansfield & Mowen, 2018; Said & Davidson, 2021), where prison demographics, chaplaincy structures, and secular rehabilitation resources contrast sharply with those in Nigerian facilities. Second, existing studies typically evaluate either moral or desistance-related outcomes through a single theoretical frame, seldom investigating both dimensions within the same cohort. While these constraints do not invalidate the existing evidence, they underscore that its applicability to a resource-constrained, multi-faith West African setting cannot be assumed without empirical investigation.

2.3 Religious Reformation in Nigerian Prisons

Although Nigerian scholarship on offender rehabilitation and recidivism has expanded significantly, existing studies overwhelmingly address general rehabilitative efforts rather than faith-based moral reformation specifically. Recent empirical contributions—such as Kofoworola and Mohammed's (2025) assessment of rehabilitative impact on recidivism at Abuja's Kuje Custodial Centre, Garba's (2025) narrative review of reoffending trends among juvenile offenders, and Ezeajughu's (2021) evaluation of crime relapse across two maximum-security facilities—collectively demonstrate that rehabilitative outcomes in Nigeria remain hotly contested and inconsistently documented. Frame-level analysis by Sanyal (2019) characterizes

recidivism primarily as an institutional failure of rehabilitation, an interpretation congruent with the modest, incremental gains historically observed across conventional educational, vocational, and counseling initiatives.

This rehabilitative deficit is compounded by severe operational constraints within the institutional environment. As Olabamiji (2025) underscores in an analysis of the Ado-Ekiti Correctional Centre, systemic prison overcrowding continuously undermines effective offender reform, while recent reporting from the Nigerian Correctional Service (2025) reveals elevated recidivism figures, particularly within urban centers like Benin City. Legislative modernizations—most notably the Nigerian Correctional Service Act of 2019—have yet to relieve these systemic strains. In an environment where secular programs are severely restricted by resource scarcity, religious bodies naturally assume a prominent operational role, as exemplified by non-governmental interventions such as Prison Fellowship (2024). Given Nigeria's pervasive societal religiosity (Dowd, 2014), incarcerated individuals frequently enter custodial facilities with deeply entrenched faith identities, establishing a crucial baseline for analyzing reformative dynamics.

Despite the visibility of faith-based initiatives, the underlying evidentiary foundation remains methodologically fragile. Scholars have increasingly examined faith-based organizations across broader security sectors, including counter-radicalisation strategies (Ishaku et al., 2021), confirming their recognized status as vital social actors; however, prison-focused evaluations remain predominantly descriptive, lacking rigorous longitudinal tracking or control groups. Even where empirical evaluations of religious involvement have been undertaken—such as Ezeajughu's (2021) Lagos-based investigation—scholars have largely overlooked moral transmutation as a distinct explanatory variable, leaving key findings vulnerable to self-selection bias. Consequently, the extant Nigerian literature firmly establishes the operational presence and widespread adoption of faith-based reform, yet falls short of methodologically demonstrating its direct causal influence on internal moral transformation or long-term post-release desistance.

2.4 Moral Transmutation and Desistance from Crime

The theoretical grounding for the connection between moral transformation and the cessation of criminal behavior is most comprehensively articulated within the desistance literature. Within this framework, Maruna (2001) demonstrated that individuals who successfully desist reconstruct their lives through narrative identity work, reinterpreting their criminal pasts as transcended mistakes, while Maruna and Farrall (2004) theoretically reformulated desistance as an ongoing process rather than a discrete event. Expanding upon these ideas, McNeill et al. (2012) advocated moving beyond a narrow view of "what works" in community corrections, asserting that indicators of moral and identity change warrant significant attention alongside traditional reconviction data. However, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) qualify this optimism by highlighting the "pains of desistance," emphasizing that personal reform is inherently accompanied by severe hardship; consequently, internal moral commitment alone cannot be assumed to safeguard against relapse when structural obstacles persist.

Across this body of work, religion is frequently conceptualized as a vital source of the moral and narrative resources upon which the desistance process relies. Jang and Johnson (2022) characterize religion-based rehabilitation as a form of moral reform, wherein repentance, forgiveness, and moral emotions like guilt and remorse actively

redirect an individual's self-understanding. Similarly, Said and Davidson (2021) explicitly connect religious participation to sustained desistance and community reentry, while Stansfield and Mowen (2018) situate religious involvement within moral communities that supply crucial supportive social ties. In the context of correctional education, Vandala (2019) likewise frames transformative personal change as a core condition for durable reintegration, reinforcing the proposition that moral transmutation serves as a plausible intermediate mechanism linking program participation to reduced reoffending.

A synthesized comparison of these accounts reveals both consensus and unresolved tension regarding the underlying mechanics of reform. While scholars agree that moral and identity change is central to sustained desistance, they remain divided over whether the decisive catalyst is internal conviction—as posited by moral-reform models—or the availability of supportive social opportunities, as emphasized in community-oriented and narrative approaches. The pains-of-desistance perspective (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016) further complicates this dynamic by noting that subjective moral change does not always coincide with external social recognition. For a cross-sectional survey examining self-reported moral change and expected desistance, this theoretical tension introduces a key methodological limitation: while such a study can establish whether program participation correlates with perceived moral reform and anticipated recidivism reduction, it cannot independently verify whether stated intentions actually translate into lawful conduct post-release—a constraint that underscores the need for future longitudinal research.

