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## **Professional Correctional Chaplains: Fact and Fiction**

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### **Table of Contents** – *click one to go to section*

Introduction .....	1
Thesis .....	2
A. Constitutional Requirement .....	2
B. Who Is a Professional? .....	4
C. Pastoral Care .....	5
D. Cost-Effectiveness of Chaplaincy .....	6
E. Chaplaincy Volunteers .....	6
Conclusion .....	7
Appendix – What Correctional Chaplains Do – Short List of 50 Competencies .....	8
Selected Bibliography .....	9
Index .....	10

### **Introduction**

The theme of this Congress was “The Perceptions of Corrections,” and the subject of the lecture was “Professional Correctional Chaplains: Fact and Fiction”—one on which there is a fair amount of current discussion and debate. In many ways this played in Texas in 2011 as prison chaplains, volunteers, and those who valued religion came together to educate and preserve professional chaplaincy in Texas. The words “fact and

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed here are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of his employing agency, nor of the chaplains associations with which he is affiliated.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.TDCJ.state.tx.us/stat/unitdirectory/ea.htm](http://www.TDCJ.state.tx.us/stat/unitdirectory/ea.htm): the Eastham Unit is a maximum security prison of the TDCJ, established in 1917, housing 2,463 male prisoners. Its main industries include heifer development, egg laying operation, farm shop, feed mill and grain storage, edible and field crops, security horses and dogs, a unit garden, and swine farrowing and finishing operations on 12,690 acres. See [www.TDCJ.state.tx.us](http://www.TDCJ.state.tx.us) for more on the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, one the largest prison systems in the world.

fiction” indicate that there are realities which are common to all professional chaplains, and there are misunderstandings about what those realities are.

Perennial questions come up: What does it mean to be a professional? What do professional chaplains do? How does their work differ from volunteer ministers who serve in our institutions? Are professional chaplains necessary to the good order and functioning of our institutions? Or, may volunteers do just as good a job as professionals? Is religious programming even necessary in jails and prisons? Before we provide some answers to these questions, let’s look at some history to see where we came from as chaplains, and why we’re here.

## **Thesis**

It is my thesis that professional correctional chaplains are the best way to facilitate provision for the constitutional requirements and religious needs of the offenders whom we serve. Other means may be effectively used to supplement providing for the religious needs of inmates, but it is my view that without professionals at the helm, many religious needs will normally go unmet, and the institution will fall liable to dealing with the expense of a potentially unconstitutional situation.

When we think about professional chaplaincy, there are two primary considerations: (1) the constitutional, or legal, requirement, and (2) the need for pastoral care for all. These two are interdependent, since there cannot be adequate pastoral care for all inmates if the institution unconstitutionally focuses its attention on the needs of only a segment of its population.

## **A. Constitutional Requirement**

In order to understand this more fully, we need to look briefly at our constitutional foundation on this subject. In the summer of 1787 the original Thirteen Colonies had won the war for independence from Britain and had set about to form a union of states. They found their task easier said than done, and so, to make the federal Constitution more palatable to the new states, a Bill of Rights was adopted, which formed the first ten amendments to our Constitution. The very first of these amendments—the First Amendment, as it is commonly known—provided for the religious needs of the inhabitants of the new country. At least eight of the former colonies had an established, government-supported, official church at the time of the American Revolution, as England’s official church was the Anglican Church, and most of the European nations had an established church, either Catholic or Lutheran. The First Amendment was meant to protect the right to practice whatever faith an individual held, and it was intended to promote toleration for all faiths, no matter what state one resided in. The amendment therefore was worded in a generic manner on purpose, stating that “Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, nor prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

From my perspective as a student of history (I am not a lawyer, much less a constitutional lawyer), the two main clauses of the First Amendment—the establishment clause, and the free exercise clause—which are often placed in conflict in litigation, in reality do not contradict but complement each other. The Founders

intended that the power of the state be limited when it comes to religious practice. They said the Congress should not establish religion, meaning, in their context, that no state-sponsored denomination or faith be established as our official religion. It's important to recognize that the Founders did not mean to prohibit all state support for religion in general—witness from our earliest history the state support of chaplains in the military, state-supported chaplains and prayers in the houses of Congress, the exemption from taxation of houses of worship, and many other expressions of support for religion. The establishment clause was to indicate only that one faith not become our official religion. At the same time, the amendment ordered that the state not prohibit the free exercise of religion. The courts throughout our history have ruled that prisoners also, subject to certain restrictions relating to safety in the institution, have a constitutional right to practice their faith. This right was substantially strengthened in 2006 when the Supreme Court of the United States unanimously upheld the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA) of 2000.<sup>3</sup>

