

**SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS  
DIVERSITY IN PRISONS**



# SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN PRISONS

Focusing on How Chaplaincy  
Assists in Prison Management

*By*

REV. JOSIAH N. OPATA



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## FOREWORD

When Reverend Josiah Opata writes about the role of chaplains in prisons, he writes with a total context in view. This is because he sees not only the prisoner but all other parties involved—correctional staff, prison volunteers, chaplains, prisoners’ families, victims and their families, courts, and parole administrators—as part of a social system. The inmate’s crime, their chances of reform and rehabilitation, and the kinds of attitudes and values that they will develop as they go through prison are greatly affected by systemic features such as family of origin, their interactions among prisoners and with correctional staff while incarcerated, and their experience with their communities and the wider society after leaving prison.

But Rev. Opata in no way excuses inmates’ crimes and their behaviors in prison by “blaming the system.” Rather, he gently but firmly reveals to each party the important responsibilities he or she has and the crucial roles played to not only make the reform and restoration of prisoners more effective but how critical this is for making society better and safer. Starting with prisoners themselves, he illustrates the important and delicate role that the prison chaplain has in helping inmates accept the responsibility for their wrongdoings and the penalties incurred for them; he then points them towards hope by encouraging them to become involved in appropriate treatment and skill-learning programs. Rev. Opata also laments the reduction of financial, educational, therapeutic and skill-building resources that are fundamental to a prisoner’s hope of rehabilitation and being able to function as a productive citizen after parole. According to him, it is not a mere matter of giving away tax dollars to prisons. Rather, it is a matter of bringing human resources from society into the prisons to facilitate rehabilitation and for the after-care needs of paroled prisoners; they need assistance in getting settled into local communities again where they can rebuild their families, find adequate support services and employment and become constructive members of society, never again to return to prison. Tragically, this is not often the case. The recidivism rate is very high because of the lack of resources for rehabilitation programs in prison and during the after-care phase.

Additionally, Rev. Opata highlights the crucial roles of religious organizations, outside volunteers, correctional staff, clergy, inmates’ families, and victims in the treatment and rehabilitative process of prisoners. He describes

the negative atmosphere of most prisons, characterized by fear, violence, and duplicity, as something that volunteers and even professionally trained correctional personnel are sometimes inadequately prepared to encounter. Inadequate training leaves well-meaning workers in prisons vulnerable to manipulation and the power struggles between inmates that are so much a part of prison life.

While a primary objective of the book is to inform those connected with our correctional system about the important and sometimes misunderstood roles of the prison chaplain, this book is appropriate for anyone interested in doing work of any kind in prisons, whether professionally or more informally. Writing as a devout minister, Rev. Opata emphasizes repeatedly the spiritual needs of prisoners and the unique power of the Christian Gospel to deliver them from sin and into a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This is so crucial for healing and reconciliation between prisoners, victims, and society as a whole. However, as a chaplain he also believes firmly in the freedom for prisoners to choose their religious resources as protected by the Religious Freedom and Restoration Act (RFRA) passed in 1993 by the U.S. Congress. He notes that one of his roles as chaplain is to make prisoners aware of these resources and to encourage them to utilize these in connection with treatment and educational programs. While acknowledging some of the problematic issues that have arisen in allowing prisoners freedom of religious choice, he resolutely (and rightly in my view) defends RFRA as crucial to successful prison reform.

We live in a day of increasing violence in our jails. Because many misinformed people are advocating overly simplistic approaches to prison reform, either of the “get tough” or soft-headed variety, this is a timely and important book.

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June 2000

## INTRODUCTION

Chaplaincy has always played a vital role in Corrections, ever since penology was established to correct people having problems in living or obeying society's established laws. But, with the passage of the Religious Freedom and Restoration Act of 1993, this role has become the vital advocate in interpreting the implications, the meaning, and the core elements of religions, including the traditional and non-traditional religions. This work will deal with several of the programs being used by chaplains, case managers, and other correctional staff at the Madison Correctional Institution in London, Ohio, in aiding the rehabilitation of the inmates to be responsible and productive citizens in their various communities. At Madison Correctional, we serve three to four types of offenders, namely: sex offenders, juveniles, substance abusers, and the mentally ill.