2.5 Research Gap

A comprehensive review of the relevant literature yields three critical observations regarding the role of faith in criminal justice. First, although faith-based interventions have undergone evaluation internationally, the primary conceptual frameworks detailing how religion facilitates individual rehabilitation and desistance remain heavily anchored in Western contexts (Jang & Johnson, 2022; Said & Davidson, 2021; Stansfield & Mowen, 2018). Second, while scholarship within Nigeria has extensively documented broader rehabilitation outcomes, facility overcrowding, and systemic recidivism trends (Garba, 2025; Kofoworola & Mohammed, 2025; Olabamiji, 2025), these studies have rarely positioned religious-based reformation as their main explanatory variable. Third, despite strong foundational premises within desistance theory linking moral change directly to crime cessation (Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Farrall, 2004), moral transmutation and recidivism reduction are seldom evaluated within the same empirical framework.

Notwithstanding the broader global research on faith-based programming and reoffending, empirical investigations specifically isolating the dual impact of religious-based reformation on both moral transmutation and recidivism reduction within Benin City Correctional Facilities remain scarce. Most existing literature focuses either on macro-level national trends or international settings, thereby overlooking the distinct ethno-religious intersections that characterize the Edo, Igbo, and Yoruba populations in Benin City. This study addresses that empirical gap by delivering localized quantitative data collected from both currently and formerly incarcerated individuals in Benin City who have undergone Christian and Islamic rehabilitation programs. The study explicitly tests the influence of religious reformation on both moral transmutation and reduced recidivism, analyzing these relationships through an integrated Social Learning, Rehabilitation, and Desistance framework within a single cohesive research design by employing two distinct regression models.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional design incorporating both descriptive survey and correlational methods. The descriptive component systematically detailed how current and formerly incarcerated individuals in Benin City evaluate faith-based reformation initiatives, the moral alterations attributed to these interventions, and their expectations surrounding desistance. Concurrently, the correlational dimension evaluated the strength and direction of the linear relationships connecting exposure to these interventions with each outcome variable. Methodological literature indicates that this design is suitable when interventions are delivered as standard institutional operations and cannot be ethically or practically manipulated through random assignment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, because the target constructs represent subjective and internal states, a structured self-report instrument offers the most direct measurement strategy, while regression-based procedures satisfy the analytical demand for quantifying associations. Given the non-experimental framework, the term "effect" within the research hypotheses denotes statistical association rather than direct causation (Setia, 2016).

3.2 Population and Sampling

Requirements framed the study's target population as all current and formerly incarcerated individuals within Benin City who participated in Christian or Islamic reformation Programmes. Owing to the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame for this population, non-probability purposive sampling was deployed to select information-rich subjects possessing direct experience with the programs under evaluation (Etikan et al., 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015). The final analytical sample comprised 115 participants. Eligibility criteria required participants to be adults aged 18 years or older, either actively detained within or released from Benin City custodial facilities, with documented exposure to at least one structured religious intervention. Conversely, individuals under 18 years of age, those lacking program exposure, persons unable to comprehend the items or provide informed consent, individuals in acute psychological distress, and those who opted against participation or withdrew were systematically excluded (Cohen, 1988; Faul et al., 2009).

3.3 Instrument and Its Validation

Data collection utilized a self-developed structured questionnaire divided into four distinct sections. Section A comprised five items gathering demographic and program participation details. Sections B through D contained five Likert-scale statements each, scored from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), producing a total of 15 core substantive items (Likert, 1932). Section B evaluated religious-based reformation programs (Q1–Q5) across indicators such as service attendance, clarity of instruction from chaplains and imams, access to religious texts, private spiritual counseling, and an institutional environment promoting spiritual transformation. Section C operationalized moral transmutation (Q6–Q10) through dimensions of remorse, moral discernment, honesty and integrity, peacefulness, and value shift (Vandala, 2019; Jang & Johnson, 2022). Section D assessed perceived recidivism reduction (Q11–Q15) by examining crime-desistance resolve, pro-social network expectations, vocational preparation, avoidance of former criminal peers, and post-release commitment to religious participation (Maruna & Farrall, 2004). Because of the survey's cross-sectional self-report design, this latter variable represents desistance intention rather than verified reoffending.

Content and face validity were established through expert evaluation by two scholars specializing in criminology, chaplaincy practice, and research methodology, followed by pilot-testing among 20 comparable individuals excluded from the final analysis (Lawshe, 1975). Scale internal consistency was verified using Cronbach's (1951) alpha against the standard benchmark of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). The resulting coefficient values demonstrated acceptable reliability across scales: $\alpha = 0.76$ for program exposure, 0.83 for moral transmutation, 0.78 for recidivism reduction, and 0.75 for the overall measurement instrument.

3.4 Data Collection

Data gathering took place in March 2026 with administrative support from staff within the Benin Correctional Service. The research instrument was administered directly in person, with clarification provided in English, Pidgin, or local languages to accommodate the 15.7% of respondents who lacked formal schooling. To mitigate social desirability bias, respondents completed the questionnaires outside the physical sight and hearing range of custodial officers. Data integrity was maintained across the sample, with all 115 returned questionnaires fully completed across all core variables, eliminating the need for missing data imputation or case deletion.

3.5 Coding and Data Analysis

Items were coded on a 1-to-5 numeric continuum. As all statements were positively phrased, no reverse scoring was necessary. Scale scores for each underlying variable were derived by computing the mean across its five corresponding items, yielding continuous scores ranging from 1.00 to 5.00. Descriptive analyses calculated frequencies, percentages, item means, standard deviations, and composite means evaluated against a baseline benchmark of 3.00. Analyzing composite Likert scales as interval-level proxies in linear models aligns with established analytical conventions (Norman, 2010).

