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Prison Chapel Volunteers

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MEMBERS OF THE clergy first became involved in prison programs in the 1700s and 1800s; their primary purpose was “to help offenders repent” (Coleman, 2003, p. 123). Since then, the role of the clergy has evolved and their responsibilities have increased. Today, prison chaplains provide an array of services, including “pastoral counseling, religious teaching and preaching, lead[ing] worship for their own faith, conduct[ing] funeral and/or memorial services and giv[ing] death notices” (Coleman, 2003, p. 125). Other duties include “facilitating [inmate] adjustment to prison, visiting prisoners in isolation, helping inmates make plans for their release, counseling and helping inmates’ families, [and] providing religious and general education” (Sundt and Cullen, 2002, p. 371). Often classified as a member of the treatment staff, prison chaplains are seen as important agents of social change, with a significant number of inmates attributing their post-release successes to these individuals (Sundt and Cullen, 2002; Glaser, 1964).

At mid-year 2003, there were more than 1.46 million prisoners under the jurisdiction of federal and state authorities in the United States (Harrison and Karberg, 2004). Of these, about 30 percent participate in religious programs and services (Sundt and Cullen, 2002). Although most American prisons have at least one full-time chaplain, without pastoral assistance many chaplains are ill equipped to meet the religious needs of inmates. To lighten their workload and to facilitate the provision of programs and services, correctional chaplains often must recruit, train, and coordinate religious volunteers (Coleman, 2003; Rogers, 2003). Yet, despite the important role these individuals play in rehabilitating criminal offenders, little is known about the men and women who volunteer in prison chapel programs.

This exploratory study adds to the sparse literature on correctional volunteers and prison ministry programs. The goal of the present article is to provide a profile of individuals involved in prison ministry programs, with foci on personal characteristics, tasks, training and means of recruitment, and an assessment of the experience from the perspective of the prison chaplain volunteer. The article also provides meaningful insights regarding ways correctional administrators may effectively recruit and manage chaplain volunteers.

[back to top](#)**Literature Review**

There is a dearth of empirical literature examining the role and impact of chaplains and chaplain volunteers in today's prisons. In one of the few studies to touch on this issue, Sundt and Cullen (1998; 2002) conducted a national survey of 232 prison chaplains to determine their correctional orientation. The researchers concluded that although "chaplains support incapacitation as the primary goal of prisons, [they] also express high levels of support for rehabilitation" (2002, p. 369). The individual variables examined in the study were sex, race, level of education, age, and religious affiliation. The sample consisted primarily of Whites (84.2 percent), males (85.2 percent), and Protestants (69.4 percent). Approximately 25.7 percent of the chaplains were Catholics and the remainder were Jewish, Islamic, or some other religious affiliation. The mean age of the chaplains was 56.5. More than 92 percent had a bachelor's degree or higher and 60 percent had a master's degree (p. 375). A majority of the chaplains had an average of ten years experience in the institutions where they worked. When queried about the best way to rehabilitate inmates, well over one-half (60.2 percent) believed that changing an offender's values through religion was the preferred method of treatment. The second most popular response was helping inmates with their emotional problems. The least frequently selected response was providing inmates with a good education (Sundt and Cullen, 2002, p. 379).

There is some evidence that correctional volunteers share these chaplains' sentiments regarding the value of religious programming as an important form of treatment. Tewksbury and Dabney (2004) conducted one of the few studies to date that profiles correctional volunteers. The researchers surveyed all of the active volunteers at a medium security prison in the South and reported that a majority of the respondents were involved in the chapel program, while only 8.6 percent were involved in recreational programs and other activities. Two-thirds (65.5 percent) of the volunteers were men and a majority was white (71.7 percent). The mean age of the volunteers was 51. The volunteers were highly educated, with approximately 78 percent having some post-secondary education and 47 percent having a 4-year degree or more. The typical volunteer participated in the chaplain's program for just over five years, while more than one-half participated for three years or more. The volunteers were active participants in the program, "with the average volunteer being at the institution one day per week for 2.8 hours" (p. 175). Distance was not an impediment to volunteer participation. Two-thirds of the volunteers traveled at least 30 minutes to arrive at their destinations and 12 percent traveled more than one hour.

