

The Work of the Chaplain
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for The New York State Council of Churches

The prison chaplain represents the oldest civilian profession in the correctional field since the establishment of the penitentiary system. Two hundred years ago chaplains were present in the English system which predated developments in the United States. In 19th century England the residence of the chaplain and that of the warden were located on either side of the main entrance to the prison. They stood as symbols of law and order, and, justice and compassion.

Until the early part of this century, in the absence of other professions, the chaplains performed many tasks. They were the social workers, teachers, librarians, recreation leaders, arbitrators, advocates, as well as spiritual advisors, priests and pastors. As other professions began to appear, often at the urging of the chaplain, the role became more sharply defined in the role of spiritual leader and advocate.

Today, the work of the chaplain is concentrated in five major areas:

Public Worship and Sacramental Ministry
Religious Education
Pastoral Care
Advocacy
Administrative Responsibility

The following is an outline of the specific tasks in each of the five categories:

I. PUBLIC WORSHIP AND SACRAMENTAL MINISTRY

Provide primary weekly worship service
Offer special sacramental services as required
Provide special seasonal worship services (Advent, Lent, Easter, etc.)
Administer to sick and those confined in special housing unit
Provide for services in different languages as needed

II. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

- Basic religious instruction in the faith
- Teach Bible classe
- Confirmation
- Instruction in morals and ethics
- Instruction in family values and problems of society

III. PASTORAL CARE

- Death notification and counseling
- Crisis counseling
- Pastoral care of the sick in hospitals
- AIDS ministry
- Visiting room visitation
- Pastoral care for special housing units and solitary inmates
- Suicide watch and counseling
- Visits to inmate yards and housing units
- Visits to work areas
- Ministry to correctional staff
- Conduct funerals
- Assist stranded families and families in crisis
- Individual counseling
- Group counseling
- Group programs in understanding violence & alienation
- Sex offender counseling both individual and group

IV. ADVOCACY WORK

- Meet with Superintendent concerning problems of facility
- Watch over the issues of justice within facility
- Represent the needs of powerless people (inmates, families, staff)
- Promote new concepts, programs and ideas
- Communicate with outside religious leaders concerning needs of system
- Act on behalf of inmates concerning post-release needs in community
- Work with outside religious organizations and churches
- Provide orientation for new inmates

V. ADMINISTRATIVE WORK

- Perform required administrative work required to conduct effective program
- Maintain adequate records and files

- Attend departmental and professional meetings
- Acquire professional training in field
- Keep records of funds and budget requirements
- Recruit, register, and supervise comprehensive volunteer program
- Supervise and train inmate clerks, teachers, and worship leaders

This is an outline of the work of chaplains. There are probably many other duties that could be added to the list by each chaplain. Almost every chaplain has his/her own strong areas of ministry and concern. The above list concerns general duties that almost every chaplain can affirm, but, there are many areas of specialized need and concern that have developed because special individual gifts.

An English chaplain wrote a book about ten years ago entitled, Summons to Serve. It is an appropriate title for our work. Our summons as chaplains comes from the prison arena itself, our own sense of calling, and the God we serve.