Hypothesis testing involved two separate simple linear regression models, the first modeling moral transmutation as a function of program exposure (H01), and the second modeling perceived recidivism reduction as a function of program exposure (H02). Each statistical model reported R, R^2, adjusted R^2, the overall F test ($df = 1, 113$), unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients, and corresponding t-test statistics for the slope parameters. Separate single-predictor models were estimated because the study design did not formalize mediation pathways.

Prior to hypothesis evaluation, necessary linear regression diagnostics were conducted (Field, 2018). Bivariate scatterplots and residual plots confirmed structural linearity. Autocorrelation among error terms was examined using the Durbin–Watson statistic (Durbin & Watson, 1951), yielding values of 2.043 for the moral transmutation equation and 1.736 for the recidivism reduction equation, both falling within the acceptable diagnostic range of 1.5 to 2.5. Outliers and influential data points were evaluated using standardized residuals alongside Cook's distance values. Hypothesis decisions applied a two-tailed significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.05$, where null hypotheses were rejected at $p < 0.05$; failure to reject was interpreted as insufficient empirical evidence rather than formal proof of the null condition. Standardized and unstandardized effect sizes (R^2, β) were reported alongside exact probability values.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Research protocols adhered to the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013) and received formal clearance and approval from correctional authorities. Recognizing that custodial detention inherently compromises individual autonomy, additional protections

were instituted in accordance with international ethical standards for research involving incarcerated populations (Gostin et al., 2007). Candidates were explicitly informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that choosing not to participate or withdrawing would have no bearing on custodial conditions, treatment, intervention access, or parole eligibility. Informed consent was secured in writing or, for participants with low literacy, via witnessed oral agreement. Official facility staff and chaplains were absent during survey completion and were denied access to individual response protocols. To preserve strict anonymity, no names, offender registration numbers, or legal offense details were recorded. Collected data were encrypted and stored securely with access restricted solely to the research team, in compliance with the Nigeria Data Protection Act (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2023), with findings compiled strictly at the aggregate level. Survey items were formatted neutrally to accommodate Christian, Islamic, and traditional spiritual beliefs, participants retained the right to skip individual items, and appropriate referral protocols were established in the event of psychological distress.

3.7 Methodological Limitations

Since all primary variables relied on self-reported data, the empirical findings remain susceptible to social desirability response bias (Nederhof, 1985). Concurrently, administering predictor and outcome measures simultaneously to single respondents introduces potential common-method variance, which can artificially inflate observed statistical associations (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Consequently, the high variance explained in the regression models (R^2 = .718 and .617) must be interpreted with appropriate caution. The cross-sectional architecture precludes drawing temporal sequencing inferences, resolving reverse causality concerns, addressing self-selection into programs, or controlling for unobserved confounders such as baseline pre-incarceration religiosity. Furthermore, the recidivism reduction metric reflects cognitive desistance intentions rather than actual behavioral reoffending (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016), and the potential indirect sequence linking program exposure to reduced criminal conduct through moral transmutation was not empirically evaluated.

Finally, while the sample size of 115 participants provided sufficient statistical power to detect large effects, it constrained estimation precision, subgroup comparisons, and multivariable covariate controls. The sample was overwhelmingly male and combined institutionalized and released individuals into a single cohort. The non-probability purposive sampling framework limits broader statistical generalization, and targeting individuals with prior program participation may overrepresent positive perceptions. Furthermore, reliability evaluation was restricted to internal consistency indices. Ultimately, these results should be interpreted as localized, hypothesis-generating findings, highlighting the need for future longitudinal studies incorporating objective behavioral benchmarks such as official re-arrest records.

4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on three distinct frameworks operating at complementary stages of the rehabilitative process, as no single framework independently accounts for the two core outcomes under investigation. Social Learning Theory focuses on the immediate social milieu where behavior is acquired; Rehabilitation Theory addresses the transformation of moral character targeted by interventions; and Desistance Theory details the identity shifts and social opportunities that sustain behavioral change post-release. Drawing upon Akers (2009), Jang and Johnson (2022), and Maruna (2001), this

integrated framework serves as an interpretive structure for the empirical relationships evaluated in Section 5.

Social Learning Theory posits that human behavior develops through continuous interaction between cognitive processes and environmental influences, specifically via exposure to peer groups, differential reinforcement, and social sanctions (Akers, 2009; Cosme, 2021). Within correctional settings, this mechanism explains how incarcerated individuals either reinforce criminal orientations or adopt pro-social behaviors based on prevailing norms and available role models. Faith-based initiatives serve as alternative learning environments where chaplains, imams, volunteers, and peer mentors actively demonstrate and reinforce pro-social standards through spiritual study groups and personal counseling (Jang & Johnson, 2022; Said & Davidson, 2021). Within the present study, this contextual dimension aligns with measured intervention components, including service attendance, clarity of religious instruction, access to sacred texts, individualized pastoral support, and the degree to which the custodial environment promotes faith as a vehicle for personal transformation.

Rehabilitation Theory—specifically its moral-reform paradigm—asserts that successful correctional outcomes require altering an individual's internal moral character and self-concept rather than merely managing behavioral risk or imparting practical skills (Forsberg & Douglas, 2020). Distinguishing instrumental skills training from moral reformation, this perspective highlights empathy, justice, and personal responsibility as indispensable to long-term change. Religious programming aligns with this model by prioritizing internal transformation through repentance and forgiveness while engaging moral emotions like guilt and remorse, enabling individuals to reframe their past behavior and envision constructive future roles (Jang & Johnson, 2022; Maruna, 2001). This theoretical line informs the study's first primary outcome, moral transmutation, measured through metrics of remorse, moral discernment, integrity, peaceful disposition, and shifts in personal values.