In this work, we are going to take a look at some of the programs that work, that are necessary and perhaps needed in building moral, spiritual, civic responsibility and are currently being used to educate, motivate, and challenge the current residents and past residents to normalcy and into becoming productive citizens, after a life in the fast lane. Our position description for Correctional Chaplains in the order of important job duties states the following: Conducts regular worship services on Sundays and for special religious observances for all inmates who wish to participate; provides spiritual guidance and counseling regarding problems in adjusting to confinement of personal and/or family problems (sixty percent of the time); coordinates all activities involving different religious denominations who provide services for the inmates; supervises all volunteers participating in various church-related activities for the inmates (thirty percent of the time); attends pertinent conferences; participates in community organizations and activities which would be beneficial in dealing with incarcerated individuals (five percent of the time); assists in training correctional employees or inmates of the institution; attends classes relevant to position at the institution and other facilities; maintains qualifications in unarmed self-defense; performs related duties as directed by the institution superintendent or designee. The minimum qualification for this job is the master of divinity degree with ordination or ecclesiastical endorsement by religious denomination and three years pastoral experience.

This is just the beginning of a long journey, because creativity is called into action by the chaplain to transform these guidelines into classes, seminars, educational goals and ministry, to guide people with problems in living and incarcerated to learn and master skills, and self-discipline in order to return to society and be responsible, courageous, respectful and cooperating members of society, i.e., the goals of parenting, which is missed by families, are to be reinforced, cultivated and regained by these individuals. It is a difficult, stressful, and demanding job, but there are several citizens from all walks of life, including church and library resources, waiting to be asked and to assist. I love being a chaplain and I am very grateful to have been hired by the Ohio Department of Corrections, especially Dr. David Schwartz and Warden Arthur Tate, Jr., for giving me this opportunity to contribute my God-given talents for the rehabilitation of inmates throughout Ohio and the world in general. I am also grateful to my current Warden, Mr. Curtis Wingard, for giving me the freedom to write, as well as being my mentor. I also appreciate some of the feedback I receive from my supervisor, Mr. Mark Saunders. In no way do I claim that only the programs outlined in this book work. Because I am a believer in comprehensive programs treatment for the whole person, physical, emotional, and spiritual, including life skills, job-training programs developed to meet the needs of the people incarcerated that work. Chaplains and other social and psychological programs can help prison management to rehabilitate offenders for meaningful living in society. What I am attempting to share here is the resources that I have been using, borrowing from all sorts of experts in different fields of concentration. The purpose is to contribute to the total rehabilitation efforts of the treatment team in the facility. So, it is important for all the team members, including psychology, psychiatry, medical, substance abuse, mental health, and religious services, to know what programs each department is delivering in order to prevent duplications. However, chaplains deliver more than just spiritual programs due to the demands placed on them for different skills by the local church and by prison administrators. So, to me, real education is continued on the job and beyond. I am learning daily and growing constantly in knowledge and skills as I arise to the different challenges and demands of my profession, whether planning or organizing programs for juvenile offenders, sex offenders, the mentally challenged, burglars, or murderers. I research to find out what the experts in these various fields have done or are still doing and apply it to the wide-open field of creative practice of chaplaincy in assisting correctional management. Some states, which are doing away with this vital profession, are only doing themselves in, because they will soon realize that the cost of not having a chaplaincy department is more than having one because when inmates riot, there is cost involved. Finally, the cost of aftercare (after prison programs) is less than recidivism.



So, it may be cost effective to keep ex-convicts out of prison unless it becomes necessary to protect citizens from a repeat predator. All ex-felons want is a chance in society to prove themselves. And, when we fail them or put roadblocks in their way, we are saying to them that they are less than human beings, and that sort of thinking or action can destroy anybody's self-esteem and reduce them to criminal beings. A criminal is sometimes a person with a thinking error and, therefore, wrong in judgment or in taking a constructive action, so a little guidance or coaching may help a lot in correcting the error.



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## Chapter 1

### THE NEED FOR PRISON MINISTRY AND BASIC COUNSELING ESSENTIALS

“ . . . **I** was in prison, and ye came unto me,” (ibid., 1) was one of the last words spoken by Jesus before his crucifixion. There are many churches today that will give their money to prison ministries but will not go to the prisoners themselves to proclaim the gospel of Jesus. There are so-called Conservative Evangelicals who are saying and agreeing with the politicians that incarceration is the key to controlling unwanted behavior, yet cut off educational opportunities for inmates in place of warehousing.

Evil is taking its toll on the cities of the United States and even spilling over to the suburbs. Crack cocaine, barbiturates, marijuana, speed, alcohol, and many types of psychedelic drugs are rampant in every high school and neighborhood in the United States. We hear of drive-by shootings, murder at home, murder on the streets, at the shopping malls, and even in restaurants. Some murders take place at the post office, the workplace, and even hospitals. No place is safe today. Yet, we enjoy watching horror movies produced in Hollywood about prison breakouts, murder mysteries and mass murderers portrayed by our heroes. The Geoffrey Dalmer's are our role models. Some women even fall in love with these perpetrators and glorify their gross crimes. Churches are being robbed and in places decent worshipers have to post guards to

watch their vehicles while they worship. Some deacons and church stewards have been known to steal monies from the offering and have even committed murder in the church. Some pastors are armed to the teeth and even carry guns to church. Are we watching the times and the seasons? Does somebody know what time it is?

