

Transforming a Texas prison

A brief history

By Vance L. Drum, DMin

It wasn't easy. But it happened. This is the short story.

Texas' Eastham Prison was bad — an unhealthy place to live and rough place to work.¹ I had gone there to serve as a chaplain in 1985, and stayed until 2012.

Called in a 1986 *Newsweek* cover story "America's Toughest Prison," Eastham had been the former

residence of Clyde Barrow (Bonnie and Clyde) 90 years ago.² The old prison, housing 2,500 maximum security inmates at the end of a road, was reserved for Texas' worst. The nickname "Bloody Eastham" was deserved: my first year there five inmates died violent deaths. Thankfully, there were no violent deaths at Eastham after that first year.

The early days

In 1985 in the Texas Department of Corrections, there was no pre-service training for non-uniformed employees.³ I was directed to the unit on my first day, shown my office, and told, "Here you are, chaplain, go to work!" My only guidance was from former Eastham chaplain Emmett Solomon, who had gone to Huntsville to become the Director of Chaplains for the agency.

Emmett kindly took me in his vehicle into Lovelady, the nearest rural town 18 miles away, ostensibly to show me where I might locate a house. His real reason for taking me for a two-hour ride was to give me some pointers — do's and don'ts — about how to do my job. The main words I remember from him: "Do not become a telephone call chaplain. If you do, you'll have a line of inmates a mile long outside your office!" That stuck with me.

Later, Solomon taught us all: "Find the meanest, baddest field boss on your unit and befriend him, because one day he will be your boss."

In those days Texas prison wardens were warrior wardens; manager wardens would come later.



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Controlling a prison was all about “us versus them,” and the way to do it was often harsh. The Texas Department of Corrections had been declared unconstitutional by federal Judge William Wayne Justice in a class action lawsuit from Eastham inmate David Ruiz, in *Ruiz v. Estelle*, in 1979.⁴ The judge had imposed federal oversight to monitor the sweeping reforms he had ordered.

My experience with a warrior warden was not with a field boss. He was a psychologist who was sent to “the Ham” to “straighten it out.” Senior Warden George Waldron came, a soft-spoken man (usually), who did not seem to care much for chaplains. One day in 1987 I went into his office to ask him for a multi-day big program event, similar to the one we’d had in 1986 that had been brought to Eastham by headquarters (not by wardens). The warden was reading a document, and making notes. I paused for his attention. He never looked up but said, “Go on ...” I took about a minute to begin to explain the program request. Suddenly, he took off his glasses, dropped them on his desk, looked up and stated: “Chaplain. Do you know where you are? YOU ARE AT THE EASTHAM PRISON! ... [He paused.] You’ve got balls. Now get out of my office!” I did. I never made another request to him in his remaining two years at Eastham. If I needed something, I went to an assistant warden.⁵

Administrative leadership

In an agency-transforming move in 1993, Governor Ann Richards appointed former Harris County (Houston) District Attorney Carol

Vance to be the Chair of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice. Chair Vance was a devout man of faith who knew we needed help. He came to our chaplains’ training soon after his appointment and said: “In Texas, we are in trouble. We’re bringing in tens of thousands of new inmates, and we’re not doing anything for them, except warehousing them. We’re not giving them programs; we’re not doing much to redirect their lives. Correctional officers are not trained or equipped to help on this. We need massive assistance from the community, and we need you chaplains to help.”

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Chair Vance soon ordered community volunteer recruitment to begin. He directed volunteer training to be written, along with supervision of the new volunteers. In a few years there were nearly 25,000 religious, education and substance use volunteers, trained and on the computer. Approximately 95% were religious volunteers, of all races and all faiths. They began teaching a myriad of rehabilitative, reentry and

faith-based classes, as well as conducting worship services for many faith groups. Eastham’s — indeed the agency’s — transformation had begun in earnest.

The American Correctional Association (ACA) had much to do with bringing the Eastham Unit into the 21st century. In collaboration with our new, visionary executive directors Brad Livingston and Bryan Collier, Eastham was the first large Texas prison to be ACA accredited, in 1999. By 2012, all 102 state prisons in Texas had been accredited, earning ACA’s Golden Eagle accreditation award. Mr. Livingston emphasized professional excellence, volunteers and programs. Mr. Collier continued and expanded on the good leadership of his predecessor, emphasizing the value of faith-based programs in an effective treatment plan. ACA accreditation had the effect of elevating chaplaincy, and giving prestige to rehabilitative and reentry programs. Warrior wardens were no longer being promoted; manager wardens were being elevated to the top spots.

