

Going pro

Making the case for professional chaplains

By Dr. Ronald G. Turner

In 2011, there were 1,700 professional chaplains working in U.S. prisons, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center, and almost all prisons employed at least one professional chaplain or religious services coordinator.¹ While exact data for 2016 is not available, a number of states have significantly reduced their professional prison chaplains over the past decade.² There are a number of reasons that having a pro chaplain is better for facilities and offenders.

Decreasing drivers

One of the driving forces behind the elimination of, or reduction in, professional prison chaplains is budgetary constraints. Taken at face value, it appears to be an easy way for the state to save money.³ Another driving force behind cutting professional prison chaplains is the recent expansion of inmates' religious rights. Since Congress passed the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act in 2000, states have struggled to protect inmates' religious rights while maintaining institutional safety and security. This challenge was made more difficult in 2015 by the Supreme Court's decision in *Holt v. Hobbs* to uphold a Muslim inmate's right to grow a beard for religious purposes.⁴ It is possible that some states have shifted the

burden of meeting inmates' religious rights to volunteers as an attempt to avoid legal liability.

Many are concerned, however, about these strategies. While prison budgets may initially go down by cutting professional chaplains, the long-term impact of relying on volunteers and other untrained staff to meet inmates' religious needs is fraught with a number of risks. The majority of volunteers do not have the training or experience needed to appropriately meet inmates' religious needs. Due to a volunteer's lack of training, possible naivety and susceptibility

What they offer

Professional prison chaplains provide a number of benefits to the prison population and staff. Here are the top 10 reasons:

1. History. Inmates have the right to practice their religion in prison so long as institutional safety and security is not jeopardized.⁵ Indeed, the word "penitentiary" comes from "penance," meaning one who sees the error of their ways, prays for forgiveness and pays the price. This was an expressed goal of many early prisons.⁶

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to inmate manipulation, the state may actually increase its legal exposure by relying on them. The state cannot avoid its legal responsibilities simply by using volunteers. Inmates' religious rights and the state's responsibility for meeting those rights do not go away by doing this.

Accordingly, professional chaplains and religious volunteers have traditionally been welcome in U.S. prisons since the earliest days.

2. Qualifications. Sixty-two percent of the chaplains responding to the Pew Research Center's survey held master's or

doctorate degrees. An additional 21 percent held bachelor's degrees.⁷ This level of education is crucial for chaplains working in today's prison environment, where the diversity of inmates' religions and the complexity of requests for religious accommodations is exploding. Basic familiarity with different faith traditions is necessary to respond appropriately to these requests while protecting the prison from inmate grievances and lawsuits. In addition, as part of their educational experience, many professional chaplains earn hours in clinical pastoral education, where they are supervised by experienced chaplains on the job before receiving their degree.

3. Professional chaplains are staff members.

Unlike volunteers, professional chaplains are in the prison every day as full-time staff members. Chaplains receive training in prison policies and procedures when they are hired and after they are updated, which is on a regular basis. As staff members, they are accountable for complying with these policies and procedures, and unlike volunteers, they are subject to disciplinary action for noncompliance. As staff members, they are also more likely to be present if an emergency arises in the prison, and they can respond immediately if needed.

4. Safety and security. The professional chaplain may be the only person in the prison many inmates trust. "Hey, chap! Need to see you, chap!" is often heard when the chaplain walks across the yard. The right chaplain in the right place at the right time often calms tension before it erupts into an assault or gang fight. Accordingly, professional chaplains often

contribute to institutional safety and security merely by being there and quietly offering a word of encouragement or counsel, and more often than not, no one else is around to see it.

5. Gaming. Professional chaplains soon learn to detect inmates trying to "game" the system in the name of religion. Volunteers often come and go on a short-term basis and never develop this skill. They are well-meaning, but can be subject to inmate manipulation.⁸

6. Representatives of the state. As representatives of the state, professional chaplains are a tangible sign to inmates that the state cares about their spiritual well-being and religious rights. By hiring chaplains, the state is "walking the talk." This can go a long way to help the state reduce prison tension and prevail in religious grievances and lawsuits.