It is time for the silent majority to wake up and get involved. When prison industries are fast becoming the major industries in some parts of our communities, when some so-called effective prison rehabilitation programs are beginning to cut off funds for chaplaincy services, when secularization of society is legislating every aspect of our moral behavior without education and ethical or moral standards, we need to cry out until somebody hears us and does something about the moral decay of our social and personal lives. Laws without intrinsic values to obey them are meaningless.

One of the questions we must ask ourselves is, “Is the church really doing its work? Is it carrying on the great commandment of the Lord?” If so, why are there so many Christians in prison? What kind of morality and ethics are we teaching these folks and is it working? If it is working to rescue some but not teaching all our members, then we need to reevaluate our programs to reach the unchurched and the

lost among our flock. Hollywood has failed us. It has defiled our thoughts, captivated our minds, and seduced our children. We need to reclaim and win the minds of our children from the gutter and the slave market of sin and bondage. What happened to our fallen President is a reflection of our society's moral decay, and Congress is not immune. All has fallen short and we need help.

There are a number of churches, organizations, and fellowships involved in prison ministry of one kind or another. To those organizations, we cannot thank you enough; you should keep up the efforts. We need you and we need your involvement, your volunteerism and your ministries. For those on the sidelines, I would like to say that charity begins at home. These inmates are your children, your neighbors, your brothers and sisters, experiencing problems in living. What are you doing to help out in the fight against corruption, against substance abuse, against crime, and against moral degeneration of society? Perhaps freedom to do as you well please ought to have some boundaries and perhaps those boundaries need some clear definitions and thought. How can the blind lead the blind? How can they be taught without a teacher and how can the teacher teach without receiving any training? Remember shepherds do not beget sheep, but sheep beget sheep. Prisoners, when properly trained, can always help other prisoners, because they once sat where those new prisoners sit. However, when we close the door of opportunities and cut off all educational opportunities, they become hopeless, depressed, and even mean. For where there is hope, there is life! Where are the Christian warriors and prayer warriors? We must not only pray for the conversion of these prisoners, but we must also act on our faith. Conversion is only a beginning into the journey of faith. Conversion without

discipleship is like having a lot of stillbirths who will never have the opportunity to crawl, walk, or run. Accepting the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior for the first time is only the beginning of the Christian journey. It is time to educate, to disciple, and to teach life skills to our brothers and sisters behind the prison walls. Who is willing to go and bare witness today? Chaplains, prison fellowship, and employees alone cannot get the job done. We need to gather all the resources available to fight evil, by talking the talk and walking the walk.

Many chaplains, imams, rabbis, and volunteers have responded to this call and challenge. How many denominations are intentionally and selectively training chaplains and volunteers to wage war on sin? How many denominations are willing to spend some money and provide additional training to support the chaplains in these needed areas? Thank God for Bible Alliance and the Aurora Ministries for their support and continuing education of correctional chaplains. Which denomination or non-denomination will follow their example?

Prisoners, like other citizens in society, attend worship services for five reasons: (1) contagious and meaningful worship; (2) safe haven for their faith, while incarcerated as seeking relief from guilt; (3) some place to connect with God and other beliefs, if they want to or be left alone in solitude, if they choose to; (4) building relationships and exploring new relationships; (5) maintaining their sanity and finding some meaning for their incarceration.

Some reasons inmates choose to stay away from church are: (1) they find no value for attending; (2) they see too much contention in the church, too much showing off or too much ignorance (some of our preachers lack education); (3) the parole board and the prison administration do not recommend the church as an important part of

their parole plans; (4) they are not interested because someone who is significant to them goes to church, but does not practice what they preach; and (5) the church does not meet their needs.

From the correctional chaplain's perspective on ministry: (1) no response from the people in the pew; (2) time pressure; (3) no adequate support from denominations; (4) inadequate resources for effective programming; (5) lack of support from secular administrators or too much dictatorship when administrators get involved. Other

factors affecting chaplain ministry are: (1) isolation (no one to share dreams with); (2) loneliness because the job does not make close friends. Other chaplains tend to be job-oriented and competitive as against cooperation and people oriented; (3) job insecurity (some states are doing away with chaplaincy as a way of saving money); (4) too much expectation from administrators and inmates (chaplains get blamed for negatives as a way of unloading); (5) difficulties in handling priorities as the paperwork increases; (6) no room for career advancement.

