

CORRECTIONAL CHAPLAIN PERSPECTIVES

Inmate peer ministry: The chaplain's role

By Kristi B. Miller, Ph.D. and Vance L. Drum, D.Min.

In a necessary, security-driven world trained to perceive deception and risk, the prison may develop into an “us versus them” culture between inmates and staff. The very nature of custody, control and security often negates much expression of individuality on the part of inmates. Key features of the prison environment — lack of privacy, loss of free choice, frequent fear of violence, overcrowding, stigma, paranoia and distrust — are known to lead to personality changes. In fact, prisoners describe this process of prisonization as “emotional numbing.”¹ Even the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that “prisons are bad for mental health.”²

Fostering spiritual growth

The correctional chaplain is a voice calling out to a population in a jail or prison. Chaplains, attempting to address the soul sickness of inmates, make intentional efforts to see the God-given potential best in each inmate. Chaplains know that spiritual needs must be addressed in order to realize genuine rehabilitation and positive transformation.

Moreover, the chapel itself often is the place where inmates feel the least marginalized and rejected.

The chaplain works with inmates to foster spiritual growth and the free exercise of the inmates' faith, as guaranteed in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, and as codified in the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000.^{3,4}

In addition, this atmosphere of spiritual growth in prison is supported by caring volunteers who offer new, morally rehabilitative

perspectives for living, and an expression of empathy to many who may not have experienced much grace nor forgiveness in life.

Every experienced prison chaplain knows, however, that manipulation and danger can find its way into a chapel program. A regular diet of this can lead to the chaplain becoming cynical in his or her attitude toward inmates. We've seen it and, unfortunately, lived it at times.



istock/LightFieldStudios

Chaplains realize that, in general, they are working with some of the most broken, wounded and dysfunctional people in society. Inmates represent those who have experienced the greatest measure of emotional and physical deprivation, sexual abuse and various other types of violence, trauma, abandonment and loss. And in the environment that they are placed in, we are not surprised when deceptive, destructive or self-serving behaviors manifest themselves.

Can a bad inmate become good?

Can one who once exhibited the most destructive and dangerous behavior then become the one who exhibits wholeness and peace, even to the point of desiring to impart healing to others? Even the most skeptical of chaplains will admit that genuine rehabilitation may happen. They have seen inmates who are living a life of fullness and serenity, who are modeling good behavior from a sincerely changed heart — a new life direction. We know inmates who have accepted responsibility for their actions, who have experienced true remorse and have embraced forgiveness. They have decided not to be defined by their past mistakes.

Inmates are takers in part because they have been wounded in their lives — broken minds, injured bodies and shattered souls. They are operating from a place of serious deficiency and need. People who have experienced substantial mental, emotional and spiritual healing relate to others on the basis of wholeness and health. They may no longer become takers but givers. They find personal

value in helping others because they understand that someone helped them find healing. By serving others, morally rehabilitated inmates know that they add worth to their own lives as they help their peers find a better path, they become “wounded healers.”⁵

By serving others, morally rehabilitated inmates know that they add worth to their own lives as they help their peers find a better path, they become “wounded healers.”

Here is a question for chaplains: What are you doing with potential human resources for ministry in your prison? Your mission to tend to the spiritual needs of the inmate population is more than what you may be able to successfully manage. One option is to recruit volunteer assistance from the outside. This is helpful and important. An additional option, which has been demonstrated to be not only workable and legal but also critical, is to develop resources from within the inmate population itself.

Moral rehabilitation

Having served in various prison chaplaincy roles, we both now dedicate our efforts to the development of moral rehabilitation through the work of peer ministers within the prison setting. One proven way of investing in the peer ministry model is by embedding a seminary within the prison by which long-term inmates can be trained to serve their peers. This was first modeled at Angola (Louisiana State Penitentiary) under the leadership of Warden Burl Cain.

The results of that 23-year program have been documented in evidence-based research conducted by Baylor University.⁶ The findings of that research have encouraged many other states to follow the peer ministry model of Angola. In 2016, Burl Cain established the Global Prison Seminaries Foundation (GPSF) to work with correctional systems throughout the country.⁷ GPSF believes that one of the greatest assets to any department of corrections system is the morally rehabilitated inmate who has been given the opportunity to influence his or her peers for good. What, then, is the chaplain’s role in the peer ministry model?

The chaplain’s role in inmate peer ministry

There are at least four ways in which dedicated chaplains are essential to the effective functioning of inmate peer ministers:

1. **Nurturing a prosocial path.** Chaplains, with the assistance of quality community volunteers, offer inmates new perspectives on how to live their life. When an inmate

makes a decision to try a new path, the chaplain is there, providing encouragement to do the right thing, to learn how to live a different life in prison, and to be introduced to re-entry resources which will continue to help upon release. The chaplain is visible and available, providing in-prison leadership for inmates willing to make a change. Those who practice a changed life may become agents of change for others.