7. Ministering to other staff. Prison chaplains often minister to other staff members struggling to deal with the pressure of working in prison. This is particularly true when they are facing a personal crisis, such as the death of a loved one, divorce and/or substance abuse. Many staff members have no faith community or other spiritual advisor to turn to. It is not uncommon for this service to other staff members to be included in the chaplain's written job description per state policy.⁹

8. Death notifications. One of the most difficult jobs of the chaplain is informing inmates that a family member has died. Inmates' responses can vary from stoic silence to anger to wailing and grief. While some volunteers learn to handle these situations, an experienced chaplain who knows how to break the news in a quiet place, prepared to respond

compassionately to the inmate's reaction, is invaluable. Delivering death notices never gets easy, and most chaplains vividly remember their first one, as captured in the following poem:

"New Chaplain"

Well,
go tell
him,
the
Warden
said.

So I
was off
to tell
the
young
inmate
his sister
had died.

But
I'm not
ready,
I'd cried.

He
wasn't
either.¹⁰

9. Ministering to ill and dying inmates. Professional chaplains frequently minister to seriously ill and dying inmates, including inmates facing execution. Some prison chaplains focus their careers in this area and become very skilled at it, offering a level of comfort most volunteers cannot provide.

10. Administrative duties. Prison chaplains devote a great deal of time to paperwork and other administrative duties.¹¹ While it can be argued that anyone can do paperwork, the chaplain's training gives the chaplain an advantage that can be beneficial to both the inmate and the prison. The chaplain can

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afterward to exchange contact information and further advance the dissemination of information throughout the field. No matter what material you have, there are many engaging and informative ways to present it.

Workshops begin on the Saturday morning of each conference and continue through Wednesday morning. They typically last 90 minutes. The sessions follow several different tracks — reentry, facility design, health care, security, special offenders, staff training, jails, juveniles and ACA resources. These sessions are designated with icons in the conference Program Book to make it easy for attendees to identify which sessions fit their interests.

Submitting your ideas for a proposal is easy. Simply log on to ACA's website and submit from there. You will need to provide a title, description and contact

information for the workshop coordinator. If at the time of submission you have information on the speakers for the session, you can add that as well. Once submitted, the proposals are reviewed and accepted based on several factors, including timeliness of an emerging topic, when the topic was last presented, variety of the panel and space availability. Presenters also must be ACA members and register for the conference. There must be at least one current correctional practitioner participating.

Sharing the knowledge you possess is a wonderful thing to provide to your field. Our members have an incredible wealth of knowledge that is shown every time ACA hosts a conference. Consider taking the skills and lessons learned from what you do every day and sharing them with your colleagues and corrections

professionals at ACA's conferences. Once you see the impact you'll have made on helping someone to solve a problem, discover a new way of facing a challenge or be introduced to a new technique, you'll be glad you participated.

To submit a workshop or find answers to questions, contact Kelli McAfee at kellim@aca.org or 703-224-0172.



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Chaplain Perspectives

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spot spiritual needs of inmates that a nonprofessional might miss. Likewise, the chaplain can pick up on potential legal problems that a nonprofessional might also overlook, saving the department countless dollars in staff time and legal fees.

Professional chaplains bring unique qualifications to prisons and provide services other staff members and volunteers cannot provide. Moreover, they pay for themselves by helping reduce prison tension and improving safety and security, often just by being there. The trend to reduce professional prison chaplains should not only be stopped, it should be reversed. We need more professional chaplains in prison, not fewer.

ENDNOTES

¹ Liu, J. (2012, March 22). *Religion in prisons — a 50-state survey of prison chaplains*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from www.pewforum.org/2012/03/22/prison-chaplains-exec

² Shimron, Y., & Banks, A.M. (2011, Aug. 8). Prison chaplains a common victim of state budget cuts. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/08/prison-chaplains-budget-cuts_n_921605.html

³ Sheridan, W. (2012, May 20). The easiest cut is the deepest: Why states are getting rid of prison chaplains. *Commonweal Magazine*. Retrieved from www.commonwealmagazine.org/easiest-cut-deepest

⁴ U.S. Supreme Court. (2015). *Holt v. Hobbs*, 574 U.S.

⁵ U.S. Supreme Court. (1972). *Cruz v. Beto*, 405 U.S. 319.

⁶ Seiter, R.P. (2017). *Corrections: An introduction, 5th edition*. Boston: Pearson.

⁷ Liu, J. (2012, March 22).

⁸ Allen, B., & Dosta, B. (1981). *Games criminal play: How you can profit by knowing them*. Sacramento, California: Rae John Publishers.

⁹ Tennessee Department of Correction. (n.d.). *Policies and procedures*. Retrieved from www.tn.gov/correction/article/tdoc-policies-and-procedures

¹⁰ Turner, R. (2015). *They call me papa*. Nashville, Tennessee: Radnor Publishers.

¹¹ Liu, J. (2012, March 22).



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