

Game changer

The digital age reaches faith-based communication

By David Young and Anna Fechter

Communication matters. Communication matters to correctional ministries. The evolution of communication among humankind over the centuries has transitioned from primitive sign language, to oral traditions, to stone and clay tablets, to sheepskins, to paper, to wired telegraph/telephone, to the current age of wireless, instantaneous communication.¹ The tsunami of technology in the 21st century has impacted how we communicate and how we deliver and receive information, including faith-based materials.² The advent of handheld digital tablet technology is a game changer for educational and religious programs that involve self-motivated, self-guided learning.³

The benefits of religious programming and counseling in the correctional system are numerous and far beyond the scope of this article.⁴ It suffices to say that religion and corrections are inextricably linked. In America, the correctional system was birthed out of the religious establishment. In the late 1700s, the Quakers in Pennsylvania developed the idea of a “penitentiary” as a place where those who misbehaved could spend time to become “penitent” about their wrongdoing — showing sorrow and regret for misbehaviors — and, hopefully, “repentance” — personal change or transformation. Corrections and religion are also linked by the fact that many individuals have a profound

“religious experience” while incarcerated and are released with a zeal for correctional ministries. The most notable example in our lifetime has been Charles “Chuck” Colson, special counsel to President Richard Nixon from 1969 to 1973. Colson was the first of the Watergate Seven involved in the Watergate scandal of 1972 to be incarcerated, serving seven months of a one-to-three-year sentence for obstruction of justice.

prisons collectively employ about 1,700 chaplains.⁶ Seven-hundred and thirty professional chaplains completed the survey’s questionnaire, making up nearly half of the 1,474 individuals contacted across all 50 states. Overwhelmingly, prison chaplains considered religion-based programming and counseling for inmates as “absolutely critical” to successful rehabilitation. A recent book that draws on

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After his release from federal Maxwell Correctional Facility in Montgomery, Alabama, Colson founded Prison Fellowship in 1976, currently the largest outreach to prisoners, ex-prisoners and families of prisoners in the U.S.

Religious education

Religion has had a presence in jails and prisons across the U.S. from the beginning of the criminal justice system.⁵ A 2011 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life revealed the nation’s more than 1,100 state and federal

more than three years of on-site researching, involving more than 2,200 inmate surveys, chronicles this high-value and transforming power of religious programming in a prison setting.⁷ The findings reveal that religiously motivated identity transformation results in a number of benefits to the facility and other inmates. For instance, transformed inmates transition from a “self-centered” focus to an “other-centered” one, reaching out in service to fellow inmates and encouraging prosocial behavior.

For many years, correctional chaplains have promoted Bible

Table 1. Sample listing of faith-based programs available to jails and prisons

Billy Graham Center for Evangelism, Wheaton College	www.wheaton.edu/BGCE/Initiatives/Institute-for-Prison-Ministries/IPM/Resources/Prisoners
Bridges International	www.bridgesofamerica.com/
Caring Hearts Jail Ministry	caringheartsjailministry.org/biblestudy.html
Celebrate Recovery Inside	www.cr-inside.org/
Chaplains for Christ International	www.chaplainsforchrist.org/ministering-to/inmates/bible-correspondence-courses/
Coalition of Prison Evangelists	www.copeconnections.org/links.htm
Correctional Ministry, Salvation Army	easternusa.salvationarmy.org/use/bible-correspondence-courses
Crossroads Prison Ministries	cpministries.org
Discipling Operational Christians	docministries.org/doc-resources-guide/all-california-counties
Dismas Ministry	www.dismasministry.org/inmate-services/
ECS Ministries	ecsministries.org/pages/prison
Exodus Prison Ministry	www.exodusprisonministry.org/
God Behind Bars	www.godbehindbars.com/
Gospel Echoes Team Inc.	www.gospelechoes.com/resources/biblestudy.html
Gospel Express Ministries	www.gospelexpressonline.org/prison-ministry/bible-study-courses/
InnerChange Freedom Initiative	www.prisonfellowship.org/about/reentry-support/innerchange-freedom-initiative/
Kairos Prison Ministry	www.kairosprisonministry.org/
Knights of the 21st Century	www.knightsofthe21stcentury.com/prison-ministry/
Little Lambs Inc.	http://www.littlelambsinc.org/inmatediscipleship.html
Powerful Ministry to Prisoners	www.lhm.org/newsroom/enewsstory.asp?ArticleID=19063
Prison Bible School	www.prisonbibleschool.com/
Prison Congregations of America	www.prisoncongregations.org/
Prison Education.com	www.prisoneducation.com/correspondence-programs/free-bible-study-programs/
Prison Fellowship	www.prisonfellowship.org/
Prison Ministry	www.middletonbiblechurch.org/mevangel/prisonm.htm
Straight Ahead Ministries	www.straightahead.org/
TBN2nd Chance	www.tbnsecondchance.org/press.php
The Fortune Society	fortunesociety.org/

study correspondence courses and religion-related programs that made use of pencil and paper for testing and journaling (see table). However, in recent years, a number of correctional facilities have started to employ tablet technology for religious programming.

