

CORRECTIONAL CHAPLAIN PERSPECTIVES

The value of prison seminaries

By Dr. Vance Drum and Burl Cain, CCE

Very few would argue about what may be self-evident — that a huge moral deficit plagues many in our country. The short reason: humankind, left to our selfish nature, is full of strife and failure.

Big challenges

Walking through prisons in the U.S., as the authors have done, reveals serious challenges.¹ In many states, prisons are seriously understaffed, with programs cancelled and other posts left vacant. The impact of COVID-19 reduced correctional staffing; full recovery has not yet happened.

Harmful contraband, especially life-endangering drugs, has overtaken a number of prisons. Some leadership and staff may look the other way, creating a lethargic, unhealthy and even lawless population. Mental illness in prisons, often associated with substance use, becomes more common as free world treatment facilities are over-run or closed.

Disrespect and violence among the incarcerated, as well as some



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short tempers and overuse of force by staff, contribute to a dangerous workplace. Persistent feelings of hopelessness, common in many prisons, result in a high incidence of suicidal ideation and actual suicide. Prison populations reflect free world society. They may be little different from how persons live — and die — on the outside.

One may wonder: What can be done about all the dysfunction and destruction in prisons?

Founding principles

The National Prison Association (NPA) was founded in 1870 in Cincinnati, Ohio, and was renamed the American Correctional Association (ACA) in 1954. The NPA's 1870 Declaration of Principles asserted that "moral regeneration" must be the "great object" of inmate treatment in prisons.² The ACA has continued this founding principle of redirecting the heart and mind of incarcerated individuals. Former ACA

Executive Director James A. Gondles (served 1990-2023) developed the ACA with a global emphasis on humanity, justice and improved healthcare for the incarcerated.

Current ACA Executive Director Robert Green, continuing the mission, revitalized the faith component of ACA's founding with a renewed emphasis on spirituality. The Global Faith Summit, held in 2025 at the 155th Congress of Correction in Denver, highlighted the need for moral reform and life direction change. The Summit was informative, inspirational and well received. A second Faith Summit is planned for the ACA Winter conference in Long Beach, California, in February 2026.

Prison seminaries

In 1995, Burl Cain, currently Commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Corrections, became the warden at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. Angola, once called “the bloodiest prison in America,”³ was an out-of-control, maximum security prison of 6,000 incarcerated, with daily violence and hopelessness everywhere. Commissioner Cain often says he was not well equipped to know how to fix the problem, but he knew God could. He contacted the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, and they began training inmates at Angola in 1995 in liberal arts, ministry and biblical studies. The ongoing seminary's purpose is to train inmates to be ministers to their fellow inmate peers.

Multi-year research in Louisiana, Texas and Mississippi has demonstrated outstanding results.

Dr. Byron Johnson and colleagues at Baylor University expended \$1.8 million of private funding to produce data-driven research on the effectiveness of prison seminaries. After the seminary at Angola began, a 90% reduction in violence occurred between 1996 and 2004.⁴ Thirty-one inmate-led houses of worship on the 18,000-acre Angola prison property accommodate the religious and moral rehabilitation needs of the incarcerated.⁵

Commissioner Cain stated: “People who commit crimes have no sense of morality. They don't care if they hurt others. They only think about themselves, so they're only doing what makes themselves feel good. Whereas, when we brought in the seminary, they started looking outward and being aware of how others felt — thinking of other people — and how they realized it was better to give than to receive. This difference proved that the prison seminary was the agent of change.”⁶

When Mr. Cain retired from Angola in 2016, he founded the Prison Seminaries Foundation (PSF). The Foundation assists the formation of prison seminaries all over the U.S., with the Prison Seminary Model (PSM) currently in 30 prisons (23 Men's and seven Women's) in 23 states. In addition, 14 Men's and one Women's programs in 15 states are in development. The latest states to begin a program are California and Montana. (<https://www.prisonseminaries.org/find-a-prison-ministry>) Internationally, The Cayman Islands are developing the program.⁷

The Prison Seminary Model (PSM)

The PSM includes three elements⁸:

- an accredited school with a four-year bachelor's degree program that encourages moral change and servanthood, as professors come into the prison to teach,
- private funding only (no state, federal or department of corrections funding is used; inmates are not charged) for the school's services, and
- an invitation from the department of corrections that allows inmates to serve as agents of change through peer ministry.

The ideal student

Eligible inmates have long sentences (15+ years). They attend school for four years, after which they have an expectation of ministry to their peers. Ministry assignment is not automatic, however. More important than a ministry degree is prosocial character change — moral rehabilitation — within the student. There is no religious test for admission into the seminary. Inmates of any faith identification may apply, be accepted and, after graduation and discernment for ministry, become peer ministers.⁹

Three transformational levels

Three levels of culture transformation occur in the PSM I¹⁰:

- **Inmate students.** Inmate students are transformed and matured by the years of intense

teaching and ministry practice they receive in their schooling. At Angola, after a four-year study, Baylor University researchers concluded: “Program participants had the prison’s highest levels of mental and emotional well-being and stability, positive attitudes toward staff and sense of meaning and purpose in life, even while incarcerated.”¹¹

