

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE PRISON CHAPLAIN

The chaplain's office at any large prison is the focal point of the prison ministry. There usually is one or two state paid chaplains (either part-time or full time) at each institution who is a *staff officer* at the prison. He has the responsibility for *all* religious services at one or more prison locations and he performs many state as well as religious functions. He has the staff responsibility for all the volunteers or church paid chaplains that come into the prison. He can and does *totally* control all religious activities in the prison.

At some penal institutions, it has happened that the chaplain obtained his job through political influences even though he did not have regular clergy training. He was able to obtain ordination through a church group that doesn't require a formal church education. As such, he was able to assume his post as a full-fledged chaplain. It is also true that sometimes trained chaplains just don't care. When these things occur, the chaplain may or may not function effectively as a viable minister and staff officer of the prison. In any case, he has control. If you are unable to get approval of reasonable requests to minister in prison, this could be the reason. There are very few chaplains that fit this description. Most are highly dedicated professionals. It could also be that your request does not conform with the security requirements or religious objectives of the prison ministry program at the institute. How can we know this?

FIRST: Talk at length with the chaplain and ask him what you can do to help. Seek specific needs in the prison's religious program that you are qualified to perform. Adapt your ministry to fit these needs.

SECOND: Be aware that (while there are no religious denominations as such in prison) the head chaplain of any institution would much prefer your ministry if it conforms to his basic religious beliefs. Most chaplains are broad-minded about this, but some staff decisions have been made on occasion based on denominational considerations. Before you jump to conclusions that a chaplain is sidetracking your religious views, be sure that he does not already have that view well represented by another ministry already active in the prison. A frank discussion of your ministry with the head chaplain and his needs would be beneficial. Most chaplains that the author has worked with in prisons throughout the United States are fair and interdenominational. They are highly dedicated Christians who eagerly seek your help as an outside prison volunteer. They will do all they can to help you spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ inside the prison.

THIRD: Go into the prison as a part of another group to get acquainted with the institution. You will learn a lot about the real needs inside the wall and your future requests to the chaplain can be properly directed after you have been exposed to the needs a few times. You will be impressed with *both* the scheduling that a dedicated chaplain can do for your ministry as well as his fairness in dealing with your requests.

There are 10 specific functions that the chaplain's office performs as a staff officer of the prison. You should be aware of them, so you can make use of them.

1. **Schedules** all religious services and obtains security clearance for the participants.
2. **Counsels** with the inmates inside the prison about their spiritual life. This is a big job and involves crisis counseling and lifesaving techniques. Our nation's prison chaplains have prevented hundreds of suicides by prisoners just by knowing when to be there and what to say.

3. **Sets up special one-time religious** visits for any worthwhile purpose between a prisoner and a religious organization outside the walls. This could include church sponsored social service or welfare organizations and special ministries.
4. **Keeps a supply of religious books,** magazines and other spiritual reading material available for the inmates to obtain and read.
5. **Maintains and office** inside the prison with ready access to the inmates. Often this office will process hundreds of letters and requests monthly on spiritual matters for the inmates by concerned outsiders.
6. **Advises prisoners of the death** of a loved one and counsels with him. This is especially difficult in a prison situation. He recommends necessary prisoner transportation and security arrangements to attend the funeral if the death is a mother or father or other close relative of the inmate. Funeral attendance regulations vary from prison to prison.
7. **Conducts inmate baptisms** or arranges for others to do this. Most chaplains baptize hundreds of inmates over their years of service because the average prison inmate has never been baptized.
8. **Represents** the institutions to all *area churches* regardless of denomination in the prison community. This is a public relations job as well as an opportunity to solicit volunteers and understanding for the prison ministry.
9. **Maintains his relationship** with *his own synod or church group* outside the prison wall to promote understanding and cooperation with the organized church to which he belongs.
10. **He prays daily** for his volunteers as well as the inmates and their families. He is the spiritual leader of the institution—both staff and inmate.

The head chaplain also works with the prisoner's family as much as possible and counsels them as much as time will permit. While he is a very busy man, he is particularly mindful of the need to maintain the family structure as a vehicle for success and rehabilitation after the inmate is released. Much of his time is spent inside the prison with the inmates and religious services but he has constant contact with the prisoner's family through the prisoner visiting room setup in the prison and his office as a chaplain of the institution.

He may also be called on to make recommendations to prison officials regarding inmate custody and security considerations as part of his position as a staff officer of the prison. The more of this that he does, the more the inmates may be suspect of his spiritual message.

Chaplains attempt to avoid the image of a "guard" inside the prison and most of them are genuine spiritual leaders, leaving the security functions to other officers. In any case, the office of the chaplain of a large penal institution is one of the most important functions at the prison. It is a life-saving and soul saving position with much temporal and eternal value at stake. Few Americans outside big prisons fully realize what the chaplain does, but his work has significance without parallel in our society today. May God richly bless him in his work.