Desistance Theory frames the cessation of criminal behavior as an ongoing process wherein individuals rebuild a pro-social identity through personal narrative reconstruction and structured social opportunities (Maruna, 2001; McNeill et al., 2012; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Central to this framework is the concept of the redemption script, through which past criminal behavior is reinterpreted as a transcended error, defining desistance by the establishment of a credible law-abiding identity rather than the passive absence of offending (Maruna & Farrall, 2004). Religious frameworks offer compelling narrative structures for this transition, as theological concepts of sin, repentance, rebirth, and redemption allow individuals to reconcile past transgressions with a future of social conformity (Said & Davidson, 2021; Stansfield & Mowen, 2018). This dimension provides the conceptual foundation for the second outcome, recidivism reduction, operationalized through the resolve to resist crime, anticipated law-abiding peer networks, post-release livelihood preparation, separation from previous criminal associates, and the perceived necessity of continued religious engagement after release.

The interaction among these three theoretical perspectives operates as a sequential process with reciprocal feedback loops. Social learning mechanisms establish the institutional environment and behavioral models, exposing individuals to new normative definitions. Rehabilitation theory specifies the internal cognitive and moral transformations—such as conscience, remorse,

and ethical identity—intended to occur within that setting. Desistance theory then articulates how this transformed self is narrated and maintained through post-custodial roles and relationships. While a structural tension exists between Social Learning Theory's focus on external environmental reinforcement and Rehabilitation Theory's emphasis on internal moral conviction, the present synthesis reconciles these perspectives by viewing external reinforcement as the catalyst for internal change, and the narratives and social ties emphasized by Desistance Theory as the mechanisms that consolidate that internal shift. This dynamic functions bidirectionally, as internal moral growth prompts individuals to seek pro-social peer groups, which in turn reinforces the positive learning environment.

The current study applies this theoretical synthesis to expand existing literature in three distinct ways. First, whereas foundational literature in this domain (Jang & Johnson, 2022; Said & Davidson, 2021; Stansfield & Mowen, 2018) was predominantly developed in Western contexts, this study applies the integrated framework within a resource-constrained Nigerian custodial environment characterized by the coexistence of Christian, Islamic, and traditional religious traditions. Second, while these theoretical perspectives are typically examined in isolation, this study explicitly connects each theory to a distinct, measurable component of the research design—program exposure, moral transmutation, and recidivism reduction—testing the impact of program exposure across two separate regression models corresponding to the study's core hypotheses. Third, by treating moral transmutation and recidivism reduction as distinct yet interrelated outcomes, the framework simultaneously evaluates shifts in moral character and desistance intentions. The scope of these contributions remains bounded by the cross-sectional, self-reported nature of the data, which allows for the detection of associations predicted by the framework but cannot empirically confirm causal sequencing or verify whether moral transmutation acts as a formal mediator between program exposure and recidivism reduction—questions reserved for future longitudinal and mixed-methods research recommended in Section 8.

5. Results and Presentation of Data

This section presents the data collected from the 115 respondents and the results of the statistical tests. The presentation is organised around the two research objectives: (1) to determine the extent to which religious-based reformation programmes influence moral transmutation among inmates in Benin City prisons, and (2) to establish the effect of these programmes on perceived recidivism reduction among ex-inmates in Benin City. Interpretation of the results is reserved for Section 6

5.1 Preliminary Data Presentation

5.1.1 Data Screening and Scoring

All 115 questionnaires administered were returned fully completed; consequently, no cases were deleted and no missing values were imputed. Responses were scored from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Composite scores for religious-based reformation programmes (Q1–Q5), moral transmutation (Q6–Q10) and perceived recidivism reduction (Q11–Q15) were computed as the mean of the five items in each scale, giving a possible range of 1.00 to 5.00. Item and composite means are reported against the benchmark of 3.00 specified in Section 3.5. Internal consistency, estimated with Cronbach's alpha, was 0.76 for programme exposure, 0.83 for moral transmutation, 0.78 for recidivism reduction and 0.75 for the overall instrument (Section 3.3).

Table1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Demographic Characteristics	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	100	87.0
	Female	15	13.0
	TOTAL	115	100.0
Age	18 – 25 years	22	19.1
	26–35 years	33	28.7
	36-45 years	35	30.4
	46- 55 years	19	16.5
	Above 55 years	6	5.2
	TOTAL	115	100.0
Highest Educational Qualification	FSLC	26	22.6
	SSCE	49	42.6
	Diploma/Degree	22	19.1
	No Formal Education	18	15.7
	TOTAL	115	100.0
Religious Affiliation	Christianity	60	52.2
	Islam	41	35.7
	Traditional / Others	10	8.7
	None	4	3.5
	TOTAL	115	100.0
Frequency of Participation in Religious Programmes	Daily	26	22.6
	Weekly	48	41.7
	Occasionally (e.g., during festivals)	22	19.1
	Rarely / Never	19	16.5
	TOTAL	115	100.0

Source: Researcher's Field Work (2026)

Table 1 shows that 100 (87.0%) of the respondents were male, while 15 (13.0%) were female. Regarding age, 22 (19.1%) respondents were aged 18–25 years, 33 (28.7%) were aged 26–35 years, 35 (30.4%) were aged 36–45 years, 19 (16.5%) were aged 46–55 years, and 6 (5.2%) were above 55 years.

