CORRECTIONAL CHAPLAIN PERSPECTIVES

Chaplaincy as care, care as chaplaincy

By Lia F. Kornmehl

What is the modern case for correctional chaplaincy? Cutting-edge surveillance systems, officer hiring incentives, and secular rehabilitative programming increasingly dominate DOC budgets. Across America more broadly, houses of worship report historic levels of public disillusionment with religion as a whole.[1] And yet, religion and spirituality are abundant in prisons and jails, possessing a rare fluidity in environments defined by restriction. As a researcher of religion and government, I spent two years investigating how correctional chaplains navigate this apparent paradox of movement and confinement. After interviewing chaplains of several denominations and religious backgrounds across the country, I found that chaplains can be the most capable correctional administrators of introducing and sustaining life-affirming and dignifying care. Put simply, chaplains remain enormously powerful in carceral contexts.

Chaplaincy across history

Since the very first Puritans settled in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, chaplains have played an instrumental role in the formation of the American correctional landscape. From roughly the late-seventeenth through mid-nineteenth centuries, reverends dictated prison and jail policies, establishing daily schedules and long-term disciplinary objectives.[2] Amid the proliferation of secular psychological counseling and enhanced surveillance technologies of the late-nineteenth century, chaplains began to lose their historical primacy. Today, chaplains are one part of complex prison and jail administrations, often paperwork-laden alongside secular colleagues. However, despite funding and staffing challenges, religion remains unavoidable in carceral facilities. Chaplaincy work is continually relevant given the religious expression protections of the First Amendment and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000 (RLUIPA) as well as the preeminence of ministry baked into American culture. As chaplain and scholar Jessica Van Denend aptly observed in 2007, "prison is a spiritual hothouse."[3] Her description conveys the chaos of carceral spaces but also alludes to religion's capacity, and

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by extension a chaplain's ability, to warm up the frigid and static zone that is a prison or jail.

Unsurprisingly, my interviewees all understood the word "religion" differently. Based on the aggregate of my conversations, I understand religion as one's relationship with the world mediated by an overarching spiritual existence. Relationships change with location, time, age, and proximity. Yet, correctional policies and even the minimized confines of single-person cells cannot totally diminish incarcerated person's religious identity and expression. In this way, religion is in constant motion inside correctional facilities, ebbing between the individual, community, and environment, unable to be fully contained but always able to be fully felt.

The variability of spiritual care reflects the dynamism of religion itself. Drawing on a variety of lived experiences and theological training, individual chaplains understand and express care in a variety of ways. For Reverend Paul in Maine, care manifests in the extra hours he spends sourcing a religious object. Rabbi Helen, working in multiple Northeast medium and maximum-security prisons, extends care by lowering her eyes as she walks through a housing unit to avoid peering into individual rooms.[4] Care may be communicated through a lengthy conversation or reverberate in a moment of silent listening. In each instance, though, spiritual care requires a chaplain to be vulnerable and flexible.

Pastoral methodologies

Across my research, I also observed that no two chaplains view or undertake their administrative and religious obligations the same way. Anna, based on the West Coast, mainly attends to Jewish and Buddhist women detained in a large city jail system. She draws from her multifaith training to prioritize "a culture of care" over reinforcing any particular religious tradition in her relationships with incarcerated individuals. Mark, an Episcopalian volunteer chaplain in Maine, similarly emphasized fostering space for introspection and agency within and outside of the makeshift chapel's stone walls. As a chaplain, "you have to give people the spiritual sustenance that they seek," Mark outlined. "Not that you want them to have," he stressed, "but that *they* seek." Their pastoral styles contrast with the Protestant veteran chaplain Reverend Thomas, who previously directed a statewide chaplaincy program and commends religion-based rehabilitative programs as his strategic preference over lengthy pastoral counseling. Such programs usually draw from faith-specific resources sent in by outside organizations hoping to combine life skills training with theological education.

Moreover, as Reverend Paul remarked, just one person "turning" to religion or setting out on a path toward meaning can ripple and swell through a correctional facility.

The pastoral methodologies of most of my chaplain interviewees fall somewhere between Anna and Reverend Thomas. Religious experiences of chaplains and those incarcerated are far from monolithic. Imam Omar, who converted to Islam during a period of incarceration, cites the Sunni Islamic learning group he encountered as the reason he "transcended" the carceral environment and sought opportunities to give back to incarcerated communities once released. Moreover, as Reverend Paul remarked, just one person "turning" to religion or setting out on a path toward meaning can ripple and swell through a correctional facility. Resistant to physical modifications or incursions, the walls, bars, and doors of prisons and jails are permeable to religion and spirituality — to an extent. Each day, chaplains balance providing tailored care with upholding security policies, including those governing which religious objects are allowed inside and who is permitted to access them.

Such religious objects are part of the "spiritual sustenance" Mark highlighted and can be a critical means of religious expression. Rabbi Adrian and Benjamin, working in a Northeast city jail system and Mid-Atlantic maximum-security prison, respectively, spoke about the

challenges of collecting and dispensing some non-Christian religious materials, including head coverings and special meals for incarcerated Jews and Muslims. Such challenges persist despite clear legal precedents for the distribution of such materials, especially since RLUIPA's implementation. Conversely, as Rabbi Adrian explained, his facility had such an excess of Bibles that administrators decided to stop freely handing them out when they discovered the men used the books' thin paper to roll handmade cigarettes. As the examples above demonstrate, chaplains constantly negotiate law, best practices, security concerns, and intuition in deciding what to give out and what to hold back. "Getting it right," as Reverend Paul put it, is usually an ideal for chaplains rather than a consistently realized goal.

Building restorative connections

Correctional chaplaincy has neither one form nor one goal. I am heartened that more religious studies scholars are taking up the work of illuminating the nuances, reflections, reckonings, and hopes of chaplains like those mentioned above. Despite overseeing huge swaths of religious landscapes and experiences, their influence is at times belittled. And still, decades after the advent of psychology-based rehabilitative programming, religious services remain ubiquitous inside prisons and jails. This is not to say that prison and jail administrators should return to the colonial model of unfettered religious instruction or adopt policies based on the dogma of any one religious tradition. Religion is not the only way through or out of incarceration, and spiritual doors often open more easily than their steel counterparts. So, to return to my initial question, I find that the modern case for correctional chaplaincy is made each day in the honest, two-way spiritual relationships built between many chaplains and those incarcerated. Chaplaincy is not a universal salve, but agency to fulfill one's religious tradition while incarcerated and equitable access to religious materials inside have enormous potential to ameliorate suffering and build restorative human connections through and beyond bars.

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END NOTES

[1] "Modeling the Future of Religion in America" (Pew Research Center, September 2022), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/; Jessica Grose, "The Largest and Fastest Religious Shift in America Is Well Underway," *The New York Times*, June 21, 2023, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/21/opinion/religion-dechurching.html.

[2] For a more detailed account of the formation of the American penal system and the chaplain's everchanging role in said system, see Jennifer Graber, *The Furnace of Affliction: Prisons & Religion in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 2011) and Adam Jay Hirsch, *The Rise of the Penitentiary: Prisons and Punishment in Early America*, Yale Historical Publications (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

[3] Jessica Van Denend, "A New Look at Chaplaincy in a Prison Setting," *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 61, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 396.

[4] All examples here and below are excerpted from in-depth interviews conducted by the author from early 2022 through the spring of 2023. All names have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved, per Institutional Review Board research ethics standards.

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