So, how does this relate to professional correctional chaplains? Throughout much of our country's history correctional chaplains have been supported by the state for the purpose of ensuring that the constitutional right of incarcerated persons to exercise their religion is protected. By providing for the religious needs of all the offenders under one's care—not just those of one's own faith group—a professional chaplain is serving the requirements of the Constitution and is serving the institution by keeping us all out of court, as much as possible. Besides that, to take care of the pastoral and religious needs of all prisoners is the right thing to do, even if it were not the law.

Now we come to the crux of the matter: Who is most qualified to do this constitutional and pastoral duty? The Mission Statement of the American Correctional Association (ACA) states that “The American Correctional Association provides a professional organization for all individuals and groups, both public and private, that share a common goal of improving the justice system.”<sup>4</sup> The ACA is a professional organization, and we promote professionalism. Further, as Helen Corrothers has indicated in her opening remarks, the ACA has long regarded professional chaplains as a foundational support to improving the justice system. The American Correctional Chaplains Association (ACCA), which became the first ACA affiliate in 1885, sees itself as an association of professionals, working alongside volunteer ministers, who seek to fulfill the constitutional and pastoral needs of our offenders.<sup>5</sup>

The first ACA standard for institutional chaplaincy, in Section F, Religious Programs, calls for a “qualified” chaplain to assure “equal status and protection for all

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.usdoj.gov/crt/housing/rluipaexplain.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/housing/rluipaexplain.htm) and [www.RLUIPA.com](http://www.RLUIPA.com) for more information.

<sup>4</sup> See [www.ACA.org/pastpresentfuture/doc\\_visionstatement2.pdf](http://www.ACA.org/pastpresentfuture/doc_visionstatement2.pdf). For more information see [www.ACA.org](http://www.ACA.org) for the American Correctional Association, also billed as the “oldest, and largest international correctional association in the world.” American Correctional Association, 206 North Washington Street Suite 200, Alexandria, VA 22314; (703) 224-0000.

<sup>5</sup> See [www.CorrectionalChaplains.org](http://www.CorrectionalChaplains.org) for more on the American Correctional Chaplains Association and its certification programs.

religions.” The standard requires that qualified chaplains have received “specialized training” and “endorsement” by an “appropriate religious certifying body.”

## **B. Who Is a Professional?**

So, who is a professional, qualified chaplain? A professional correctional chaplain is one who, by reason of specialized knowledge and extended training, is called and compensated for the purpose of providing religious and pastoral services to incarcerated persons of all faiths in an institution. Professional chaplains have extensive knowledge of the faith affiliations of his or her inmates, and that person works to provide for the religious needs of those persons. The professional goes beyond his or her own faith group to find faith group representatives in the community who are qualified and willing to minister to those of that faith in the institution. Professionals also have extensive knowledge of the beliefs and practices of the various religions represented in the offender population. If, for example, there are adherents of minority religions in the population, as there no doubt are, but the chaplain knows little about any religion except his or her own, that chaplain will be ill-equipped to coordinate with volunteer providers for ministry to that population.

This reaching out beyond one’s own faith group to provide for ministry to the needs of all the offenders in one’s institution is the essence of the constitutional mandate to provide for the “free exercise” of religion. It is an activity which is best provided by professionals compensated by the state—professionals who are not compensated for this ministry by their own faith group.

Why do I say to this?

The constitutional requirement of “free exercise” is a state requirement, and, in my view, is one which is best ensured and safeguarded by an employee of the state. Volunteer, or specific faith chaplains who are compensated by their faith group, provide valuable and necessary ministry. However, it is my conviction that, by virtue of their faith-group-originated compensation, they would normally have a fiduciary obligation, or a contractual obligation, to especially promote the interests of their particular faith group. As we say in Texas, “you dance with the one that brung you, and you look out for the one who pays you.” Professional, state-supplied chaplains have no such obligation to promote the interests of one faith group over another. In fact, the obligation is the opposite—to treat all the faith groups without favoritism.

