

CORRECTIONAL CHAPLAIN PERSPECTIVES

A virtuous prison through staff investment

By Kristi Miller Anderson, Ph.D. and Genevieve Turner, JD

As the administrator, advisor, and supervisor over work involving spiritual welfare and religious guidance for prison and jail populations, correctional chaplains wear many hats. A fitting description of the Chaplaincy can be summed up in 1 Corinthians 9:22, “*I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.*”

Chaplains are called to remember that “hurt people hurt people,” and that all people have the capacity to

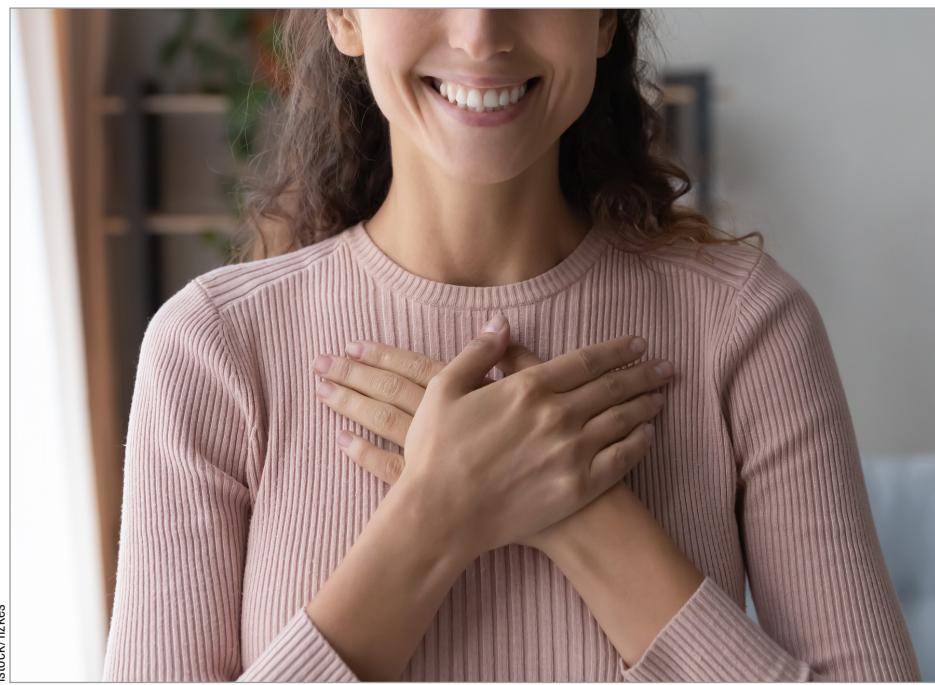
fall and to be redeemed. Each person is endowed with human dignity that should be respected because they have inherent value. But often the ethos, structure, and culture of a prison itself can cause a rift between these truths and the way inmates experience their prison sentences, the interactions they have with staff, and the workplace environment.

Virtue, righteousness, morality, and goodness: We all intuitively know these characteristics define behavior that shows high moral

standards, but practically what do these words mean in the context of a prison setting? Does the notion of a “virtuous prison” defy its purpose? How can the place that hosts the most deviant of the population be considered “virtuous?” And yet, as Fyodor Dostoevsky says, “*The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.*” A related truism spoken from Mahatma Gandhi is also applicable: “*The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.*”

In 1789, prison reform began taking place in America, and by the early 1800s the American people became more infatuated with the possibility of exchanging corporal punishment for a rehabilitative model of incarceration.¹ To distance themselves from the remnants of the Monarchical principles left in the United States from England, “barbarous” statutes and forms of punishment were being changed.² Essentially, the young country was looking at the mission of the prison system through a completely new lens — focusing on moral rehabilitation over punitive deterrence.

Early reform leaders decided that to give inmates the tools they needed to effectuate change in themselves,



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the way institutions were developed would have to change. In fact, The American Correctional Association (“ACA”) was founded over 150 years ago on this very principle:

“The treatment of criminals by society is for the protection of society. But since such treatment is directed to the criminal rather than the crime, its great object should be his moral regeneration. The state has not discharged its whole duty to the criminal when it has punished him, nor even when it has reformed him ... Having lifted him up, it has further duty to aid in holding him up.”

— ACA Declaration of Principles, 1870

Unfortunately, America has seemingly reverted to a correctional system that values retribution over restoration. It is time to evaluate and elevate the culture of the institution to develop a model that infuses virtue not only into the hearts and minds of inmates, but also into the culture of a prison for all of those inside.

