

Range of Chaplain
Engagement with Prisoners
Graduate Theological Union
Master's – Christian Theology Thesis

By Katy Dickinson

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The Cross of Light

Ad

My Jail Ministry

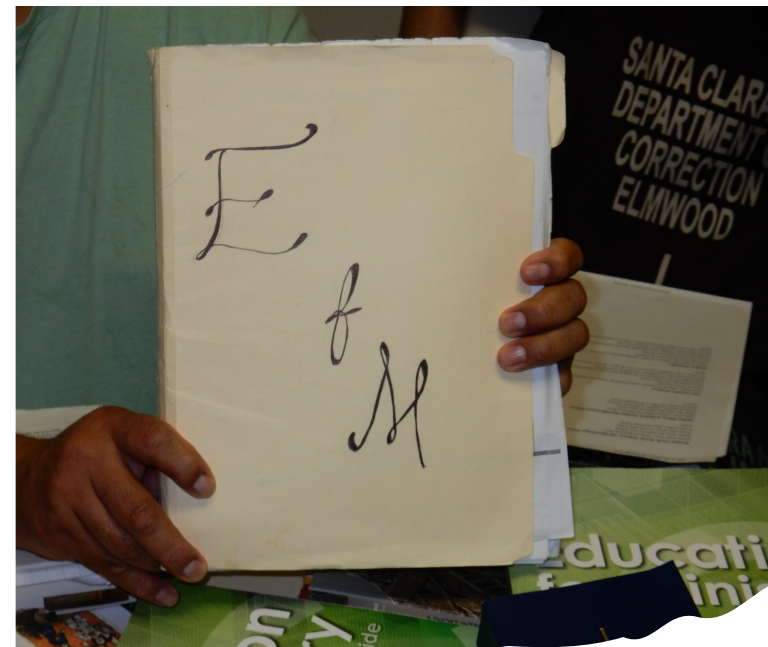
- I am a lifelong Episcopalian, and since 2015 have been a volunteer chaplain in Santa Clara County. Thanks to the leadership of the Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy, especially by the **Revs. Dave Robinson and Liz Milner**.
- Until the COVID-19 pandemic lock out (March 2020), we went in twice a week to Elmwood jail with two seminars:
 - Education for Ministry (EfM), 4-year program of the University of the South – School of Theology. (I have been an Accredited EfM mentor since 2010).
 - Transforming Literature of the Bible (TLB), based on EfM but taking only 6 months.
- Ours is the 1st college-level, EfM program in jail. In the last 2 years, we have taught 166 participants. Thanks to the **Rev. Peggy Bryan** and my Co-Mentors **Joel Martinez, Diane Lovelace, & John Plocher**.
- Graduate Theological Union Master's – Christian Theology, Spring 2021. Continuing in GTU's Interreligious Chaplaincy Certificate program.
- Thesis is dedicated to the Rev. Canon William H. Barnwell (1938-2020) and the community of Stepping Stones. With thanks to my husband John Plocher and the many friends and colleagues who read and re-read the document and offered their wise suggestions to help get it right. You inspire me.

Thesis Topic: Range of Chaplain Engagement with Prisoners

- Most congregations interested in ministry to the incarcerated start slowly, with a desire to act righteously, with moral correctness and integrity but without a strategic plan, goals, or ministry structure.
- The range of jail or prison chaplain engagement and practices reflects aspects of a congregation's sociology and theology, individual preferences, and requests made of them by the chaplaincy.
- *Researched the theology, sociology, and structures behind ministry with the incarcerated and to ex-prisoners in reentry.*
- *In-person data collection is from the greater San Francisco Bay Area, but most publications take a country-wide U.S. context.*
- *Focus on how Christian individuals, congregations, chaplaincy programs, and faith organizations engage in ministry to prisoners*
- *Also considers aspects of interfaith engagement and theological hospitality (as Matthew 25 says, welcoming the stranger).*

New Tool: Prisoner Ministry Engagement Tool (PMET)

- PMET is new evaluation mechanism (“tool”) to help chaplains, congregations, and faith-based organizations analyze their range of engagement and practices.
- PMET consists of three components:
 1. Four-quadrant graph maps actions and organizations in terms of their focus and time frame.
 2. Progressive set of engagement levels shows organizational development.
 3. Process for faith-based organizations to define, understand, shape, expand their ministry.
- 3 PMET components work together in parallel with spiritual discernment to lead a congregation through its goal-setting discussions.
- PMET is new, but management methods associated with graphs, progressive level tracking, and process design are well-established business and industry best practices.