The volunteers in Tewksbury and Dabney's study gave diverse reasons for participating in the prison ministry program. Although 49.2 percent of the respondents said they had "a religious calling or desire to share religious beliefs/values with others," 26.2 percent expressed non-religious reasons, and 18 percent participated in the program because they were asked to do so or because they knew someone who was incarcerated (3 percent) (2004, p. 176). Many volunteers stated that the most rewarding aspect of their prison experience was the belief in their work and that they could make a difference (p. 177). Reflective of this, Tewksbury and Dabney (2004) reported that

Male volunteers were more likely than women (41.9 percent vs. 30.8 percent) to value feeling that they were helping to change/rehabilitate inmates, while women were more likely than men (23.1 percent vs. 3.2 percent) to value the opportunity to share a religious experience with others...[W]hite volunteers were more likely than non-whites (44.4 percent vs. 30.0 percent) to value helping change/rehabilitate inmates, and non-whites were more likely (20.0 percent vs. 8.3 percent) to value the opportunity to share a religious experience...[T]hose age 40 and younger were more likely (62.5 percent vs. 35.4 percent) to appreciate their volunteer experience because they believed they were agents of change/rehabilitation.... (p. 178).

The literature on prison ministry volunteers is sparse, with only the studies by Sundt and Cullen (1998; 2002) and Tewksbury and Dabney (2004) providing insights regarding this population. The present study seeks to add to this important, but clearly understudied, area.

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Methods

Data for the present study were collected during summer 2003 via anonymous surveys distributed to prison ministry volunteers in three Kentucky prisons. Requests for participation were sent to chaplains in all 14 Kentucky prisons by both the first author and an administrator from the Department of Corrections' Central Office. Three chaplains chose to participate. The surveys were distributed either at mandatory quarterly volunteer trainings or to volunteers when they arrived at the prison to complete their volunteer activities. All surveys were accompanied by postage-paid return envelopes addressed to the first author at the prison where he served as Research Director. Despite requests from the researchers, prison chaplains did not maintain a count of the number of surveys distributed; however, a total of 80 survey containing 136 variables were provided to the three chaplains for distribution and 41 surveys were returned, making the response rate at least 51 percent.

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Findings

Analysis of the demographics of the prison chapel volunteers revealed that a majority are middle-aged white females representing a wide range of religious faiths (see [Table 1](#)). When asked about their personal experiences with the criminal justice system and about both their own and their family members' experiences in prison ministries, one in six (17.5 percent) of the volunteers reported having a prior criminal conviction. Approximately 12.5 percent of the volunteers reported that they had been on probation and 12.5 percent had been in jail. Five percent of the volunteers had also served time in prison.

A significant number of volunteers reported that their family members are also active in the general ministry and in prison ministry programs. Indicative of this, 57.9 percent of the volunteers have at least one family member who is involved in the general ministry and almost one-half (45.9 percent) have a family member who is involved in prison ministry programs.

The volunteers in this study possessed lengthy careers as participants in correctional ministry programs. Reflective of this, two-thirds of the volunteers were previously involved with religious programming at a different prison, for an average tenure of more than nine years. Sixty percent of the volunteers reported prior experience in jail-based ministry programs, for an average tenure of nearly 8 years (94 months). Although not as common as their experiences in adult facilities, more than one-quarter (26.8 percent) of the volunteers reportedly had worked in some capacity in religious programming at a juvenile detention center, for an average of more than 4 years (50 months).