With respect to educational qualification, 26 (22.6%) respondents had First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC), 49 (42.6%) had Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE), 22 (19.1%) possessed a diploma or degree, while 18 (15.7%) had no formal education.

In terms of religious affiliation, 60 (52.2%) respondents identified as Christians, 41 (35.7%) as Muslims, 10 (8.7%) as belonging to traditional or other religious affiliations, and 4 (3.5%) reported no religious affiliation.

Concerning participation in religious programmes, 26 (22.6%) respondents participated daily, 48 (41.7%) participated weekly, 22 (19.1%) participated occasionally, and 19 (16.5%) reported rarely or never participating.

5.2 Objective One: Religious-Based Reformation Programmes and Moral Transmutation

The first objective examined the extent to which religious-based reformation programmes influence moral transmutation among inmates in Benin City prisons. Table 2 presents respondents' perceptions of their

participation in religious-based reformation programmes.

Table 2: Respondents' Perception of Religious-Based Reformation Programmes

S/N	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev.
Q1	I maintain consistent involvement in organized religious services and prayer meetings conducted within the correctional facility.	0 (0.0)	8 (7.0)	36 (31.3)	49 (42.6)	22 (19.1)	3.74	0.85
Q2	The religious teachings delivered by chaplains/imams are characterized by their comprehensibility and practical application.	0 (0.0)	3 (2.6)	29 (25.2)	50 (43.5)	33 (28.7)	3.98	0.81
Q3	The facility provides adequate access to religious literature (e.g., Bible, Quran) and associated study materials.	1 (0.9)	2 (1.7)	31 (27.0)	50 (43.5)	31 (27.0)	3.94	0.83
Q4	Religious leaders offer consistent, individualized spiritual counselling sessions tailored for inmates.	0 (0.0)	4 (3.5)	29 (25.2)	51 (44.3)	31 (27.0)	3.95	0.81
Q5	The prison environment actively promotes the practice of religious faith as a viable mechanism for personal change.	0 (0.0)	1 (0.9)	31 (27.0)	49 (42.6)	34 (29.6)	4.01	0.78
Grand mean							3.92	0.82

Researcher's Field Work (2026)

5.1.4 Composite Scale Scores

Table 2 indicates that the item means ranged from 3.74 to 4.01, with a grand mean of 3.92 and standard deviation of 0.82. Q1 recorded a mean of 3.74 (SD = 0.85), Q2 recorded 3.98 (SD = 0.81), Q3 recorded 3.94 (SD = 0.83), Q4 recorded 3.95 (SD = 0.81), and Q5 recorded 4.01 (SD = 0.78).

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of the Composite Scale Scores (N = 115)

Variable	Items	Cronbach's α	Mean	SD
Religious-based reformation programmes	Q1–Q5	0.76	3.92	0.58
Moral transmutation	Q6–Q10	0.83	3.91	0.59
Perceived recidivism reduction	Q11–Q15	0.78	3.86	0.60

Source: Researcher's Field Work (2026).

The composite mean was 3.92 (SD = 0.58) for religious-based reformation programmes, 3.91 (SD = 0.59) for moral transmutation and 3.86 (SD = 0.60) for perceived recidivism reduction (Table 3).

5.2 Objective One: Impact of Religious-Based Reformation Programmes on Moral Transmutation

5.2.1 Descriptive Results

Table 4: Respondents' Ratings of Moral Transmutation

S/N	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev.
Q6	Engagement in religious programmes has fostered a sense of genuine remorse regarding my past actions.	0 (0.0)	5 (4.3)	40 (34.8)	42 (36.5)	28 (24.3)	3.81	0.86
Q7	I have cultivated an enhanced perception of right and wrong through the religious teachings provided in this setting.	1 (0.9)	3 (2.6)	24 (20.9)	55 (47.8)	32 (27.8)	3.99	0.82
Q8	In my daily interactions with inmates and wardens, I now prioritize the principles of honesty and integrity.	1 (0.9)	3 (2.6)	23 (20.0)	54 (47.0)	34 (29.6)	4.02	0.83
Q9	The process of religious reformation has effectively replaced aggressive tendencies with a more peaceful disposition.	0 (0.0)	6 (5.2)	32 (27.8)	59 (51.3)	18 (15.7)	3.77	0.77
Q10	I maintain that my core values have undergone a fundamental change for the better as a result of these programmes.	0 (0.0)	2 (1.7)	31 (27.0)	52 (45.2)	30 (26.1)	3.96	0.78
Grand mean							3.91	0.81

Researcher's Field Work (2026)

The mean scores for the five moral-transmutation indicators ranged from 3.77 to 4.02. Q6 recorded a mean of 3.81 (SD = 0.86), Q7 recorded 3.99 (SD = 0.82), Q8 recorded 4.02 (SD = 0.83), Q9 recorded 3.77 (SD = 0.77), and Q10 recorded 3.96 (SD = 0.78). The grand mean was 3.91, with a standard deviation of 0.81.

5.2.2 Regression Results for Hypothesis One

$H0_1$: Religious-based reformation programmes have no significant effect on moral transmutation among inmates in Benin City prisons.

$H0_1$ was tested with a simple linear regression of the moral transmutation composite score on the programme exposure composite score. The Durbin–Watson statistic was 2.043, within the acceptable range of 1.5 to 2.5 (Section 3.5). The model summary, analysis of variance and coefficient estimates are presented in Tables 5 to 7.

