



Prison staff chaplains provide a comprehensive understanding of the religious exercise requirements of the U.S. Constitution

CORRECTIONAL CHAPLAIN PERSPECTIVES

The faith factor *Prison culture transformation through religious efforts*

By Dr. Vance L. Drum

Is it possible to rehabilitate a person or to change the culture of a prison for the better? The criminal justice field has debated this question for centuries. It goes, perhaps, all the way back to Philadelphia's Walnut Street Prison in the 1790s, where they instituted inmate isolation for the well-intentioned purpose of engendering penitence (from the Latin word for "remorse"), hence, America's first "penitentiary."¹ The isolation experiment did not succeed, however, and the prison closed in 1835.

By the 1980s, criminological thought moved toward a "tough on crime" mindset, mostly leaving behind the idea that rehabilitation was even possible.² Recent research, however, suggests some faith-based prison programs may have a positive effect on rates of recidivism, as well as contributions to prosocial

change in prison culture.³ The following six faith-related factors, which can promote positive change in inmate behavior, chronicle Texas' movement from "tough on crime" to "smart on crime" — from a punitive prison model to a programmatic, rehabilitative prison model.

Governmental support

For the past two decades, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) has pursued criminal justice reform techniques that create a positive atmosphere for the promotion of rehabilitation and reentry programming. These programs' effects have assisted inmates not only in their institutional adjustment, but also in staying out of prison upon release. As a result, the latest available recidivism rate in Texas (after three years out of prison) has fallen to

21 percent over the past three decades.⁴

With significance to the faith-based perspective, the last 20-plus years have seen the election of devout, faith-friendly governors in Texas. These governors have appointed all nine current members of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice (TBCJ), those of whom also actively support faith-based rehabilitation and reentry programs. These types of programs have been promoted and conducted through TDCJ's robust chaplaincy program.

Agency leadership

Beginning in the 1990s, under the leadership of TBCJ Board Chairwoman Carol S. Vance, TDCJ opened its doors to the assistance of the community in inmate rehabilitation.

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The InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI) instituted the Carol S. Vance Unit, a Richmond, Texas, prison founded on faith-based programming. IFI, a privately funded faith-based program, first launched in Texas in 1997 as part of Charles Colson's Prison Fellowship ministry.

At the same time, the TDCJ chaplaincy program came under the visionary leadership of Emmett W. Solomon. Solomon was mild-mannered but steady, always promoting faith-based rehabilitative help for inmates through his innovative direction of the chaplaincy program. The work of these pioneers continues through the agency's current leadership.

Willing volunteers

Prior to these years of reform, TDCJ was a fairly closed system. It rarely welcomed the public and often regarded community volunteers with suspicion. Vance, addressing the 1993 annual chaplains' training conference, indicated the trouble Texas faced. The state's inmate population had massively increased, but they still had no comprehensive plan to assist those inmates in becoming productive, law-abiding citizens upon release.

Vance proposed inviting the community into the Texas prison system for the purpose of helping inmates with their life direction, life management and life skills. So

TDCJ developed a volunteer training program, recruited volunteers and ultimately established a Volunteer Services Department. With the support of the governor in 1995, TDCJ even established a Governor's Criminal Justice Volunteer Service Awards Ceremony, held annually in Austin. Though a governmental approach, religious

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volunteers comprise the majority of the 28,000-plus trained community volunteers serving in the Texas prisons in 2017, according to TDCJ Volunteer Services.

Managerial administrators

Wardens also changed. In pre-reform days, most agencies selected facility administrators based upon their ability to be tough, unbending and sometimes harsh — all skills they believed necessary to control the prison environment. People viewed the few rehabilitation and reentry programs with suspicion. Administrators generally believed inmates solely brought themselves to prison, and they deserved the difficulty of the environment.

This "warrior" mentality began to change with TDCJ's new leadership. The department began appointing wardens who could learn and exercise managerial skills positively in their facilities. From the top down, they promoted helpful programs for offenders — such

as rehabilitation, reentry, family and diverse spiritual development programs — rather than strict punishments. Inmates expressed more hope and began to experience significant, positive change. Now, modern-era wardens seek to promote not only a safe and secure prison environment, but also quality programs to assist inmates to move in more prosocial directions.

Caring chaplains

Prison staff chaplains provide a comprehensive understanding of the religious exercise requirements of the U.S. Constitution. In addition, chaplains play a key role in facilitating the myriad programs that help inmates with their institutional adjustment and with staying out of prison upon release.

TDCJ operates with one to three staff chaplains at each prison. Chaplains have the following two primary functions:

(a) To facilitate worship services, per requirements of the Constitution's First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The "free exercise" clause has historically been interpreted by courts as suggesting that incarcerated people also have a right to exercise their faith. The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000, upheld unanimously by the U.S. Supreme Court, expands and codifies the Amendment.⁵ Chaplains may lead religious services when the service is of their own faith. When the service is of a faith different than the chaplain's, a diverse group of volunteers may conduct the service.

(b) To supervise and facilitate the many faith-based programs that offer inmates new perspectives and skills in managing and conducting their lives in a pro-social manner. Simply offering a variety of religious worship opportunities is not enough to accomplish the mission of promoting positive change in inmate behavior. Reducing recidivism requires moral reformation among many inmates who have serious moral deficits.

In addition, staff chaplains offer quality pastoral care to inmates and staff, particularly in crisis situations. This work of chaplains is largely unseen, but it contributes significantly to the successful institutional adjustment of inmates — providing for a safer and more secure prison, and helping serve as a positive moral compass for the institution.

Enlisted offenders

Successful prison culture transformation cannot happen without the enlisted assistance of willing inmates to serve as role models and informal mentors. They can influence their peers by their own positive character. Inmate volunteers (not in a supervisory capacity) assisting in chapel worship services and classes has a long history in Texas, and it has helped change the culture in a number of prisons.

In recent years, this practice has expanded to include inmate field ministers from diverse religions who have graduated from an in-prison, accredited four-year seminary program. The field ministers then get transferred to prisons around Texas for a variety of authorized and supervised ministry tasks. Currently, 97 field

ministers are employed in 19 Texas prisons, with positive reviews.

Prison culture transformation is possible when certain factors are in place — particularly a faith factor, which is activated and promoted through a robust correctional chaplaincy program with administrative support. Religious faith that is respectful of others has the power to positively change lives, as well as, when acted upon by a significant number of influential inmates and correctional staff, the entire culture of a prison.



Vance L. Drum, D.Min., is retired as director of chaplaincy operations for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and staff chaplain for the Eastham Unit in Texas.

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