State-of-the-art tablets

In the last 15 years, internet connectivity and usage have soared among Americans. New data from the Pew Research Center shows that nine in 10 Americans are online, 77 percent own a smartphone and nearly 50 percent own a tablet computer.⁸ While state departments of corrections have been hesitant

to touch the subject, the call for increased programming behind bars has drawn many jails and prisons to the option of connectivity. Today, correctional administrators across the U.S. are turning to wireless tablets to expand educational and religious programming for inmates.⁹

For most, even the thought of internet connectivity in prison shakes the very foundation of the

correctional institution: security. So what is the solution? Secure networks. Wireless tablet programs in correctional facilities do not grant access to the open internet. Imagine a one-way highway with no on or off ramps. The network is closed — and heavily monitored.

There are numerous inmate-facing technology providers servicing correctional needs today. Edovo, a Chicago-based provider of education and rehabilitation technology to people in jail and prison, stands apart from the others.¹⁰ What makes Edovo unique is its mission-driven approach. The company — a social enterprise — aims to reduce recidivism and improve opportunities for all of those affected by incarceration. The company rents tablets to correctional facilities for around \$1.50 to \$2.00 a day — typically paid for by inmate welfare/ commissary funds designated for education — thus available to inmates free of charge.

faith backgrounds. Students can read from “Buddha and His Teachings” or learn the rules of worship in Islamic studies. It makes available the Catholic, Hebrew and King James Bibles to read, among others. Students can sift through up to three years of services from the Washington National Cathedral, or follow Shabbat with Rabbi Steve Blane of Sim Shalom.

Tools on Edovo’s platform enable instructors and chaplains to create and upload custom content for inmates they work with on a regular basis. This has great appeal to those who wish to supplement class time instruction with “homework” assignments or extra materials to keep inmates self-motivated beyond the didactic sessions. Facilities can even take advantage of the digital platform to disseminate what is typically required of inmates to review, such as inmate handbooks and Prison Rape Elimination Act materials.

implementing a tablet-based program for the first time. “How could this possibly make my life easier?” some ask. Across facilities who’ve adopted Edovo, correctional staff report that tablet usage ultimately results in a more calm environment with improved inmate behavior and fewer conflicts and violent occurrences among inmates. As of January 2017, Edovo is live and active in 25 correctional facilities across 12 states. Users across all sites are spending approximately 1 million minutes a week in the program.

Roles for chaplains

It would be advantageous for chaplains to advocate for distance-learning options that promote increased access to educational and faith-based programs. As chaplains know, in a correctional setting, a laundry list of things can go wrong to inhibit scheduled class sessions or prevent inmates from attending. Every outside material must be approved before entering the facility. Tablets revolutionize the way chaplains can offer programming, resources and services to inmates. Tablet technology allows inmates to follow courses at their own pace and to stay on track with instructor-led sessions. With a content-creation feature like Edovo’s, chaplains can upload teaching materials from a computer and update resources for inmates at any time. In this way, chaplains can keep inmates motivated outside of designated class time.

Whether it be a course with learning checks or a resource guide for inmates who wish to explore spiritual options, chaplains can take advantage of tablet programs to quickly and safely distribute materials. For instance, if a chaplain wants to show a video during a class but does not have enough time,

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Edovo tablets house thousands of hours of digital learning materials designed to meet educational, vocational, legal and treatment needs of the incarcerated. Popular courses include “Parenting While Incarcerated,” “Anger Management and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy” and others. Not surprisingly, users overwhelmingly request religious resources. As a result, Edovo offers a range of faith-based materials, including religious study courses, holy texts and a video archive of sermons and lectures from various

Tablet technology opens a world of data previously inaccessible in most correctional settings. Administrators can follow users’ progress in the Edovo program and track how they engage with the tablets. Course completion rates and time spent in certain courses paint a picture of inmate needs and help correctional staff support inmates in specific areas — be they educational, vocational, spiritual or treatment-related.

Skepticism normally occurs among correctional staff

the video can be uploaded onto tablets for individual viewing sometime later. On other occasions, two or three inmates might be inspired by a specific topic, but there is no time in class to dive in. A chaplain can share resources on a tablet for inmates to explore on their own time.

In some instances, treatment-oriented faith-based programs can trigger insecurities or emotional stress for inmates. Tablets allow the opportunity for inmates to follow certain programs privately, at their own pace, without the pressure of a group setting. A user's responses are recorded, saved to a personal account, and available for the inmate and instructor to review at any time.

Future potential

As prison education programs are beneficial for successful reentry, the federal government has produced a 60-page guide for inmates and those on probation and parole.¹¹ Studies show that inmates who participate in correctional education programs have 43-percent lower odds of recidivating and 13-percent higher odds of obtaining employment postrelease.¹² The tablet platform, with features like Edovo, has the potential to change education and religious programming on a large scale for many jails and prisons. When it comes to providing meaningful programming in jails and prisons, high costs and operational difficulty weigh heavily on facilities. Tablet technology provides facilities a realistic option to increase programming and services with minimal financial and staff burden.

ENDNOTES

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¹¹ U.S. Department of Education Office of Vocational and Adult Education. 2012.

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