In recent years we have seen strained budgets in nearly every state, a coarsening of our culture, and a devaluing of faith and faith communities in many places. When agencies look for places to trim the budget, often the religious program, and state-supplied chaplains, are the first to go. Experience has shown that this is a great mistake. Departments of correction in Georgia, Washington State, North Carolina, Texas, Colorado, and perhaps other states have cut numbers of their state-supplied chaplains. After some years of trying this way, Georgia, North Carolina and Texas have re-hired some of their chaplains—Texas is hiring twenty-five new chaplains this year. In addition, Indiana and Oregon see the value of professional chaplaincy ministry to inmates, and is hiring more chaplains, without having cut any. That will be good for them.

A professional chaplain will help keep the chaplain and the warden out of litigation by facilitating a constitutional program. Such a professional will pay for his or her annual salary by helping to avoid major religiously-based and First Amendment lawsuits against the institution.

### **C. Pastoral Care**

Now let us turn our attention to pastoral care. The professional correctional chaplain is one who has been trained in successful, interpersonal relating, human relationship problem-solving, and has the learned skills necessary to teach, verbally and by example, how to grow in managing one's life and relationships. To that end, the ACA requires that Clinical Pastoral Education, or equivalent specialized training, be part of the education of a qualified, professional chaplain in an ACA-accredited institution.<sup>6</sup>

As we all know who work in corrections, we work in a specialized and challenging environment. Successful ministry to incarcerated persons requires specialized training which ministers who have not experienced this training do not have, and it is a myth to think that good-intentioned volunteers who have not received much specialized training can do just as good a job as intensely-trained professionals. Think of it in this way: When you go in to have open heart surgery, anybody with a knife can cut on you in the general vicinity of your heart, but when I go in, I want a highly-trained, professional surgeon to do the cutting on me. Don't you? The consequences following who is in charge of our chaplaincy programs in the institution may be just as great. And because of the value of faith itself, many believe the things eternal are of a greater value than anything on this earth. The value of faith is inestimable to the majority.

Professional chaplains who have been trained in how to handle critical and traumatic incidents have a ministry of presence and intervention in the institution that is needed to help prevent the escalation of these kinds of incidents into bigger, potentially more violent, situations. In my first year as a prison chaplain, in 1985, we had five violent deaths in our maximum security prison, and I knew I was in the big house, and that this was serious business. Thankfully, we haven't had such a violent year since then.

It is in the nature of our work that we will never be able to fully quantify the influence for good, and especially the disasters and critical incidents avoided, by professional chaplains. The chaplain who fulfills his or her calling by listening empathically, helping to cool off inmates who are agitated by situations often beyond their control, will pay for their annual salary, again, by helping to prevent major incidents or riots in the institution.

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<sup>6</sup> See [www.ACPE.edu](http://www.ACPE.edu) for more on the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education, the foremost provider of clinical pastoral education in the U.S. that was established in 1925 and that maintains rigorous standards for its certified programs in 350 institutions across the country, 113 theological schools, and 23 faith groups and agencies.

Professional chaplains also, in the course of their ministries, provide much encouragement to offenders about what might be described as calling them to their faith. Most people, including offenders, have some connection, or awareness, of a higher power, the divine, the holy, the Creator, the Almighty. They have strayed away from honoring that power in their lives, but insofar as we can redirect their hearts toward honoring that power, showing the value of peace and love over strife, fighting, violence and hate, we are doing our job. This is not just pie in the sky by and by, and nice-sounding words. How people think and live dramatically affects their quality of life here and now, as well as that of all their relationships. For as many of those offenders as follow the precepts of their faith when they are released from the institution, and we influenced their positive life direction change, we will have facilitated a safer society.

The description of this workshop says that the chaplain is often seen as the “conscience of the institution.” What does this mean? A professional chaplain is one who exemplifies by his or her conduct, speech and ministry the highest standards in corrections. The chaplain should be someone that anyone in the institution may look up to and say, “There is a real professional,” in addition to being a godly person.

Finally, a professional correctional chaplain is one who is on call at all hours in an emergency, and who is visible and available to the institutional staff as their chaplain. It is a common myth that chaplains are only in the institution for the offenders. However, as all of us know who work in corrections, administrative and security staff have great needs, including spiritual needs, as well. Our ministry of presence and intervention during their times of need goes far not only in helping them in their distress but also in creating the relationships which are necessary to facilitate a smooth-running, constitutionally sound religious program which is helpful to all.