Inside Elmwood Jail

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Mass Incarceration is a *Wicked Problem*

“Wicked problems are ill-defined, ambiguous and associated with strong moral, political and professional issues. Since they are strongly stakeholder dependent, there is often little consensus about what the problem is, let alone how to deal with it. Furthermore, wicked problems won’t keep still: they are sets of complex, interacting issues evolving in a dynamic social context. Often, new forms of wicked problems emerge as a result of trying to understand and solve one of them.”¹

– Tom Ritchey

1. “Wicked Problems: Modelling Social Messes with Morphological Analysis.” *Acta Morphologica Generalis - AMG* 2, no. 1 (2013), <http://www.swemorph.com/pdf/wp.pdf>.

Mass Incarceration, Systemic Racism

- “The United States is the world's leader in incarceration with 2.2 million people currently in the nation's prisons and jails — a 500% increase over the last forty years.”¹
- “Every year, over 600,000 people enter prison gates, but people go to jail 10.6 million times each year. Jail churn is particularly high because most people in jails have not been convicted... At least 1 in 4 people who go to jail will be arrested again within the same year — often those dealing with poverty, mental illness, and substance use disorders, whose problems only worsen with incarceration.”²
- Pew Research reported in 2020 that U.S. imprisonment rates overall are declining, and the gap is shrinking between inmates who are White and those who are people of color; however, disparities are still extreme.³
- “Systemic racism is evident at every stage of the system, from policing to prosecutorial decisions, pretrial release processes, sentencing, correctional discipline, and even reentry.”⁴

1. “Trends in US Corrections,” *The Sentencing Project*, August 2020.

2. Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, “Mass Incarceration: the Whole Pie 2020.” *Prison Policy Initiative*, 24 March 2020.

3. John Gramlich, “Black imprisonment rate in the U.S. has fallen by a third since 2006,” *FactTank - Pew Research Center*, 6 May 2020.

4. Wendy Sawyer, “Visualizing the Racial Disparities in Mass Incarceration,” *Prison Policy Initiative*, 27 July 2020.

Jail and Prison are Different

Jail	Prison
Whether or not they are guilty, 74% of people held in American jails are not convicted of any crime. Many un-convicted people remain in jail because they are too poor to make bail.	Prison inmates have been convicted.
Inmates are usually in a jail near their home community, or in the community where they were arrested.	Prison inmates may be sent anywhere in their state (and sometimes out of state).
People can be jailed from a few days to a dozen years or more. Most do not know their schedule for judgement.	Prison inmates generally know their incarceration schedule.
Jail sees a large-scale, constant churn in and out.	Prison populations are comparatively stable.
Jails are managed by county or municipal authorities.	Prisons are managed by the state governments and the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons. There are also incarceration facilities operated by the armed forces and other federal agencies.

An Unbalanced Society

- In America, 93% of prisoners are identified as male.¹
- In addition to criminal behavior, incarceration is associated with many personal and socio-economic challenges, acting alone or together:
 - About half of inmates in Santa Clara County have mental illness.²
 - About two-thirds of jail inmates report drug dependence or abuse.³
 - Many have been in and out of foster care, incarceration, mental illness, and/or addiction since early teens.
- Few are innocent, but most seem over-punished because they are too poor to pay bail or hire a capable lawyer.
- Gustavo Gutiérrez: “The question for Job is not whether or not he is a sinner; he knows well that as a human being he is indeed a sinner. The question rather is whether he deserves the torments he is suffering.”

1. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Prisoners in 2017, by Jennifer Bronson and Ann Carson, NCJ 252156, April 2019, 3.
2. Maryann Barry, “Augmentation of Behavioral Health Services to Inmates in County Jail,” County of Santa Clara: Santa Clara Valley Health & Hospital System, 15 December 2015.
3. Wendy Sawyer, “BJS Report: Drug Abuse and Addiction at the Root of 21% of Crimes,” Prison Policy Initiative, 28 June 2017.
4. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

Chaplains and Religion Inside

Religion in Prisons: A 50-State Survey of Prison Chaplains is a unique 2012 research study by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life:

- U.S. state prison chaplains are predominantly male, middle aged, White, Christian, highly educated, and conservative.
- “The overwhelming majority of state prison chaplains (85%) identify themselves as Christians, and about seven-in-ten are Protestants (71%). Fully 44% of all the chaplains surveyed say their denomination is part of the evangelical Protestant tradition, while 15% belong to a mainline Protestant tradition and 7% say they are associated with the historically black Protestant tradition. Catholics make up 13% of the chaplains. The remainder either belong to non-Christian traditions (including 7% who are Muslim and 3% who are Jewish) or did not specify a religious preference.” (p. 27)
- Chaplains estimated that 68% of inmates were Christian, of which 50% think of themselves as born-again or evangelical Christian.



How Does Chaplaincy in Jail / Prison Work?

- There is a strict and time-consuming bureaucratic process to visit jail or prison for any reason. If you want to visit prisoners who are not related to you, the process is even more lengthy and complex, including a regular cycle of finger printing, background checks, training, and supervision.
- Most jail chaplaincy volunteers will support any inmate to the extent they can, regardless of religion, and inmates will often go to any chaplain or worship service available. Prisoners are welcome at all worship services.
- *Los Angeles Times* reported on a Jewish jail inmate who said he attends Christian classes as an escape, “‘You do anything to get out,’ he said. ‘It feels very secluded and isolated in there. Anything that inspires learning, wisdom.’”¹

1. Leila Miller, “When Jail Chaplains are Volunteers, Some Faiths are More Present than Others,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 November 2019.

Portrait of a Chaplaincy

Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy, Santa Clara County,

<https://www.cicministries.org/>

- 6 paid staff: 5 chaplains, 1 office manager:
 - 4 Christian Chaplains, 1 Muslim Chaplain.
 - 1 African American, 1 Latino, 1 Middle Eastern, 2 White Chaplains.
 - Requires 1 unit of CPE, Mdiv or equivalent degree, experience.
- Paid for by Santa Clara County contract, plus grants and donations.
- Provides annual training/management of 300+ volunteers.
- Monthly: 280 services, oversees 80 religious diets, and 580 individual counselling sessions, 24/7 pager for emergencies.
- Provides services to a wide variety of believers, including, Buddhists, Protestant and nondenominational Christians, Hindus, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Latter Day Saints (Mormons), Muslims, Native Americans (various tribes), Pagans and Wiccans, Rastafarians, Satanists, Scientologists, Sikhs, and Taoists. Catholics have their own chaplaincy.
- Most inmates are Christian, the next largest group is Muslims, then Buddhists.

Christian Chaplain - Jail Addiction

In 2016, when the Rev. Louann Roberts retired after twenty-five years of service as the Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy Facility Chaplain, Correctional Center for Women, she wrote,

“The best of poignant memories of all are the bright, strong and contagious faiths that encouraged and blessed me in unexpected ways. The faith, love and gratefulness found among prisoners that is freely shared with anyone who will take the time to listen, is the most addicting thing I've experienced in my life. I'm forever changed by the evil and the good, the contrasts where love can still win over hate, and that God is found in jail.”¹


1. Louann Roberts, “Praying with My Eyes Open,” CICMinistries.org, *Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy*, 2016.