Looking back at the years leading up to the Progressive Era, the catalyst behind prison reform was a religious one driven by the notion of a higher purpose.³ Today, penologists call for the restoration of a moral purpose behind prison walls. This goal seems lofty, but experts argue the key to restore the moral purpose of corrections is to transform custodial institutions into virtuous prisons.⁴

The model of virtue and human dignity has been successfully implemented in other countries like Norway⁵, Germany⁶, and Singapore,⁷ amongst others. For example, the Association for the Protection and Assistance of the Convicted (APAC) method was launched in Brazil in 1972.

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APAC seeks to humanize prisons and punishment, ultimately working with the inmates (called “recuperandos”) to establish “*a tripod of love, trust, and discipline*” – all of this with very little guard presence and without weapons or violence.⁸ Although the recidivism rate in Brazil is between 80-85%, the APAC rate is only 15%.⁹ Although prison violence is extremely high in Brazil, APAC has never had a registered rebellion.¹⁰ Although the cost per inmate

in Brazil is high, APAC has reduced that cost by 1/3.^{11, 12} The APAC formula is clear, “*Treat the human being as a subject of rights and duties, with respect so that he can respect himself also. And with love so he can then respond with love. Nobody is unrecoverable. We start from that premise and that is our motto.*”¹³

Current U.S. prisons and jails host religion classes and religious services, educational opportunities, addiction recovery services, counseling, and a slew of other well-intentioned programs meant to drive positive change for inmates. So why is America stuck in a punitive system prone to violence and negative consequences for all of those who reside or work within a prison? How does the nation move the needle from the highest incarceration rate in the world with nearly half of the inmates released return for a parole/probation violation or a new sentence within three years?¹⁴

A theory is emerging and gaining more traction in America asking if investment in frontline correctional staff could help open the door to true and lasting cultural change, significantly reducing recidivism in the process. Just like APAC’s ideology to treat inmates with love so they then can respond with love, the same counter-culture shift should extend to correctional officers, counselors, and other frontline employees.

Correctional staff deal with a unique combination of traumatic, organizational, and operational stressors. In addition, many correctional officers and staff have a history of dealing with trauma, adversity, and hardships that impact their psychological, emotional, and

physical health.¹⁵ Research on the impact of the job on correctional officers is alarming. These individuals experience a sixteen-year shorter life expectancy, a 39% higher suicide rate, and are 20% more likely to divorce their partners compared to the general public.¹⁶ The stress involved in maintaining hypervigilance is overwhelming not only on the body, but also the mind. Prolonged stress leads to burnout, referred to as “corrections fatigue” within the criminal justice system.¹⁷ Common stages include:

1. Emotional Exhaustion

— Feelings of emotional overextension and a lack of emotional resources.

2. Depersonalization

— A negative, callous, or excessively detached response to other people who are usually the recipients of one’s services of care.

3. Reduced Personal Accomplishment

— A decline in feelings of competence and the successful achievement of one’s work.¹⁸

Correctional staff investment is paramount in achieving a positive environment. Unfortunately, the research regarding the impact of the job on the health and personal problems corrections staff experience reveals a possible explanation for the overarching negative prison culture.

Burnout is a terrible place from which to live. Not only for the correctional officer and the negative impact this occupation has on an individual’s personal life and family,

but for the ethos of the prison as a whole.

Research suggests rehabilitation-oriented officers seek to help inmates more, creating more personal respect for officers.¹⁹ When mutual respect between staff and residents exists, and positive interactions are present, prison culture can change for the better. But how can correctional staff promote such ideals of hope for someone else if they have lost it themselves?

As chaplains, realistically the ability to significantly impact organizational issues like mandatory overtime, employee turnover, salaries, job vacancies, and leave time, does not exist. Even without that authority, the ability to model virtuous behavior, intentionally interact with staff, and improve the social work environment for all is still possible. By nature, chaplains focus on fostering virtue among the inmate

population and already have a rehabilitative mindset. What steps could be taken to extend the audience and foster virtue within the correctional staff that results in a holistic prison environment?