#### **D. Cost-Effectiveness of Chaplaincy**

For every person who stays out of prison because their lives were redirected to a more pro-social and godly way, we have, again, paid our annual salary as chaplains. So, to hire professional chaplains is the most cost-effective hiring an agency can do, in three ways:

1. These chaplains help reduce litigation,
2. They defend religious freedom and the First Amendment,
3. They help reduce major incidents,
4. They deal with family death and crisis of inmates, and even staff,
5. They help reduce recidivism, and
6. They coordinate and facilitate religious volunteers.

#### **E. Chaplaincy Volunteers**

Now I want to say a bit more about the value of volunteers. In the prison where I serve, I am the only staff chaplain for a population of 2,500 maximum security offenders and about 500 officers. There is no way I could adequately provide for the

religious needs of the offenders there without lots of help. So, I have recruited, helped to train, and supervise volunteer ministers. We have an average of 150 religious volunteers monthly in our program, which has an average monthly inmate attendance of about 7,000.

A professional chaplain therefore is able to multiply quality ministry in a way which only a staff chaplain is best equipped to do. Without a professional chaplain in the institution who knows the particular religious needs of the offender population, and who is qualified to train, supervise and evaluate the volunteers coming in, the program would lapse into chaos. The result would be that the administrators would wisely place severe restrictions on volunteer ministry, to avoid disruption caused by a lack of good training and supervision. Chaplains should treat these trained volunteers with great respect and appreciation.

In Texas, with 12,000 trained and approved religious volunteer names in the agency computer, these volunteers donated approximately 600,000 hours of ministry to the state last year. That is the equivalent of 312 full-time staff positions, and over \$10.8 million in value, using the Independent Sector figure for 2006 of \$18.04 per volunteer hour to estimate the value of volunteer services—which is a near double *total* cost recovery in this venue alone, not even to mention the savings from litigation prevention and recidivism reduction.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

To summarize, professional correctional chaplains have received specialized training to provide effective ministry in the challenging environment of corrections. They are a vital link between community volunteer resources and agency administrative personnel to ensure that the religious needs of all offenders are provided for. Using a state-supplied professional chaplain is the best guarantee of providing a constitutional program which will help reduce litigation. The trained professional chaplain becomes a safety valve, through listening and pro-social intervention, providing a calming ministry of presence in potentially explosive situations. Finally, by linking the offender population with positive community resources, and through the redemptive work of changing inmates' hearts, minds and directions, the professional chaplain helps ex-offenders to stay out of prison, thus reducing the rate of recidivism.

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<sup>7</sup> See [www.IndependentSector.org](http://www.IndependentSector.org), which in its about sections notes: "Independent Sector is the leadership forum for charities, foundations, and corporate giving programs committed to advancing the common good in America and around the world. Our nonpartisan coalition of approximately 600 organizations leads, strengthens, and mobilizes the charitable community in order to fulfill our vision of a just and inclusive society and a healthy democracy of active citizens, effective institutions, and vibrant communities."

## Appendix – What Correctional Chaplains Do – Short List of 50 Competencies

This list comprises a few of the many and varied function, is by now means comprehensive, and the bold type is used to facilitate a quick overview of the variety by signal topics:

1. Learn the **faith affiliations** are of the population the chaplain serves.
2. Learn the **basic beliefs and practices** of the faiths represented in the institutional population.
3. **Network** with religious community locally and nationally.
4. Coordinate **holy days** for the various faiths represented in the population.
5. Coordinate **religious diets** for the offenders.
6. Provide **worship services** for the various faith groups represented in the population.
7. Provide **discipleship** (spiritual growth) programming for the various faith groups.
8. Provide **spiritual reentry** programming for the pre-release population.
9. Provide for a **mentoring** program for pre-release offenders.
10. Respond to offender requests for a **change of religion** of record.
11. Respond to offender requests for **religious medallions** and other religious devotional items.
12. Respond to all other **offender written requests** in a timely manner.
13. Provide religious **programs and services orientation** for new offenders.
14. Supervise **offender clerks** and porters in the religious program area.
15. Provide **data input** into the institutional computer regarding offender program participation.
16. Respond to offender requests for **indigent hygiene** help (offender donated, if approved).
17. Maintain an **offender chapel library** of religious materials which have been solicited and screened.
18. Coordinates **special programs**, e.g., marriage seminars, athletic ministry events, family programs, etc.
19. Coordinates **faith-based housing** programs.
20. Become familiar with the religious **resources in the community** (attend ministerial assn. meetings, etc.)
21. **Recruit quality volunteers** to minister in the institution.
22. **Train, supervise and evaluate** quality, teachable volunteers to minister in the institution.
23. **Seek volunteers** who may be able to minister to the **minority faith** groups in the prison.
24. Facilitate **clergy visits** for offenders.
25. Facilitate and provide **religious literature** for all faith groups.
26. Prepare **volunteer clearance lists** for the facility administrator to approve.