Peer ministry

Chaplain Emmett Solomon had come to Eastham in 1967. He soon instituted a group of faithful inmate influencers who were active in the chapel program. He set up the program as a reentry training vehicle to assist with chapel programs. He wanted released inmates to feel comfortable in a faith community, and to know how a congregation was to be conducted.

Solomon met with the group weekly, mentoring them in leading in prayer, chapel choir, pastoral care

of their fellow inmates, teaching Sunday School classes, administering worship and preaching Scripture messages. Thursday night was inmate-facilitated worship. The chaplain was present, guiding and overseeing.

When Solomon left to become the agency's Director of Chaplains, he and his Director successor Jerry Groom (who had also been an Eastham chaplain) put peer ministry into written agency policy in the 1990s. When I came to Eastham, I valued what I saw in peer ministry, continued, and expanded it.

Many factors helped transform the Wainwright Unit, and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The recidivism rate has declined sharply over the past 30 years, down currently to 21% after three years out.

The Prison Seminary Model, begun by Burl Cain at the violent Angola prison in Louisiana in 1995, had transformed Angola into a smoothly functioning model prison.⁶ Cain had invited the New Orleans

Baptist Theological Seminary to come and train selected inmates to be ministers to their fellow prisoners. The outcome was that these trained graduates, from an accredited, four-year seminary, began ministering. Prison culture transformation soon followed.^{7, 8}

In Texas, two state legislators, Senators Dan Patrick and John Whitmire (Republican and Democrat respectively), visited Angola in 2010, and came back to Texas with a common purpose of instituting a prison seminary in Texas. Beginning instruction in 2011, there are now 202 accredited seminary graduates in 42 Texas prisons, covering 65% of the state's prison population. There are 149 students currently enrolled in the men's seminary, and, beginning in 2021, there are 30 enrolled in the women's seminary.⁹

Conclusion

After retiring as Director of Chaplaincy Operations in 2017, I became a volunteer at the Wainwright (old Eastham) Unit. Today (July 5, 2022) I was there, sitting in a reentry class of 30, led by a seminary trained inmate graduate. The class was on Personal Financial Management, and today's lesson, "Budgeting." Excellent class.

Many factors helped transform the Wainwright Unit, and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The recidivism rate has declined sharply over the past 30 years, down currently to 21% after three years out.¹⁰ New agency leadership, the American Correctional Association, chaplaincy collaboration and peer ministry have all contributed to a new era at an old prison.

ENDNOTES

¹ The Eastham Unit name was changed to the H. Dale Wainwright Unit in 2021. Mr. Wainwright is a former Chair of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice.

² Press, Aric. 1986. Inside America's Toughest Prison, *Newsweek*, 108(14):46-61.

³ The name was changed to Texas Department of Criminal Justice in 1989.

⁴ *Ruiz v. Estelle*, 503 F. Supp. 1265

⁵ Amazingly, 20 years later, Warden Waldron called me at the prison. He had retired, had experienced some health problems and had nearly died. After pleasantries we had never had at work, he asked me if I would be willing to receive a call from his wife, should she ever need to call me. He expressed relief when I said that I would. The next day I called him and asked to come and visit him and his wife. I did. We had a wonderful visit, which happened annually until he died. But I didn't have to conduct his funeral. He had joined his wife's church, and his pastor preached his funeral.

⁶ See www.prisonseminaries.org

⁷ See the research of Hallett, Michael, Joshua Hays, Byron Johnson, Sung Joon Jang and Grant Duwe. 2017. *The Angola Prison Seminary: Effects of Faith-Based Ministry on Identity Transformation, Desistance, and Rehabilitation*. New York: Routledge.

⁸ Beeler, A. (2022). Inmate Seminaries – How they have positively impacted corrections. *Corrections Today* May/June Vol. 84 No. 3, pp34-42. Alexandria, VA: American Correctional Association

⁹ Office of the Field Ministry Coordinator, Texas Department of Criminal Justice, interview on June 29, 2022.

¹⁰ Office of Executive Services, Texas Department of Criminal Justice, July 6, 2022.



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