Buddhist Chaplain – Ripping Off the Covers

“A woman asked me for a little Buddhist book of quotations, so I went into the CIC office and sure enough there was the book, a little book with a pretty cover on it.... Of course, true to the rules, the officer said, “She can’t have it! It’s got hardcovers!” I thought, well not for long! So I myself went RIP! RIP! and I gave it to the woman. She was pleased, and I was pleased to see the surprised look on the officer’s face. I have to say it was fun to be a white haired lady tearing stuff up!

But something deeper happened that day. With that gesture, it was more than just giving out the pages of a book, something about that action felt powerful to me... The book, yes it’s in pieces, but the important part, the text, has been liberated from everything that was forbidden about it. Now the man or the woman is free to receive the text, and I am free to give it.”¹

1. Margaret Gainer, “Ripping Off Covers.” *Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy*, 12 October 2019.



Joy in Jail, Learning to Believe

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- Jail is often a grim place but sometimes there is space for joy. The Rev. Peggy Bryan told the story of trying to get a worship group of thirty men at Elmwood Jail to sing a two-part round of the camp song "Rejoice in the Lord Always." The men were good sports but even after several tries, it just did not work and everyone fell apart laughing in a spirit of childlike joy.¹
- When inmates understand that they have value and joy is still possible, they may be motivated to fight harder to get a shorter prison sentence.
- Prison Policy Initiative reports, "almost all convictions are the result of plea bargains, where defendants plead guilty to a lesser offense, possibly in a different category, or one that they did not actually commit."²

1. Peggy Bryan, Associate Rector for Outreach, Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church, in her email to the author, 11 October 2020.
2. Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, "Mass Incarceration: the Whole Pie 2020." *Prison Policy Initiative*, 24 March 2020.

Data from 24 Christian Congregations

Interviewed (May-August 2020) by Katy Dickinson

San Francisco Bay Area, Ministries for Prisoners and Those in Reentry

Churches	# of Congregations	Protestant Mainline	Protestant Evangelical	Roman Catholic	Kairos Prison Ministry
Baptist	1 (4%)	1			
Episcopal	4 (17%)	4			
Evangelical Covenant	1 (4%)		1		
Lutheran	1 (4%)	1			
Methodist	2 (8%)	2			1
Presbyterian	1 (4%)	1			
Nondenominational	8 (33%)		8		
Roman Catholic	6 (25%)			6	5
Totals	24	9 (38%)	9 (38%)	6 (25%)	6 (25%)

Goals for Engagement by Congregations

Ministry Goals	For Current Prisoners (24 Congregations)	For People in Reentry (19 Congregations)
Evangelism, creating new Christians, spreading the Good News of Jesus	83%	79%
Life reform, inspiring life transformation	96%	100%
Lower recidivism (not returning to incarceration, not reoffending)	90%	75%
Education, expanding potential through learning and reflection	71%	84%
Additional Goals	21%	26%

Additional goals for ministry with those in reentry included, creating a family-like support system, leadership development, keeping them off the street, connecting them to existing community programs, and getting them permanent housing and jobs.