2. **Encourage the ministry activities of peer ministers.** The use of trained peer ministers will multiply the chaplain's efforts exponentially. Moreover, peer ministers themselves are uniquely equipped to speak into the mental, emotional and spiritual needs of the prison population. Often, they have come from their own place of deep woundedness and defeat. The peer minister's own story of overcoming, coupled with specific training to counsel and comfort, makes him or her a

powerful voice of healing in an environment marked by constant stressors and trauma. The fact that they live among the very ones they are serving — their peers — gives them a unique “ministry-in-place” that no free person could hold.

Additionally, peer-led ministry activity allows for an authentic setting in that the inmate leading those types of activities knows firsthand the difficulties of the incarcerated population. The participant has the benefit of knowing his or her peer minister on a personal level, living with him or her 24/7, and can evaluate the motives of that minister and the ministry.

3. **Selection of peer ministers.** The chaplain usually knows the inmates who would make the best peer ministers. Such inmates are already modeling moral rehabilitation, and are likely already a participant in chapel events and other prosocial activities. The chaplain

should encourage those inmates to pursue the training necessary to become a peer minister. In doing so, the chaplain is building his or her future team by which to best meet the spiritual needs of the population.

Selected inmates must be humble and teachable, respected by their peers, and selected without favoritism. They must understand that they will exercise no material or coercive authority over their peers, nor receive any special benefits or privileges for their service. All service is voluntary.

Seminary-selected inmates have long sentences to allow for four years of accredited schooling, and must have enough time to continue to minister after graduation. Selections are made without regard to one's faith or no faith preference.

4. **Supervision.** Chaplains exercise supervision over the peer ministers in the prison. They meet regularly with the peer ministers, providing guidance and direction. Though a peer minister may have received a top-quality training and education, he or she will continue to need mentorship. The degree itself does not determine an inmate's suitability to be a moral leader among his or her peers. The transformation of one's character — as evidenced by prosocial activity, wisdom, integrity and selfless servanthood — is the determining factor. The chaplain can be



istock/Arrangements-Photography

the one who encourages, and one to whom the peer minister is accountable, as he or she continues on the road toward spiritual maturity.

Effective chaplain supervision

Chaplains have a vital role to play in the effective management of a successful peer ministry program. Inmate life directions are changed in a positive manner as moral rehabilitation is practiced by greater numbers of inmates. Peer ministers' respected and prosocial influence affects the entire culture of the prison. Use of force and incidents of inmate violence decline.

Reintegration into society is facilitated and recidivism rates are reduced, as Johnson et. al have headlined in their research.⁸ Chaplaincy management and supervision provide necessary guidance and direction for the program.

ENDNOTES

¹ Jarrett, C. (2018). How prison changes people. London, United Kingdom: British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). May 1. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20180430-the-unexpected-ways-prison-time-changes-people>

² *Mental health and prisons*. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2005 (Information Sheet). Retrieved from http://www.who.int/mental_health/policy/mh_in_prison.pdf

³ Constitution of the United States. First Amendment

⁴ Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, 42 U.S.C. §§ 2000cc, et seq. Retrieved from justice.gov/crt/title-42-public-health-and-welfare

⁵ Nouwen, H. J. M. (1979). *The Wounded Healer*. New York: Random House.

⁶ Hallett, M., Hays, J., Johnson, B., Jang, S. J., & Duwe, G. (2017). *The Angola Prison seminary: Effects of faith-based ministry on identity transformation, desistance, and rehabilitation*. New York and London: Routledge.

⁷ See www.globalprisonseminaries.org

⁸ Johnson, B. *The Angola Prison seminary*, p. 205.

Kristi B. Miller, Ph.D. is the former warden and former chaplain at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women, and is currently the chief operating officer of the Global Prison Seminaries Foundation.

Vance L. Drum, D.Min. is the former director of chaplains at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, and is currently the peer ministry coordinator at the Global Prison Seminaries Foundation.



Streamline TB testing with QuantiFERON®-TB Gold Plus

Reduce the risk of active TB exposure and improve screening efficiency at your facility by using QuantiFERON-TB Gold Plus at intake and during routine screenings of inmates and correctional facility staff.

To learn more, visit www.QuantiFERON.com/corrections.

QuantiFERON-TB Gold Plus is an in vitro diagnostic test for *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* infection. QFT-Plus is an indirect test for *M. tuberculosis* infection (including disease) and is intended for use in conjunction with risk assessment, radiography, and other medical and diagnostic evaluations. QFT-Plus package inserts, up-to-date licensing information and product-specific disclaimers can be found at www.QuantiFERON.com.

Trademarks: QIAGEN®, Sample to Insight®, QFT®, QuantiFERON® (QIAGEN Group). Registered names, trademarks, etc. used in this document, even when not specifically marked as such, are not to be considered unprotected by law.

PROM-13415-001 11/2018 © 2018 QIAGEN, all rights reserved.

Ordering www.qiagen.com/shop | Technical Support support.qiagen.com | Website www.QuantiFERON.com

Sample to Insight