Table 5: Model Summary – Religious-Based Reformation Programmes and Moral Transmutation

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. error of the estimate	Durbin–Watson
1	0.847	0.718	0.715	0.313	2.043

Predictor: (Constant), religious-based reformation programmes. Dependent variable: moral transmutation.

Table 6: Analysis of Variance – Moral Transmutation

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p
Regression	28.087	1	28.087	287.169	< 0.001
Residual	11.052	113	0.098		
Total	39.139	114			

Predictor: (Constant), religious-based reformation programmes. Dependent variable: moral transmutation.

Table 7: Regression Coefficients – Moral Transmutation

Predictor	B	SE	β	T	p
(Constant)	0.542	0.201	—	2.699	0.008
Religious-based reformation programmes	0.858	0.051	0.847	16.946	< 0.001

Dependent variable: moral transmutation. B = unstandardised coefficient; SE = standard error of B; β = standardised coefficient; df for t = 113.

Religious-based reformation programmes significantly predicted moral transmutation, $R = 0.847$, $R^2 = 0.718$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.715$, $F(1, 113) = 287.17$, $p < 0.001$ (Tables 5 and 6). The unstandardised coefficient was $B = 0.858$ (SE = 0.051; $\beta = 0.847$), $t(113) = 16.946$, $p < 0.001$ (Table 7). The fitted equation was: moral transmutation = 0.542 + 0.858 × (religious-based reformation programmes). At the 0.05 level of significance, $H0_1$ was rejected.

5.3 Objective Two: Effect of Religious-Based Reformation Programmes on Recidivism Reduction

5.3.1 Descriptive Results

Table 8: Respondents' Ratings of Perceived Recidivism Reduction

S/N	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev.
Q11	The religious values I have internalised provide me with the necessary resolve to resist the temptation of returning to crime.	0 (0.0)	11 (9.6)	29 (25.2)	48 (41.7)	27 (23.5)	3.79	0.91
Q12	I am confident that my faith will facilitate positive associations with law-abiding citizens upon my discharge.	0 (0.0)	4 (3.5)	26 (22.6)	54 (47.0)	31 (27.0)	3.97	0.80
Q13	Participation in religious-based vocational and ethical training has equipped me to pursue legitimate means of livelihood.	0 (0.0)	6 (5.2)	32 (27.8)	54 (47.0)	23 (20.0)	3.82	0.81
Q14	Due to my current religious commitments, I am significantly less likely to reintegrate into my former criminal social circles.	0 (0.0)	3 (2.6)	34 (29.6)	54 (47.0)	24 (20.9)	3.86	0.77
Q15	I believe that sustained involvement in religious activities post-release is fundamental to achieving permanent desistance from prison.	0 (0.0)	5 (4.3)	35 (30.4)	47 (40.9)	28 (24.3)	3.85	0.84
Grand mean							**3.86**	**0.83**

Researcher's Field work (2026)

Table 7 shows that the item means ranged from 3.79 to 3.97, with a grand mean of 3.86 and standard deviation of 0.83. Q11 recorded a mean of 3.79 (SD = 0.91), Q12 recorded 3.97 (SD = 0.80), Q13 recorded 3.82 (SD = 0.81), Q14 recorded 3.86 (SD = 0.77), and Q15 recorded 3.85 (SD = 0.84)

5.3.2 Regression Results for Hypothesis Two

$H0_2$: Religious-based reformation programmes have no significant effect on recidivism reduction among ex-inmates in Benin City.

$H0_2$ was tested with a simple linear regression of the perceived recidivism

reduction composite score on the programme exposure composite score. The Durbin–Watson statistic was 1.736, within the acceptable range of 1.5 to 2.5 (Section 3.5). The results are presented in Tables 9 to 11.

Table 9: Model Summary – Religious-Based Reformation Programmes and Recidivism Reduction

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. error of the estimate	Durbin–Watson
1	0.785	0.617	0.613	0.374	1.736

Predictor: (Constant), religious-based reformation programmes. Dependent variable: perceived recidivism reduction.

Table 10: Analysis of Variance – Recidivism Reduction

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p
Regression	25.402	1	25.402	181.712	< 0.001
Residual	15.796	113	0.140		
Total	41.198	114			

Predictor: (Constant), religious-based reformation programmes. Dependent variable: perceived recidivism reduction.

Table 11: Regression Coefficients – Recidivism Reduction

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	0.657	0.240	—	2.735	0.007
Religious-based reformation programmes	0.816	0.061	0.785	13.480	< 0.001

Dependent variable: perceived recidivism reduction. B = unstandardised coefficient; SE = standard error of B; β = standardised coefficient; df for t = 113.

Religious-based reformation programmes significantly predicted perceived recidivism reduction, $R = 0.785$, $R^2 = 0.617$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.613$, $F(1, 113) = 181.71$, $p < 0.001$ (Tables 9 and 10). The unstandardised coefficient was $B = 0.816$ (SE = 0.061; $\beta = 0.785$), $t(113) = 13.480$, $p < 0.001$ (Table 11). The fitted equation was: perceived recidivism reduction = 0.657 + 0.816 × (religious-based reformation programmes). At the 0.05 level of significance, $H0_2$ was rejected.

5.4 Summary of Hypothesis Tests

Table 12: Summary of the Simple Linear Regression Tests of the Null Hypotheses

Null hypothesis	Dependent variable	R	R^2	F(1, 113)	B (SE)	t	p	Decision at α = 0.05
$H0_1$	Moral transmutation	0.847	0.718	287.17	0.858 (0.051)	16.946	< 0.001	Rejected
$H0_2$	Perceived recidivism reduction	0.785	0.617	181.71	0.816 (0.061)	13.480	< 0.001	Rejected

Source: Researcher's Field Work (2026). Independent variable in both models: religious-based reformation programmes. df = 1, 113 for all F tests; t tests have 113 degrees of freedom.