The prison ministry volunteers appear dedicated to their work at the current institution and remain involved for long periods. When asked about the length of time they had worked in the current program, the volunteers reported a mean tenure of 7 years and 4 months. As shown in [Table 2](#), more than one-half of these individuals reported being an active volunteer at the current prison for more than 5 years. Only one in fourteen (7.3 percent) reported that they had been a prison chapel volunteer for less than one year.

The fact that prison chapel volunteers have longevity with their programs is not surprising given that they report very high levels of satisfaction with their work. When asked, "How satisfied are you with your experience as a volunteer with the prison Chapel program?" the mean response was 8.75, with fully one in three participants in the sample expressing complete satisfaction (10 on a 10-point scale). Clearly, prison chapel volunteers enjoy their work and, as will be discussed below, feel that they reap numerous personal rewards from their efforts.

The path to becoming a prison chapel volunteer takes many forms. Administrators seeking to initiate or to enhance prison chapel programs may seek volunteers in multiple venues. [Table 3](#) shows that, not surprisingly, the most common sources of referral to prison ministry programs are individuals already involved in ministry work. Other viable sources of referral include the volunteers' spouses and friends.

Most volunteers in prison chapel programs come to their work with minimal formal training for the tasks they are expected to perform. Although two-thirds of the volunteers report that they have been ordained, a majority lacks a formal education to prepare them for their duties. As evidenced in [Table 4](#), only one-third of the volunteers have a university/seminary degree and slightly more than one-quarter (26.8 percent) have participated in a mentoring or apprenticeship program. Most common among these volunteers (82.9 percent) is the belief that they have learned to do their tasks through “many” years of experience in ministry work.

[Table 5](#) summarizes the many tasks and activities that prison ministry volunteers report performing. As shown here, almost all volunteers report that they engage in some form of teaching inmates. The most frequently reported “formal” activity that volunteers engage in is preaching at the prison; fully two-thirds (65.9 percent) of the volunteers report doing so. Interestingly, relatively few of the volunteers report that they engage in tasks not of a purely religious nature, such as counseling regarding personal problems, assisting with transition/re-entry to society, and providing companionship/friendship to inmates.

An examination of the tasks that prison chapel volunteers perform in light of their education and training revealed both expected and unexpected findings. Surprisingly, a comparison of self-reported tasks by volunteers who are ordained and those who are not shows little difference in their activities. The majority (81.5 percent) of ordained volunteers reported preaching at the prison; however, so, too, did one third (35.7 percent) of non-ordained volunteers. Additionally, ordained volunteers were more likely to counsel inmates regarding personal problems (44.4 percent vs. 21.4 percent) and spiritual issues (77.8 percent vs. 28.6 percent), and work to convert inmates to their faith (25.9 percent vs. 7.1 percent); non-ordained volunteers were more likely to work with inmates regarding society re-entry issues (28.6 percent vs. 11.1 percent).

When asked to explain why they chose to volunteer in a prison-based chapel program, the respondents’ open-ended responses fell into four general categories. Most common, 50 percent of all respondents reported feeling called by God to do the work. An additional 22 percent of respondents reported that they believed prison ministry volunteer work offered a viable opportunity to share their beliefs with others. Although probably included in the first two types of responses, 16 percent of the respondents stated they were seeking to provide some form of direct assistance to inmates. Finally, one in eight (12 percent) of the respondents reported that they began their prison ministry work simply because someone asked them to do so.

The reasons given by the volunteers for joining the prison ministry are directly related to the benefits they report receiving from their work. As shown in [Table 6](#), nearly all of the volunteers report feeling that they are serving God through their volunteer work, with two of every three saying that their efforts provide them with a sense of purpose. More interesting, however, is the data showing that 41.5 percent of the respondents experienced a sense of reward from engaging in a mentoring relationship with at least one inmate. Although such outcomes are not reported as a common reason for initially becoming involved with the prison ministry, they appear to be an unanticipated, positive consequence for both the volunteers and the inmates.