27. **Notify offenders of death** in their immediate and extended family.
28. Provide **emergency phone calls** for offenders.
29. Provide **grief counseling for offenders** who have experienced loss in family death, critical illness, parole denial, and tragedies like accident and divorce.
30. Receive and respond to **inmate family calls** from outside the institution.
31. Model and teach effective **interpersonal relationship building**; provide **mediation** of offender differences.
32. Be a **chaplain to the warden** and administrative staff.
33. Be **accountable** to the warden and chaplaincy HQ for policy and procedures.
34. Be a **chaplain to the security** staff; **walk around** and listen; be **visible, available**.
35. Provide **presence and support for staff** involved in traumatic incidents; attend staff/family **funerals**.
36. Be familiar with the **expectations of the senior administrative staff**.
37. Know the **culture** of the institution.
38. Provide **training to new and established staff** in the institution.
39. Be aware of agency sophisticated **policy and procedures**, and honor them.
40. Provide **monthly reports** to director of chaplains, and senior facility administrator; attend **training** events.
41. Generate **written memoranda** regarding religious **program schedules**.
42. Generate **requests for supplies and equipment**, and
43. **Maintenance** of program equipment and area of chapel and education space.
44. Respond to **religious-related litigation**.
45. Facilitate **offender marriages**, or provide reference, counseling.
46. **Counsel** offenders in all **life issues**, from institutional adjustment to developmental issues, as an expert in one's own faith on life issues
47. **Notify next-of-kin in times of offender deaths** or life-threatening illness.
48. Provide counsel and **ministry to offender, offender family, and victim family** at time of **execution** (three *separate* chaplains).
49. Attend **training and fellowship events with one's outside faith group**.
50. **Nurture** one's own **spiritual life** by being a part of local religious community.

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---

## Index

### Persons

Corrothers, Helen, 3  
 Cutter, J. B., 9  
 Dammer, H. R., 9  
 Drum, Vance L., 1  
 Duncan, J., 9  
 Johnson, B. R., 9  
 Larson, D. B., 9  
 Lehman, J. D., 9  
 Levin, Marc, 9  
 Lippy, C. H., 9  
 Melton, J. G., 9  
 O'Connor, T. P., 9, 10  
 Pallone, N., 9  
 Pitts, T. C., 9  
 Quillard, F., 9  
 Shaw, R. D., 10  
 Wilkinson, Reginald, 9  
 Williams, P. W., 9

### Publications

*Center for Effective Justice, Texas Public Policy Foundation*, 9  
 Bill of Rights, 2  
*Chaplains to the Imprisoned*, 10  
*Corrections Today*, 9  
*Criminology and Public Policy*, 9  
 Criminology and Religion, 9  
*Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 9  
*Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience*, 9  
 First Amendment, 2, 4, 6  
 Impact of Religious Programming on Recidivism, 10  
*Journal of Community Corrections*, 10  
*Justice Quarterly*, 9  
 Pennsylvania Volunteers Build Bridges, 9  
 Perceptions of Corrections, 1  
*Religion in Corrections: American Correctional Association*, 9

*Religion, the Community, and the Rehabilitation of Criminal Offenders*, 9  
 Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000, 3, 9  
 Restorative Justice in Texas, 9  
*The IARCA Journal*, 10  
*The State of Corrections – 1999 Proceedings*, 9  
 What Works, 10

### Institutions

137th Annual Congress of Correction, 1  
 ACA, 3, 5  
 ACCA, 3  
 American Correctional Association (ACA), 1, 3, 9  
 American Correctional Chaplains Association (ACCA), 3  
 Anglican Church, 2