Table 7 shows that the item means ranged from 3.79 to 3.97, with a grand mean of 3.86 and standard deviation of 0.83. Q11 recorded a mean of 3.79 (SD = 0.91), Q12 recorded 3.97 (SD = 0.80), Q13 recorded 3.82 (SD = 0.81), Q14 recorded 3.86 (SD = 0.77), and Q15 recorded 3.85 (SD = 0.84).

6. Discussion of Findings

Both empirical regression models presented in Section 5 yield convergent conclusions. Engagement in religious-based reformation programmes served as a statistically significant predictor of both perceived moral transmutation, R2 = 0.718, adjusted R2 = 0.715, F(1, 113) = 287.17, p < 0.001, B = 0.858, t = 16.95, and perceived reduction in recidivism, R2 = 0.617, adjusted R2 = 0.613, F(1, 113) = 181.71, p < 0.001, B = 0.816, t = 13.48. Consequently, both null hypotheses were rejected at the α = 0.05 significance threshold across the sample of 115 current and former correctional inmates. Evaluated against Cohen's standard benchmarks, these statistical outputs represent robust, high-magnitude effect sizes. Furthermore, high overall mean scores—3.91 for moral transmutation and 3.86 for recidivism reduction—confirm strong respondent agreement with both positive outcomes. The ensuing discussion interprets these findings through the study's tripartite theoretical framework, synthesizes the two empirical models into a unified analytical narrative, contextualizes results relative to existing literature, and explores practical implications for the Nigerian Correctional Service, remaining carefully bounded by the cross-sectional, self-reported, and purposive parameters of the study design.

The observed association between intervention exposure and moral transmutation aligns closely with Social Learning Theory. As articulated by Akers (2009), human behavior is acquired and maintained through differential association, behavioral imitation, the internalization of favorable or unfavorable definitions regarding social conformity, and differential reinforcement. In densely populated custodial environments like Benin City, where criminogenic peer subcultures routinely challenge conventional moral codes, faith-based programming offers a structured counter-environment for prosocial learning. Imams, chaplains, external volunteers, and devout peers provide constructive behavioral models, while organized prayer sessions and pastoral mentorship systematically reinforce values of honesty, self-discipline, and accountability. This theoretical reading is directly substantiated by the highest-scoring indicator on the moral transmutation scale: the daily prioritization of honesty and integrity when interacting with fellow inmates and correctional staff (M = 4.02), alongside strong recognition of institutional faith promotion as a vehicle for personal transformation (M =

4.01). Respondents effectively experience the custodial environment as a setting where prosocial behaviors are modeled and affirmed. Conversely, the comparatively lower mean recorded for replacing aggressive tendencies with a peaceful disposition (M = 3.77) further reinforces social learning principles; institutional aggression is heavily reinforced by survival imperatives and peer pressures, rendering behavioral modification slower than shifts in underlying attitude.

Rehabilitation Theory—specifically through the moral-reform construct framed by Forsberg and Douglas (2020)—further clarifies the substantial explanatory power of the initial regression model. This framework posits that authentic rehabilitation extends beyond superficial risk management or vocational skill acquisition, requiring a structural transformation of an individual's moral character and personal self-concept. The vast proportion of variance explained in moral transmutation (71.8%) indicates that participants view faith-based intervention as directly targeting personal remorse, ethical discernment, and foundational values. Survey items capturing genuine remorse (M = 3.81), heightened moral judgment (M = 3.99), and fundamental shifts in core value systems (M = 3.96) directly reflect the internal reform described by this model. These findings resonate with the conceptualization advanced by Jang and Johnson (2022), who characterize religion as an active mechanism for moral restoration wherein spiritual repentance, forgiveness, and accountability fundamentally alter how justice-involved individuals evaluate themselves. Nevertheless, while these findings align with moral-reform principles, self-reported metrics cannot fully isolate genuine character transformation from socially desirable self-presentation.

Desistance Theory offers critical insight into the second regression model and explicates the developmental link connecting both empirical outcomes. Maruna (2001) established that individuals successfully exiting crime construct a "redemption script"—a coherent personal narrative that reframes past criminal conduct as a temporary misstep while affirming a newfound conventional identity. Religious traditions naturally supply established cognitive templates for this identity shift through core doctrines of sin, repentance, personal rebirth, and spiritual redemption (Maruna & Farrall, 2004; Said & Davidson, 2021). The survey items assessing perceived recidivism closely reflect this process. Expressed confidence that religious faith will facilitate post-release social ties with law-abiding citizens yielded the highest score in Table 4 (M = 3.97). Similarly, a reduced likelihood of re-engaging with former criminal networks (M = 3.86, SD = 0.77, representing the lowest dispersion across the scale) and the conviction that sustained post-release religious engagement is essential for desistance (M = 3.85) highlight identity reconstruction and social re-anchoring. These patterns parallel the work of Stansfield and Mowen (2018), who emphasize religious involvement and the surrounding moral community as pivotal assets for community re-entry.

