The warden-chaplain relationship

An interdependent team

By Burl Cain and Dr. Vance Drum

Wardens and chaplains have the opportunity to be key members of a team that facilitates culture transformation in a prison. A productive warden-chaplain relationship has at least six basic components:

1. **Spiritual needs facilitation**
   
   A wise warden will recognize the value of a good chaplain and will seek ways to work together to build a healthier prison setting. The chaplain helps support the spiritual needs of the general population, and that is crucial to the overall morale of the prison. The chaplain is the gatekeeper to what comes and goes in the religious community of the prison. Therefore, the warden should support the chaplain so they can effectively meet the religious needs of the population in the least restrictive way possible. To worship is at the core of what it means to be human. The more inmates are allowed to thrive in religious practices, the better behavioral and attitude outcomes will be.

   In addition to promoting positive behavior and attitudes through religious programming, wardens and chaplains serve the public as a team by following compliance with the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment guarantee of “free exercise” of one’s religion. The Amendment was amplified and codified in the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA) of 2000, a law which was upheld 9-0 by the U.S. Supreme Court. RLUIPA states that government shall not impose a substantial burden on an inmate’s religious exercise, unless the burden furthers a compelling governmental interest, and does so by the least restrictive means.

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Interaction and inclusion

It is essential that the warden and upper administration interact with the institutional chaplaincy program as much as possible. Chaplains are able to gather information in the institutional setting that typical correctional staff rarely can. A good chaplain gains the trust of the inmates and has a calming effect on the prison environment. Because of these qualities, the chaplain is a vital component to smooth prison operations. When stressed, inmates tend to act out, often through violence.

For many years, the Louisiana State Penitentiary’s warden has included chaplains in staff meetings since they are the most direct connection to the population. Not only do chaplains provide counsel to the inmates, but they can also counsel and support the inmates’ families, as well as the correctional staff.

Chaplains should not feel that they are in any way outside the prison team because they are not security staff. Administrative, security and treatment staff all form one team. The mission of the team is to provide security and safety for all inmates and staff, and to provide opportunities for rehabilitation and reform, including through the free exercise of religion.

Staff care

A warden is responsible for more than just the inmates when running a prison. They are also responsible for many employees. The self-care of the staff should not be overlooked by the warden. A wise warden will bring the chaplain in on the task of the staff spiritual well-being. Corrections is an emotionally and mentally draining environment, not to mention potentially dangerous. It is well-known that correctional officers have higher rates of mental health issues — depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide attempts and completed suicides — than other occupations in the general population. Chaplains play a vital role in offering the support needed to their fellow staff members to help prevent burnout and ultimately turnover.

Chaplains should offer themselves as staff members who are visible and available to their coworkers. They should walk through the high-traffic areas of the entire prison daily and through less trafficked areas at least periodically. The chaplain should not be a stranger to the wardens’ offices, walking through them with a friendly greeting at least daily. The entire prison is the chaplain’s domain for ministry. A smile and a “Hello, how are you,” along with a listening ear, go a long way toward establishing the chaplain as one who cares about their colleagues.

Inmate rehabilitation

Chaplains are important in any prison, but especially in long-term inmate populations. They provide hope, facilitate spiritual needs and serve as an approachable figure of authority. Having a resource such as this allows the inmates to peacefully do their time and encourages personal development and work skills.

Mentoring, with the help of community volunteers, may be a helpful vehicle for much practical, one-on-one training that assists reentry and reduces the rate of recidivism.

In addition, in most prisons where the great majority of inmates will one day be released, opportunities for faith-based rehabilitation and reform — and programs associated with successful reentry — are an important part of a comprehensive chaplaincy program. Chaplains may offer courses in parenting and family life, marriage seminars, and prosocial core values. Mentoring, with the help of community volunteers, may be a helpful vehicle for much practical, one-on-one training that assists reentry and reduces the rate of recidivism.
**Community connection**

The chaplains also play a major role in prison visitation. They are often the connection to the public, through both traditional visitation and volunteer and ministry groups. As chaplains take the lead in bringing these groups into the prison, many community-based reentry and rehabilitation opportunities can become available to the prison without the strains of state budgets.

**Agents of change**

Chaplains are agents of change in the corrections realm, and change is imperative for effective rehabilitation. The organizational chart of a prison is like a wagon wheel, with each branch of work representing a spoke. If a spoke, such as the chaplain, is missing, the wheel will wobble and the wagon will not make the distance. It’s time that wardens realize the valuable asset they have within the chaplaincy and utilize them. Wardens, however, must be the ones to initiate the dialogue and provide the chaplain an avenue in which to flourish.

Wardens and chaplains must be activists together in the team’s mission of providing not only security but also an environment that is conducive to positive, life-changing treatment. Neither can function successfully without the other. Wardens open the door for programs and volunteers. In so doing, they lift up the chaplain in the eyes of the staff with the warden’s approvals. Chaplains must be wise and visionary, working cooperatively with the warden and staff to facilitate the good initiatives the warden has authorized.

Inmates who attend their ministry activities often receive what they have never before received: new perspectives on life, a sense of self-worth and wise guidance.

Wardens would do well to understand that the benefits far outweigh the risks involved in bringing faith-based volunteers into the prison. Quality volunteers who have been recruited, trained and supervised may donate time worth millions of dollars annually to the state. Inmates who attend their ministry activities often receive what they have never before received: new perspectives on life, a sense of self-worth and wise guidance.
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6 Ibid.


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6 Ibid.


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7 Ibid.