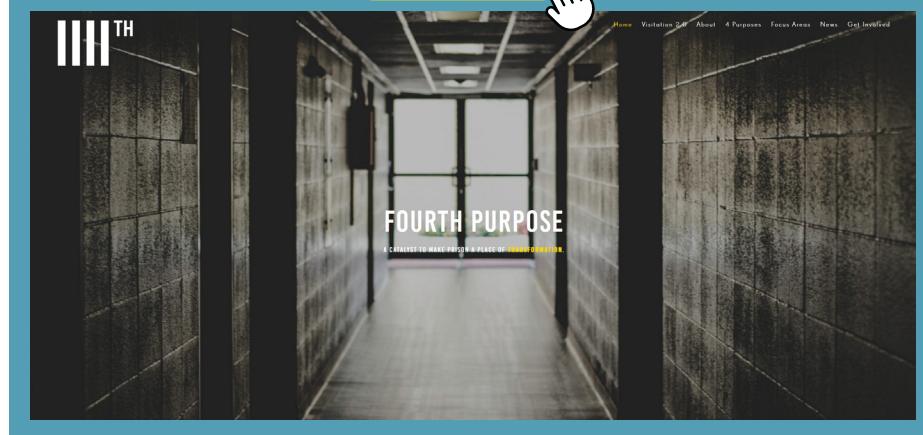
The opportunity to affect true and lasting change is behind the walls of America’s prisons. When staff are working in their purpose, so many lives have the potential to be changed for the better. This includes not only staff’s own health and wellbeing, but also their partners, spouses, and family members. In addition, the inmates with whom correctional staff interact and ultimately members of the communities where staff and returning citizens reside will be benefactors of this far-reaching change.

When reflecting on the hats chaplains wear, perhaps there is room to invite correctional staff into the flock. In a dark world, there is always an opportunity to be the light.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

on tools and resources regarding correctional staff investment and wellness, please visit

4thpurpose.org



ENDNOTES

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Statement of Ownership

U.S. Postal Service STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION (required by Section 3685, Title 39, United States Code), (1) Title of Publication: CORRECTIONS TODAY. (2) Publication No.: 019-640. (3) Date of Filing: October 7, 2021. (4) Frequency of Issue: 6 times per year. (5) No. of Issues Published Annually: 6. (6) Annual Subscription Price: \$35 (7) & (8) Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication/Headquarters of Publisher: 206 N. Washington St., Suite 200, Alexandria, VA 22314. (9) Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher and Editor. Publisher: James A. Gondles Jr. Editor: Kirk Raymond. American Correctional Association, 206 N. Washington St., Suite 200, Alexandria, VA 22314. (10) Name and Complete Mailing Address of Owner: American Correctional Association, 206 N. Washington St., Suite 200, Alexandria, VA 22314. (11) Known Bondholders, Mortgages, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding One Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages or Other Securities: Sandy Springs Bank 17801 Georgia Ave. Olney, MD 20832. (12) The Purpose, Function, and Nonprofit Status of This Organization and the Exempt Status for Federal Income Tax Purposes: Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months. (13) Publication name: CORRECTIONS TODAY. (14) Issue date for circulation data: March/April 2020. (15) Extent and Nature of Circulation: Average No. of Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: (a) Total Number of Copies (Net Press Run): 6,796. (b) Paid and/or Requested Circulation: (1) Paid and/or requested mail subscriptions: 6,646. (3) Other classes mailed through USPS: 150. (c) Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation (sum of (15b1) and (15b3)): 6,796. (d3) Free Distribution by Mail (Samples; Complimentary; and other Free): 0. (d4) Free Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or Other Means): 0. (e) Total Free Distribution (sum of (15d3) and (15d4)): 23 (f) Total Distribution (sum of (15c) and (15e)): 6,796. (g) Copies Not Distributed: 0. (h) Total (sum of (15f) and (15g)): 6,796. (i) Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation (15c/15f x 100): 100 percent. Actual No. of Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: (a) Total No. of Copies (Net Press Run): 6,796; (b) Paid and/or Requested Circulation: (1) Mail subscriptions: 6,796 (3) Other classes mailed through USPS: 0. (c) Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation (sum of (15b1) and (15b3)): 6,796. (d3) Free Distribution by Mail (Samples; Complimentary; and other Free): 0. (d4) Free Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or Other Means): 0. (e) Total Free Distribution (sum of (15d3) and (15d4)): 0. (f) Total Distribution (sum of (15c) and (15e)): 6,796. (g) Copies Not Distributed: 0. (h) Total (sum of (15f) and (15g)): 6,796. Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation (15c/15f x 100): 100 percent. (17) This Statement of Ownership will be printed in the November/December 2021 issue of this publication. (18) I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete: Kirk Raymond, director, Communications and Publications.