- Association of Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE), 5  
Eastham Unit, 1  
International Association of Residential and Community Alternatives, 10  
Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections, 9  
TDCJ, 1  
Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), 1
- Web Sites**  
ACA.org, 3  
ACPE.edu, 5  
CorrectionalChaplains.org, 3  
IndependentSector.org, 7  
PreciousHeart.net, 10  
RLUIPA, 3, 9  
RLUIPA.com, 3  
TDCJ.state.tx.us, 1  
usdoj.gov, 3
- Other Items**  
ACA-accredited institution, 5  
accountable, 8  
Alexandria, VA, 3  
all faiths in an institution, 4  
Almighty, 5  
American Revolution, 2  
athletic ministry events, 8  
awareness, 5  
basic beliefs and practices, 7  
Britain, 2  
Catholic, 2  
change of religion, 7  
changing inmates' hearts, 7  
changing inmates' minds, 7  
chaos, 6  
chapel library, 8  
chaplain to staff, 8  
clearance lists, 8  
clergy visits, 8  
Clinical Pastoral Education, 5  
Colorado, 4  
community resources, 7  
Congress shall make no law, 2  
conscience of the institution, 5  
constitutional, 2  
constitutional right, 3  
constitutionally sound, 6  
coordinate volunteers, 6  
cost-effective, 6  
counsel, 9  
Creator, 5  
crisis of inmates, 6  
culture of the institution, 8  
data input, 8  
death, 6  
devaluing of faith, 4  
discipleship, 7  
divine, 5  
emergency phone calls, 8  
establishment clause, 2  
establishment of religion, 2  
execution, 9  
expectations, 8  
extended training, 3  
faith affiliations, 7  
faith group representatives, 4  
faith-based housing, 8  
family death, 6  
family programs, 8  
first ACA standard, 3  
Founders, 2  
free exercise clause, 2  
free exercise, 9  
free exercise of religion, 4  
Georgia, 4  
godly person, 6  
grief counseling for offenders, 8  
heart surgery, 5  
higher power, 5  
holy, 5  
holy days, 7  
Indiana, 4  
indigent hygiene, 8  
inmate family calls, 8  
interpersonal relating, 4  
interpersonal relationship building, 8  
Kansas City, Missouri, 1  
lawsuits, 4  
litigation, 4, 6  
love, value of, 5  
Lutheran, 2  
maintenance, 9  
major incidents, 6  
marriage seminars, 8  
marriages, 9  
maximum security, 1, 6  
maximum security prison, 5  
mediation, 8  
memoranda, 9  
mentoring, 7  
minister/s, 1, 3, 5, 6  
minority faith, 8  
monthly reports, 9  
multiply quality ministry, 6  
needs, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7  
network, 7  
next-of-kin notifications, 9  
nor prohibiting the free exercise, 2  
North Carolina, 4  
notify offenders of death, 8  
of our culture, 4  
offender chapel library, 8  
offender clerks, 8  
offender written requests, 8  
Oregon, 4  
pastoral care, 2  
pastoral education, 5  
peace, value of, 5  
perennial questions, 1  
pie in the sky, 5  
policy and procedures, 8  
positive life direction, 5  
problem-solving, 5  
professional correctional chaplain/s, 1, 2, 6  
programs and services orientation, 8  
real professional, 6  
recidivism, 6, 7  
recruit quality volunteers, 8  
redemptive work, 7  
reduce litigation, 6  
reduce/ing recidivism, 6, 7  
religious community, 9  
religious devotional items, 8  
religious diets, 7  
religious freedom, 6  
religious literature, 8  
religious medallions, 8  
religious program, 4, 6, 8, 9  
religious programming, 2  
religious volunteers, 6  
religious-related litigation, 9  
resources in the community, 8  
safeguarded by an employee, 4  
safer society, 5  
safety valve, 7  
seek volunteers, 8  
serving the institution, 3  
special programs, 8  
specialized training, 7  
spiritual growth, 7  
spiritual life, 9  
spiritual needs, 6  
spiritual reentry, 7  
staff chaplain, 6  
supplies, 9  
support for staff, 8  
surgeon, 5  
taxation of houses of worship, 3  
Texas, 4  
theological schools, 5  
Thirteen Colonies, 2  
train, supervise and evaluate, 8  
training, 9  
training and fellowship events, 9  
training to new staff, 8  
traumatic incidents, 5, 8  
value of faith, 5  
value of love, 5  
value of peace, 5  
value of volunteers, 6  
violent deaths, 5  
vital link, 7  
volunteer/s, 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8  
Washington State, 4  
worship services, 7