## PERSONAL LIVES OF CORRECTIONAL CHAPLAINS

- Work about forty (40) hours a week
- Ministry affects their families sometimes negatively
- Ministry sometimes becomes an outright hazard to own families
- Inability to meet the needs of the job
- Inadequate support from denominations in terms of resources and continuing education needs
- Some develop low self-image on the job from when hired
- Some reports serious conflicts with inmates or staff on a frequent basis
- Do not have someone they consider as a close friend (*ibid.*, 2)
- Too many inmates per one chaplain (average about 1,000 to 1,500 inmates).

## DELINQUENCY

Is delinquency preventable? Does it have any warning signs? What are the symptoms of delinquency? Perhaps in our attempt to provide for our children, to buy them material resources like living in a nice house, driving a nice car, we neglect something so basic that television, radio, and movies cannot provide and that is the love of a mother. I am no exception, because I recall being in school by age three and by age five, had excelled to a sixth grade level. Teachers in the upper primary school would usually ask me to answer questions for their students that they themselves could not answer before I was even enrolled in the first grade.

This was a blessing to me because my mother was an illiterate woman who could neither read nor write. I owe my education to my sister, Gladys, who was my babysitter and first grade teacher. Prior to her marriage and having children of her own, I was her pet and she tutored me greatly.

However, I missed out on my mother's love. I needed her to say she loved me, to affirm me and assure me that I was needed. Living in the same house, calling her my mother and by her punishing me whenever I did wrong as a child, I was full of stupidity and she did not spare me the rod. I sometimes felt that she was not my mother and I

doubted her sincerity and motives for punishing me. I did not doubt my father as being my father because he taught me speech and grammar, as well as wisdom. I recall him sending me a letter with what he called ten useful phrases to memorize. Those useful phrases have become like a philosophy of life to me—my guiding principles of living.

In my work with inmates in the state prisons in Ohio, I noticed some complaints and indictments of parents. Some doubted that their parents were actually their parents, like I did with my mother, while others openly accused their parents of neglect. Whatever the case, the ontological question: Is delinquency preventable or genetic or affected by the environment or the culture? My answer is probably, “yes and no,” because I am not an expert in these areas and, therefore, need to leave some room for an ongoing discussion of the topic. The answer to these questions would consider biblical perspectives, psychological and social sources. Webster defines a delinquent as “one who fails to do what the law requires (ibid., 3). So a Christian delinquent is a professing Christian failing to do what the Christian law or Gospel requires. I like what Dr. Charles R. Swindell (ibid., 4) did with his Bible Study Guide on the family life of Eli (I Samuel 1-4). Eli had two sons, Hophni and Phineas. He had adopted a son named Samuel, loaned to him by his parents, Hannah and Elkanah, because Samuel was a special gift from God. Professionally, Hophni and Phineas were supposed to follow in their father’s footsteps as priests (1:3b); instead, they took different moral paths by disobeying God’s commandments to the extent that God decided that the two young men were worthless, because they did not know Him (2:12). These two embraced sin contrary to the decalogue; they never familiarized themselves with the priestly

customs or duties. They never committed themselves to God and committed fornication openly with the young virgins who served at the doorway of the tent meetings. Besides other sins, they took huge portions of the meat brought by Israel for burnt offerings for themselves and their father did nothing about their lifestyles. When reports of Eli’s sons were brought to his attention, he refused to deal with them until it was too late. His failure to teach his sons the law of God and his inability to warn them of the consequences of disobedience cost him his life and the destruction of his family. He was a judge and a priest but, yet, he did not take the time to live what he preached or ever teach it to his own children. The boys grew up in the church like any other preacher’s children, but they did not know the Lord. He condoned their wrongdoing and became part of the problem.

Like Eli, the church in America must be careful about the lifestyles of preachers, our immediate families, and the congregations we serve. We must start to instill some discipline in our children in their early years before we ruin their lives. So, biblically, delinquency seems to mean lack of training, lack of biblical knowledge, and lack of discipline. Since most inmates suffer from low self-esteem, we might need to go back to our biblical roots and traditions as one of our tools to wage war on crime.

In the DSM-III-R, the American Psychiatric Association was very subtle in defining delinquency. It merely called it a “disruptive behavior disorder (ibid., 5). It included attention-deficit hyperactive disorder, conduct disorder (violates basic rights of others), oppositional defiant disorder, anxiety disorders, avoidance disorders and so on, which are treatable and can be diagnosed early. But when teenagers start with pranks at school, defiant at home and truancy at school, it seems like many parents