

# Correctional Chaplains: Calming The Storms of Life For Staff and Inmates

By PAUL E. ROGERS

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

A little-known piece of the American Correctional Association's history is that in June 1886, a fellowship of prison chaplains preceded the Wardens Association by six months in becoming ACA's first affiliate. That group, known today as the American Correctional Chaplains Association, is stronger than ever in its partnership with ACA.

Correctional chaplains, similar to their counterparts in the military and in hospitals, provide spiritual care to those who are disconnected from the general community by certain circumstances. This is the case with those who are incarcerated and with correctional staff and their families who often find themselves isolated. Each correctional chaplain is also a representative of his or her particular faith group and is required to be endorsed by a religious body in order to become a chaplain.

Correctional chaplains are professionals with specialized training in the unique dynamics of the correctional system and institutional security. They may be seen as:

- Religious program managers, ensuring that all inmates are afforded opportunities to practice the faith of their choice and coordinating the various activities of those faith groups. This requires extensive knowledge of a diverse range of faiths and denominations therein, as well as policies and procedures that govern all aspects of the prison system;
- Pastoral counselors, providing spiritual guidance and assisting in the notification of deaths (grief counseling) and other emergencies. They may also assist in marriage, premarital and divorce counseling;
- Primary advisers, implementing religious program policy. Chaplains are on-site resources for clarifying issues involving various faith practices, religious property, diets and other religious standards, thereby ensuring that these are permitted to the fullest extent possible within the usually restrictive correctional environment;
- Leaders of prayer and worship, performing liturgical duties consistent with their own faith groups;

- Recruiters, training and coordinating religious volunteers. They work closely with representatives of various faith communities to encourage participation in institutional programs and ensure that volunteer activities are conducted in a diverse yet secure manner;
- Those responsible for maintaining order to the institution by providing positive reinforcement and diffusing frustration, anger and stress among inmates and staff. Their active presence lessens threats, assaults and other negative behaviors. Administratively, chaplains have a positive influence on the finances of an institution by resolving conflicts, averting harm to individuals and damage to property, and the lawsuits that result from such occurrences. Also, having qualified correctional chaplains on staff ensures that there will be less financial loss due to lawsuits resulting from issues of specific religious rights; and
- Representatives of corrections, particularly in matters of religious practice, to the outside community by advising local clergy and laypersons in matters of correctional concern. In the role as a community liaison, chaplains help raise the awareness and sensitivity of correctional issues and interests.

As one can see, correctional chaplains are so much more than preachers. They have developed into a specialized field of pastoral ministry and have a unique role that is essential to the mission of corrections, of orderly and secure confinement and rehabilitation. Looking to the future, correctional chaplains seek greater collaboration with other professionals. Since one of their goals is for inmates to experience successful re-entry into the community, they continue to seek new partnerships within the field of community corrections.

For further information on current chaplaincy-related issues, activities and resources, please visit ACCA's Web site at [www.correctionalchaplains.org](http://www.correctionalchaplains.org).

*Chaplain Paul E. Rogers is president of the American Correctional Chaplains Association and chairman of the American Correctional Association's ad hoc committee on religion and faith-based services. He serves as chaplain at Dodge Correctional Institution in Waupun, Wis.*