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Discussion

This exploratory study seeks to add to the sparse literature on prison ministry programs and correctional volunteers. The implementation of rehabilitative programming in correctional environments is subject to two important but competing concerns. On the one hand, correctional administrators must provide high-quality programming for inmates that address their psychological, social, spiritual, and practical needs; on the other hand, they must manage their agencies’ ever-shrinking budgets. A possible reconciliation between these opposing responsibilities lies in the use of prison ministry volunteers. With appropriate training in prison security protocol and the tenets of diverse faiths, prison chapel volunteers are potentially capable of enhancing and expanding religious programming by providing quality services to inmates who benefit from their assistance while simultaneously facilitating the conservation of agencies’ fiscal

resources.

Demographically, the volunteers in this article are quite interesting. Unlike the correctional volunteers studied by Tewksbury and Dabney (2004), where most prison chapel volunteers were middle-aged white males, a majority of the prison chapel volunteers in this article are middle-aged white females. Similar to the earlier study, however, the volunteers represent a diversity of religious faiths, including Protestants, Evangelicals, Catholics, and Muslims. Some of the volunteers have prior criminal convictions and previously were incarcerated in jail or served time in prison. A significant number of volunteers have family members that are also active in general ministry and prison ministry programs. Although most volunteers gravitated to prison ministry programs because of referrals by persons actively working in the ministry, others volunteered at the suggestion of their spouses and friends.

Quite surprisingly, most volunteers receive little formal education or training to prepare them for the responsibilities they are entrusted with in prison ministry programs. Though a majority of volunteers report that they are ordained, only one-third have university or seminary degrees; even fewer have been trained by a mentor or received instruction in an apprenticeship program. Despite this, most volunteers believe they are well qualified to serve in prison chapel programs because their “many” years of experience in the ministry have prepared them to do the work.

With regard to the tasks they perform, there is little difference between ordained volunteers and non-ordained volunteers. Almost all volunteers report that they engage in teaching inmates, with the most frequent formal activity being preaching. Additionally, less than 20 percent of all volunteers report engaging in non-religious tasks such as counseling regarding personal problems, assisting with transition/re-entry to society, or providing companionship/friendship to inmates.

In general, the volunteers in this article are extremely dedicated to prison ministry work and remain involved for long periods. More than 56 percent report that they have been doing this type of volunteer work for more than 5 years. For most, the average tenure at their current institution is more than 7 years. Many volunteers also report having worked at a different prison for an average of more than nine years. Still others report long-term involvement with chaplain programs in jails and juvenile detention centers.

Perhaps a primary reason that volunteers have such long tenures with prison chapel programs is that they receive a high degree of satisfaction from their work. A majority of respondents surveyed rated their satisfaction level as 8.75 on a 10-point scale. This is probably reflective of the fact that many feel called by God to do the work. (For similar findings, see Tewksbury and Dabney, 2004.) Other volunteers are drawn to prison ministry programs because they view the work as an opportunity to share their beliefs and to provide direct assistance to inmates.

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Conclusion

Most of the volunteers in this study were influenced to work in prison ministries by individuals already in the ministry; however, networking outside of traditional religious channels has hardly been exploited. This study’s results raise questions about how current knowledge of correctional volunteers can be used to enhance recruitment, selection, training, and retention of individuals to serve in prison chapel programs. Noteworthy among the study’s findings is the fact that at least one-third of the prison chapel volunteers have graduated from university and seminary programs. Thus, a reasonable strategy would entail recruiting religion students at selected institutions of higher learning and seminaries to serve as volunteers in prison chapel programs. Marketing materials containing testimonials from current volunteers who describe the benefits derived from participating in such programs may also be developed for distribution to potential applicants.

Prison administrators might also consider partnering with universities and seminaries to develop externship programs for students interested in embarking on a career as a correctional chaplain. The benefits from such programs are two-fold: the students receive hands-on experience working

with inmates in a correctional setting, and administrators receive qualified and much-needed assistance in providing religious programs to inmates.

