Inmate peer ministry: The chaplain’s role

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In a necessary, security-driven world trained to perceive deception and risk, the prison may develop into an “us versus them” culture between inmates and staff. The very nature of custody, control and security often negates much expression of individuality on the part of inmates. Key features of the prison environment — lack of privacy, loss of free choice, frequent fear of violence, overcrowding, stigma, paranoia and distrust — are known to lead to personality changes. In fact, prisoners describe this process of prisonization as “emotional numbing.” Even the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that “prisons are bad for mental health.”

**Fostering spiritual growth**

The correctional chaplain is a voice calling out to a population in a jail or prison. Chaplains, attempting to address the soul sickness of inmates, make intentional efforts to see the God-given potential best in each inmate. Chaplains know that spiritual needs must be addressed in order to realize genuine rehabilitation and positive transformation.

Moreover, the chapel itself often is the place where inmates feel the least marginalized and rejected. The chaplain works with inmates to foster spiritual growth and the free exercise of the inmates’ faith, as guaranteed in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, and as codified in the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000. In addition, this atmosphere of spiritual growth in prison is supported by caring volunteers who offer new, morally rehabilitative perspectives for living, and an expression of empathy to many who may not have experienced much grace nor forgiveness in life.

Every experienced prison chaplain knows, however, that manipulation and danger can find its way into a chapel program. A regular diet of this can lead to the chaplain becoming cynical in his or her attitude toward inmates. We’ve seen it and, unfortunately, lived it at times.
Chaplains realize that, in general, they are working with some of the most broken, wounded and dysfunctional people in society. Inmates represent those who have experienced the greatest measure of emotional and physical deprivation, sexual abuse and various other types of violence, trauma, abandonment and loss. And in the environment that they are placed in, we are not surprised when deceptive, destructive or self-serving behaviors manifest themselves.

Can a bad inmate become good?

Can one who once exhibited the most destructive and dangerous behavior then become the one who exhibits wholeness and peace, even to the point of desiring to impart healing to others? Even the most skeptical of chaplains will admit that genuine rehabilitation may happen. They have seen inmates who are living a life of fullness and serenity, who are modeling good behavior from a sincerely changed heart — a new life direction. We know inmates who have accepted responsibility for their actions, who have experienced true remorse and have embraced forgiveness. They have decided not to be defined by their past mistakes.

Inmates are takers in part because they have been wounded in their lives — broken minds, injured bodies and shattered souls. They are operating from a place of serious deficiency and need. People who have experienced substantial mental, emotional and spiritual healing relate to others on the basis of wholeness and health. They may no longer become takers but givers. They find personal value in helping others because they understand that someone helped them find healing. By serving others, morally rehabilitated inmates know that they add worth to their own lives as they help their peers find a better path, they become “wounded healers.”

Moral rehabilitation

Having served in various prison chaplaincy roles, we both now dedicate our efforts to the development of moral rehabilitation through the work of peer ministers within the prison setting. One proven way of investing in the peer ministry model is by embedding a seminary within the prison by which long-term inmates can be trained to serve their peers. This was first modeled at Angola (Louisiana State Penitentiary) under the leadership of Warden Burl Cain.

The results of that 23-year program have been documented in evidence-based research conducted by Baylor University. The findings of that research have encouraged many other states to follow the peer ministry model of Angola. In 2016, Burl Cain established the Global Prison Seminaries Foundation (GPSF) to work with correctional systems throughout the country. GPSF believes that one of the greatest assets to any department of corrections system is the morally rehabilitated inmate who has been given the opportunity to influence his or her peers for good. What, then, is the chaplain’s role in the peer ministry model?

The chaplain’s role in inmate peer ministry

There are at least four ways in which dedicated chaplains are essential to the effective functioning of inmate peer ministers:

1. Nurturing a prosocial path.
   Chaplains, with the assistance of quality community volunteers, offer inmates new perspectives on how to live their life. When an inmate...
makes a decision to try a new path, the chaplain is there, providing encouragement to do the right thing, to learn how to live a different life in prison, and to be introduced to re-entry resources which will continue to help upon release. The chaplain is visible and available, providing in-prison leadership for inmates willing to make a change. Those who practice a changed life may become agents of change for others.

2. **Encourage the ministry activities of peer ministers.** The use of trained peer ministers will multiply the chaplain’s efforts exponentially. Moreover, peer ministers themselves are uniquely equipped to speak into the mental, emotional and spiritual needs of the prison population. Often, they have come from their own place of deep woundedness and defeat. The peer minister’s own story of overcoming, coupled with specific training to counsel and comfort, makes him or her a powerful voice of healing in an environment marked by constant stressors and trauma. The fact that they live among the very ones they are serving — their peers — gives them a unique “ministry-in-place” that no free person could hold.

Additionally, peer-led ministry activity allows for an authentic setting in that the inmate leading those types of activities knows firsthand the difficulties of the incarcerated population. The participant has the benefit of knowing his or her peer minister on a personal level, living with him or her 24/7, and can evaluate the motives of that minister and the ministry.

3. **Selection of peer ministers.** The chaplain usually knows the inmates who would make the best peer ministers. Such inmates are already modeling moral rehabilitation, and are likely already a participant in chapel events and other prosocial activities. The chaplain should encourage those inmates to pursue the training necessary to become a peer minister. In doing so, the chaplain is building his or her future team by which to best meet the spiritual needs of the population.

Selected inmates must be humble and teachable, respected by their peers, and selected without favoritism. They must understand that they will exercise no material or coercive authority over their peers, nor receive any special benefits or privileges for their service. All service is voluntary.

Seminary-selected inmates have long sentences to allow for four years of accredited schooling, and must have enough time to continue to minister after graduation. Selections are made without regard to one’s faith or no faith preference.

4. **Supervision.** Chaplains exercise supervision over the peer ministers in the prison. They meet regularly with the peer ministers, providing guidance and direction. Though a peer minister may have received a top-quality training and education, he or she will continue to need mentorship. The degree itself does not determine an inmate’s suitability to be a moral leader among his or her peers. The transformation of one’s character — as evidenced by prosocial activity, wisdom, integrity and selfless servant- hood — is the determining factor. The chaplain can be
the one who encourages, and one to whom the peer minister is accountable, as he or she continues on the road toward spiritual maturity.

**Effective chaplain supervision**

Chaplains have a vital role to play in the effective management of a successful peer ministry program. Inmate life directions are changed in a positive manner as moral rehabilitation is practiced by greater numbers of inmates. Peer ministers’ respected and prosocial influence affects the entire culture of the prison. Use of force and incidents of inmate violence decline.

Reintegration into society is facilitated and recidivism rates are reduced, as Johnson et. al have headlined in their research. Chaplaincy management and supervision provide necessary guidance and direction for the program.

**ENDNOTES**


3 Constitution of the United States. First Amendment


7 See [www.globalprisonseminaries.org](http://www.globalprisonseminaries.org)

8 Johnson, B. The Angola Prison seminary, p. 205.