Synthesizing these findings points toward a sequential continuum in which all three theoretical frameworks function successively. Social learning mechanisms first modify the immediate social environment and normative influences within custody. Next, moral-reform processes convert this spiritual exposure into internal shifts in conscience and personal identity—the exact construct captured in Model 1. Finally, desistance processes translate this transformed self-concept into the post-release environment, manifesting as personal resolve against temptation, deliberate avoidance of former criminal peers, and sustained commitment to legal livelihoods—the construct evaluated in Model 2. Respondents' belief that internalized moral

values grant them the strength to resist reoffending (M = 3.79) reflects this theoretical continuity, demonstrating that the psychological and moral assets developed in Model 1 serve as protective factors in Model 2. The slightly lower variance explained in the second model (R2 = 0.617 vs. 0.718) is theoretically sound; post-custodial desistance depends heavily on broader extrinsic variables, including stable employment, housing availability, family reunification, and social stigma—factors operating outside the single-predictor models evaluated here. While the empirical data mirror this conceptual sequence, the cross-sectional design precludes definitive causal or temporal claims, leaving path-analytic and longitudinal verification for future research.

Benchmarking these empirical results against broader literature necessitates careful methodological qualification. In an evidence-based synthesis evaluating whether faith-based initiatives measurably reduce reoffending, Dodson et al. (2011) concluded that while preliminary evidence appears promising, conclusions remain constrained by systemic methodological weaknesses, notably self-selection bias and the absence of rigorous control groups. The present findings directionally support the premise that faith-based engagement associates with improved behavioral outcomes; however, they share identical methodological constraints. Participants were purposively sampled, no non-religious control group was evaluated, and outcome variables relied on perceived rather than officially verified reoffending metrics. Consequently, the exceptionally large effect sizes observed here should not be interpreted as proving a stronger program effect than established literature suggests. Rather, they likely reflect common-method variance arising from a shared perceptual data source, wherein respondents who evaluate the program positively similarly report favorable personal outcomes. Nevertheless, this study offers valuable, localized empirical evidence from Nigeria to a research landscape historically dominated by Western settings, even if it does not establish counterfactual proof of reduced recidivism. Regarding the work of Jang and Johnson (2022), the robust correlation between program engagement and moral transmutation supports their theoretical assertion that religion functions as a catalyst for moral reform. Because their framework outlines an internal evolutionary process, operationalizing it solely through self-reports captures perceived change; validating true cognitive shift requires objective behavioral indicators, such as institutional disciplinary logs and independent moral reasoning assessments.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

An empirical analysis of faith-based reformative initiatives in Benin City custodial facilities confirms their effectiveness in promoting offender rehabilitation. Grounded in Social Learning Theory, Rehabilitation Theory, and Desistance Theory, the research examined how religious interventions impact moral transmutation and perceived recidivism reduction among active and former inmates. Quantitative results indicate that systematic involvement in religious programs strongly predicts moral renewal ($R^2 = 0.718$, $F(1, 113) = 287.17$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 71.8% of the variance in participants' self-reported moral reorientation and personal integrity. Likewise, faith-driven rehabilitation accounts for 61.7% of the variance in perceived recidivism reduction ($R^2 = 0.617$, $F(1, 113) = 181.71$, $p < 0.001$). This underscores that internalized spiritual values, pastoral support, and moral instruction form critical psychological and social safeguards against reoffending. Ultimately, the findings show that within resource-limited correctional settings, faith-mediated interventions counter criminogenic subcultures by building cognitive scaffolds, enabling redemption

scripts, and fostering genuine moral transmutation.

To optimize these outcomes, key strategic actions are proposed for correctional leaders, community partners, and policymakers:

1. Institutional Integration: The Nigerian Correctional Service should formally integrate standardized faith-based modules into its primary rehabilitation framework across all custodial centres. Execution requires professionalizing chaplain and imam training, establishing uniform ethical curricula, and ensuring multi-religious inclusivity to accommodate various faith traditions without bias.
2. Post-Release Mentorship Networks: Faith-based organizations should expand pre-release and post-release support by establishing formal Memoranda of Understanding with custodial centres. Beyond spiritual care, these partnerships should offer practical re-entry resources, including housing support, vocational training, job placement assistance, and community-based anti-stigma initiatives to ensure successful reintegration.
3. National Policy & Evaluation: Judicial authorities and national policymakers should create a cohesive national policy governing faith-based prison rehabilitation. This framework ought to define operational benchmarks, set up public-private funding mechanisms, and implement standardized monitoring and evaluation systems linked to behavioral metrics, shifts in moral attitudes, and measurable desistance outcomes.

However, several methodological constraints qualify these conclusions. Relying on self-reported survey data creates potential exposure to social desirability bias among incarcerated participants. Additionally, the study used a cross-sectional correlational design with a purposive sample of 115 individuals from Benin City custodial centres. Although this sample size provided sufficient statistical power for regression modeling, the localized focus and non-probability sampling limit the direct statistical generalizability of these results to the broader Nigerian correctional system. Finally, single-point cross-sectional data limits the ability to establish long-term causal links between religious participation and actual post-release reoffending over extended timeframes.

Future studies should employ longitudinal and mixed-methods research designs to expand on this research. Tracking participant cohorts over multi-year post-release windows is critical to observing actual desistance trajectories, measuring official re-arrest figures, and verifying whether moral transmutation persists beyond incarceration. Comparative research across geographically and culturally varied facilities is also recommended to assess regional differences in program implementation and participant outcomes. Lastly, future inquiries should isolate and evaluate specific mechanisms of religious interventions—such as prayer frequency, scriptural study, individual pastoral counseling, and peer mentorship—to identify which specific spiritual practices drive behavioral change and recidivism reduction most effectively.

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