- **Inmate population.** Seminary graduates, called peer or “Field Ministers,” influence, by their example and teaching, the inmate population. They have access to all areas of the prison. They do not coerce, but their moral life of integrity is noticeable. Prison culture transforms when the example of a moral life is received, admired and emulated by peers.
- **Free society.** Field Ministers are not easily released, due to their long sentences. Some are eventually released, after long time served. However, those they minister to are regularly released into society. As they are released, many go out as men and women of faith, changed by their positive interaction with their ministering peers. Change for the better in prison, though not often talked about, happens for many, and is a great blessing to society. Better for society to have a former prisoner living clean, holding a job, attending a house of worship and taking care of their family, than one who became only a better criminal in prison. Morally

rehabilitated Field Ministers transform the prison culture, and by extension, help change the culture outside prison.

What do field ministers do?

Field Ministers are trained, graduated and assigned to serve in one or more prisons. Then they minister according to their knowledge, skills, training and assignment. Each graduate possesses different aptitudes. Their assignment, matching their skill set, provides meaningful ministry in the population. Examples of their work include¹²:

Facility Service Ministry

- Intake and orientation of newly arrived inmates
- Mentoring
- Reentry/pre-release programming

Crisis Ministry

- Grief and trauma support
- Hospice and hospital care
- Geriatric ministry
- Funeral/memorial services for fellow inmates

Counseling ministry

- Tier-walking: listening and responding, in all areas of the prison
- Prosocial counseling
- Conflict resolution
- In-prison adjustment
- Family reconciliation
- Racial reconciliation
- Inmate forgiveness

Spiritual Development Ministry

- Teaching rehabilitative and Scripture text classes/courses

- Worship service planning and conducting
- Prayer leadership
- Preaching

This minister, with an amazingly cheerful but gentle, uplifting countenance and manner, ministers daily to the dying on the unit. He sits with them, listens to them, talks with them and prays with them. No one dies alone on that unit.

Personal story

I (Vance Drum) visit Field Ministers regularly in my state. (Currently there are 276 Field Minister graduates ministering in 51 facilities in Texas.¹³) Recently I visited the nine Field Ministers on a unit to encourage them in their work. I wanted to visit the hospice area, so the chaplain had a Field Minister take me there. This Field Minister is a former gang leader serving a life sentence, but now is a transformed and devout man of faith. He introduced me to the Field Minister serving inmates in hospice care. This minister, with an amazingly cheerful but gentle, uplifting countenance and manner, ministers daily to the dying on the unit. He



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sits with them, listens to them, talks with them and prays with them. No one dies alone on that unit. He loves the ministry, and he does it well.

My guide then showed me a nearby classroom area. Three faith-based rehabilitative classes were being conducted in three classrooms, all by Field Ministers. The students — about fifteen in each class, all disciplinary inmates barely out of restrictive housing — were listening attentively and respectfully to their inmate peer teacher. They were hearing new ideas about life, themselves, God’s love and expectations, overcoming addiction, and a host of other subjects. Much of the teaching they have never heard before from parents, guardians, school teachers or in houses of worship. In prison, they are hearing new, prosocial perspectives from their peers. They listen. As they do, their thinking and behavior are transformed.

Keys to success

Leaders in the prison system are key to the success of the prison seminary program. Executive leadership shows the way. Wardens support and instruct staff to facilitate the Field Ministers’ work. Chaplains supervise and experience the blessings of expanded and extended ministry. Field Ministers are not a threat to the chaplain’s job; instead, they greatly enhance the chaplain’s ministry. Wardens, at first skeptical, now ask for more Field Ministers. These Field Ministers, known to God but not to most of us, serve “under the radar” in varied ministries too valuable to fully appreciate. **CT**

END NOTES

¹In addition to the authors’ personal experience, see Corrections1. December 10, 2024. *Roundtable: How the corrections profession was challenged in 2024.*

²aca.org: about us, our history and mission, declaration of principles

³Shere, Dennis. 2005. *Cain’s redemption: a story of hope and transformation in America’s bloodiest prison.* Chicago: Northfield Publishing.

⁴Hallett, Michael, Joshua Hayes, Byron Johnson, Sung Joon Jang and Grant Duwe. 2017. *The Angola prison seminary: effects of faith-based ministry on identity transformation, desistance, and rehabilitation.* New York: Routledge.

⁵Interview with Dr. Rick Sharkey, Supervising Chaplain at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, August 25, 2025.

⁶Prison Seminars Foundation. *Changing lives through moral rehabilitation.* Walker, LA: prison-seminaries.org, p. 3.

⁷For information about the founding and work of Prison Seminars Foundation, see www.prisonseminaries.org.

⁸www.prisonseminaries.org

⁹www.prisonseminaries.org

¹⁰www.prisonseminaries.org.

¹¹Hayes, Joshua. “Baylor researcher point of view: an innovative solution for Oklahoma’s criminal justice impasse.” In www.prisonseminaries.org.

¹²Texas Department of Criminal Justice, Chaplaincy Department Manual (2017 ed.)

¹³Texas Department of Criminal Justice, Chaplaincy and Volunteer Services Division, August 28, 2025.



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