Another strategy for developing a contingent of prison chapel volunteers involves capitalizing on the network of individuals related to and/or known by current prison staff and chapel volunteers. The current research indicates that almost two-thirds of the volunteers received assistance from ministers, priests, and others active in the ministry to become prison volunteers. Additionally, more than half of the volunteers have family members actively involved in the general ministry and almost half have family members involved in the prison ministry. Prison administrators who are willing to cultivate relations with staff and members of the community can use these connections to locate volunteers and foster interest in religious programming.

This study (and the prior research by Tewksbury and Dabney, 2004) provides a limited profile of individuals who volunteer to work in prison chapel programs. Further research is needed to determine the qualities and qualifications that make volunteers best suited to work in programs of this nature, as well as strategies that administrators may employ to effectively recruit and retain them. Research is also needed to document the nature and adequacy of training provided to volunteers by prison officials to minimize security breaches and lessen the risk of harm to volunteers, staff, and inmates.

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Table 1: Demographics of Prison Ministry Volunteers

Demographic	Percent of Volunteers
Sex	
Male	17.5 percent
Female	82.5 percent
Race	
White	85.0 percent
Black	15.0 percent
Age	
Mean	54.7
Median	53
Range	28—85
Ordination	65.9 percent
Religious Faith*	
Protestant	43.9 percent
Catholic	5.0 percent
Muslim	2.5 percent
Evangelical	35.0 percent
Nondenominational	22.5 percent

* Total equals more than 100 percent due to some respondents claiming more than one category. Also reported are Jehovah's Witness, Independent and Pentecostal.

Table 2: Length of Time as a Prison Chapel Volunteer

Time as prison chapel volunteer	Percent of Volunteers
Less than one year	7.3 percent
More than 1, but less than 5 years	36.6 percent
More than 5, but less than 10 years	36.6 percent
More than 10 years	19.5 percent

Table 3: Sources of Referral/Encouragement for Prison Chapel Volunteers

Who assisted to become prison volunteer	Percent of Volunteers
Minister/priest/etc.	58.5 percent
Current prison chaplain	17.1 percent
Former prison chaplain	7.3 percent
Prison staff member	4.9 percent
Close family member	2.4 percent
Friend from church	39.0 percent
Friend not from church	9.8 percent
Coworker	2.4 percent

** Totals more than 100 percent as respondents were allowed more than one answer.*

**Table 4: Training for One's Tasks
as a Prison Chapel Volunteer**

Training	Percent of Volunteers
Self Taught	29.3 percent
University/seminary degree	34.1 percent
University/seminary certificate	12.2 percent
Mentoring/apprenticeship program	26.8 percent
Many years of experience	82.9 percent
None	2.4 percent

**Table 5: Tasks & Activities Performed by
Prison Chapel Volunteers**

Current Activities as Volunteer	Percent of Volunteers
Preach	65.9 percent
Teach	90.2 percent
Instrumental Music	10.0 percent
Vocal Music	25.0 percent
Counsel inmates on personal problems	36.6 percent
Counsel inmates on spiritual issues	61.0 percent
Religious text study	48.8 percent
Work with inmates for re-entry transition	17.1 percent
Find and assist converts to own faith	19.5 percent
Be a friend to inmates with no/few friends	19.5 percent

Table 6: Chapel Volunteers' Reported Personal Rewards from Volunteer Work

Reward Experienced	Percent of Volunteers
Feel a sense of purpose	65.9 percent
Feel am serving own God	92.7 percent
Meet new friends	12.2 percent
Meet new romantic partner	0
Help needy others	31.7 percent
Learn about different faiths	4.9 percent
Opportunity to practice/sharpen skills	22.0 percent
Chance to convert others to own faith	39.0 percent
Experiment with new opportunities	2.4 percent
Find opportunities for new experiences	22.0 percent
Mentor an inmate	41.5 percent

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