



# Chaplaincy: Facing New— and Old— Challenges



**Editor's Note:** This article is the second of a three-part series written by members of the American Correctional Chaplains Association about the role of chaplains in the corrections community.

The transcripts of the 1886 National Prison Congress are very revealing about the relationship at that time between prison administrators and proponents of religious programs. Chaplains were prominent in the proceedings; prayers were offered before each morning and afternoon session and an entire morning's program was devoted to "Moral and Religious Instruction in Prison."

During that session's summation, a participant identified only as Chaplain Parker recounts a revealing incident with an obviously wry sense of humor: "A few months ago, a company of officers thinking, I suppose, to joke me a little, said to me, 'Chaplain, how many of your prayer-meeting men have been converted since you have been here?' I said, 'Gentlemen, before answering that question, suppose I ask another — that is the Yankee way of getting at it. How many of the officers of this prison, during the months of my chaplaincy, sitting in the chapel and listening to the services, have been converted?' Well, that settled the question sufficiently to make them silent."

Back then, chaplains were exclusively Christian. Their unabashed objective was to convert everybody to their particular brand of Christianity, and it was either Jesus' way or no way. Though much of this remains the status

BY GARY FREDMAN

quo in some places, prison chaplaincy has become increasingly pluralist in the ensuing 117 years, and chaplains find themselves dealing with more contemporary issues.

Though Christians still dominate the landscape of prison chaplaincy, diversity is now the order of the day. Proselytizing is still active in many prison facilities, but it is officially prohibited or generally discouraged. Chaplains are still a mainstay of prison operations, but many of their positions are being eliminated or they are being replaced by unqualified community volunteers. Prison religious programs are still widely available to all inmates, but they are increasingly being relegated to faith-based units. Religion itself is still an integral element of correctional programming, but even it is being redefined by the courts. Each of these issues, therefore, deserves a closer inspection.

**Christianity vs. Diversity.** As the country's prison population has dramatically increased, so has the religious diversity of inmates. Though more and more minority clergy have been answering the call to prison chaplaincy, they are often excluded by qualifications that are based on Christian-type ordination and pastoral education standards. Likewise, prison religious programs are all too frequently limited to Christian modes of practice, whereby inmates of other faiths are often obstructed in fulfilling their religious obligations. The world is made up of much more than just Christians and all faith traditions should be honored and accorded equal treatment in prison environs.

**Permitting vs. Prohibiting Proselytizing.** As inmates are literally a captive and vulnerable audience, proselytizing is rightfully prohibited in most prisons. Yet, inmates are regularly subjected to subtle and active forms of proselytizing by dominant faith groups — subtly, by way of heavily focusing on certain faith programs while limiting others, and actively by using outside volunteers and inmate “disciples.” This behavior is highly offensive and disrespectful to targeted inmates of other religions. Again, all faith traditions must be honored and adherents of all faiths should be free of proselytizing pressures from others.

**Professional Chaplains vs. Volunteers.** Correctional chaplaincy is a professional discipline, requiring extensive training beyond that of one's own faith group. Staff chaplains must have sufficient working knowledge of divergent faith requirements in order to properly administer the activities of all faith groups. When properly augmented by contract clergy and community resources of other faiths, staff chaplains are highly effective, contributing significantly to the orderly operations of correctional facilities and the rehabilitation of offenders. However, some correctional systems have recently fallen prey to offers of “free” chaplains from religious organizations whose agendas are self-centered. Consequently, religious programs in those places have suffered greatly, and the religious rights of many inmates have been trampled upon. The integrity of religious programs can be best ensured by retaining professional correctional chaplains and fully using their expertise.

**Open Religious Programs vs. Faith-Based Units.** In the past few years, prisons have been experimenting with inmate living units that are operated in accordance to faith-based principles — a promising development but one that is ripe for abuse. Though most of these programs profess

to be open to inmates of various faiths and “interfaith” in nature, many are actually operated out of a single faith contingent's mission and are proselytizing machines. Furthermore, in some systems where these units have been established, they have become the entire focus of religious programming. Fortunately, however, some truly “multi-faith” unit programs are proving themselves to be the preferable alternative because inmate participants are being taught about their faiths by members of their own faiths and proselytizing is discouraged. These multifaith units should be encouraged, but only so long as they do not detract from religious programs that are available to inmates elsewhere.

**Religious vs. Civil Law.** Recently, the federal Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act was enacted to ensure the religious freedom of all inmates. Likewise, some state and local religious freedom initiatives have been enacted to ensure the religious freedom of all citizens. Some may view this as being burdensome on or intrusive of correctional operations. The alarming development, however, is that civil courts have been ruling that a supposed “sincerely held belief” in a given faith is the proper test for determining an inmate's religious affiliation. This directly conflicts with the standards (i.e., religious laws) by which bona fide members of various faith groups are affirmed and it would also appear to violate proper separation of church and state. It has created a nightmare for prison religious program administrators in that they are essentially being required to accept the faith claims of inmates who are not recognized by the faiths themselves as well as accept some claims that are not even linked to any particular faith tradition. As religious freedom is a hallmark of American life, it should be protected at any cost, even if it requires correctional administrators to step out of their familiar operational box. However, when the courts start making religious decisions, they should be actively challenged. Likewise, correctional systems and personnel should be vigorously defended against inappropriate religion-related lawsuits.

Though chaplaincy is facing new — and old — challenges, it is of proven benefit and deserving of the utmost support. However, religious programming must be properly managed to ensure that it continues to serve as an effective correctional tool.

For further information on chaplaincy issues, visit the American Correctional Chaplains Association's Web site at [www.correctionalchaplains.org](http://www.correctionalchaplains.org).

*Chaplain Gary Friedman is chairman of Jewish Prisoner Services International and the Jewish chaplain for the Washington State Department of Corrections. He also serves as communications chairman of the American Correctional Chaplains Association and sits on the American Correctional Association's ad hoc committee on Religion and Faith-Based Services.*