Prisoner Services and Programs

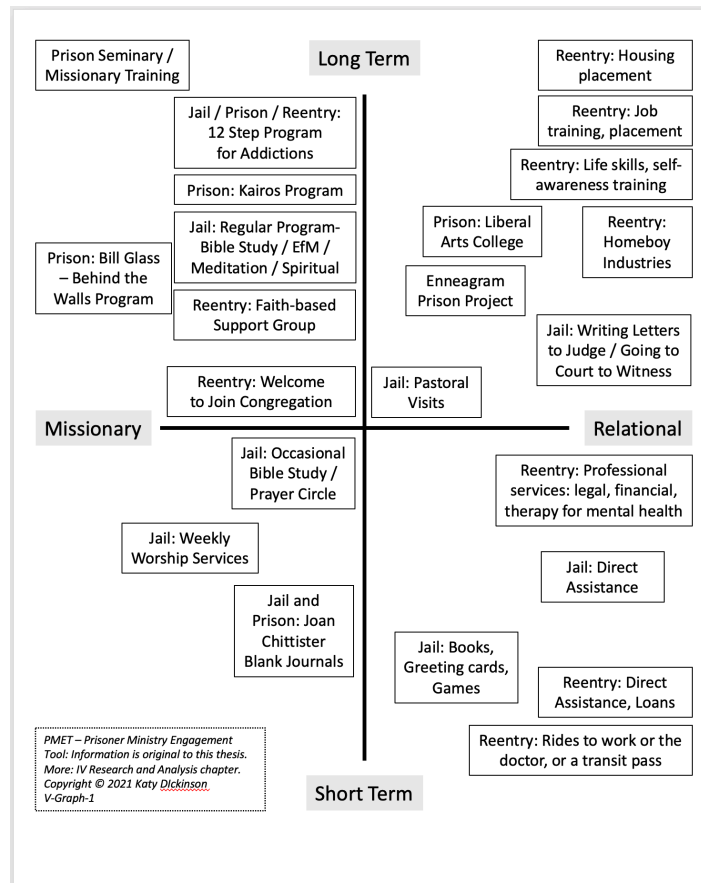
Program or Offering - by 24 Congregations	Percent
In-person visits for pastoral support (praying, listening, counselling)	83%
Occasional in-person Bible study	75%
In-person regular program: in-depth Bible study, life skills, worship / communion / mass, adult baptism / confirmation, yoga, music, arts	92%
Direct assistance: commissary or stamp money, reading glasses	75%
Letter writing: to inmates, attorneys, judges	63%
Attending court hearings: for support, or to give testimony	33%
Greeting cards for inmates to send to their families	21%
Calendars, games and puzzles, coloring books, etc.	17%
Weekend or workshop programs in prison: Kairos, Bill Glass Behind the Walls, Alternatives to Violence Project and others	29%
Holiday parties and gifts for families, especially children of prisoners	8%

Reentry Services and Programs

Program or Offering - by 19 Congregations	Percent
Invite them to worship with the congregation	100%
Direct assistance: laundry, showers, help with a job, car, medical costs	84%
Tattoo Removal	26%
Job training, resume or interview skills coaching	58%
Life skills, self-awareness development	63%
Offering professional services: legal, financial, therapy for mental health	26%
Loans, or money to cover bills / rent, work clothes, or tools	53%
12 step programs for addictions – hosting on their campus	74%
Rides to work, doctor's appointments, interviews, transit passes	68%
Transition housing, cold weather shelter, hotel room on day of release	74%
Referrals to other programs, for homeless, housing, and reentry (see next page)	47%
Homeless survival supplies such as tents, food, clothes, blankets	21%

PMET Graph: Sample

- The Prisoner Ministry Engagement Tool (PMET) Graph features actions and organizations in the range of chaplain engagement.
- The left end of the horizontal x-axis is labeled *Missionary*, meaning more focused on evangelicalism and religious conversion.
- The right end of the x-axis is labeled *Relational*, meaning more focused on life reform and transformation in faith.
- Both ends of the x-axis may yield the same results over time.
- There is a broad movement of increasing difficulty from left to right and from bottom to top.



Not Addressed Here

Incarceration is a large, complex topic. Here are some related topics not addressed (or only lightly considered) in this thesis – each of which deserves more research:

- Regional U.S. differences in incarceration patterns and racial/ethnic prisoner demographics.
- Differences in non-Christian approach and engagement with prisoners.
- Justice courts and the parole system.
- Carceral and justice studies (or the lack thereof) in seminaries and academia.
- Related social issues including homelessness, foster care, mental health care, education, classism and racism.
- Youth offenders and their families.
- Victims and their families.
- Guards, officers, and carceral staff.
- Transgender, gay, bisexual, and gender-nonconforming prisoners.
- Faith-based prisoner programs paid for by religious groups vs. by the government.



Next Steps

- Congregations can use the PMET tools to reconsider where they are in relation to their sociology and theology, and what they want to do differently during and after these pandemic times. In parallel, congregations will need to pray and spiritually discern their path, being open to God's guidance.
- Be persistent, remembering that patient and loving interaction can break down barriers for the most marginalized among us.



Questions?

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