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TDCJ chaplains help agency fulfill its mission

By Pastor Larry Miles, TBCJ Member

TDCJ chaplains play a unique and vital role in the state's criminal justice system, as the broad range of pastoral care and quality faith programs they provide for offenders, their families and correctional staff combine to help the agency achieve its mission of providing public safety by promoting positive change in offender behavior and reducing recidivism.

TDCJ's Chaplaincy Department helps provide for moral rehabilitation through spiritual transformation. TDCJ chaplains provide morally enriched programs to assist offenders in their institutional adjustment and prepare them for successful reentry into society. A variety of programs, activities and com-



Chaplain Randall Lowe and an offender pray together in the Wynne Unit chapel.

munity participation opportunities encourage offenders to pursue their faith, reconcile relationships and strengthen their families. Participation in religious activities and attendance at religious services is voluntary.

Within the Rehabilitation Programs Division, agency chaplains work on the unit level with the incarcerated population, and through regional parole offices with those who have been released. Rehabilitation and reentry work focuses on life direction change and spiritual transformation and, since criminal justice systems are microcosms of the many faiths and cultures in society, Chaplaincy ensures that ministry is provided in a multifaith and multicultural manner, ensuring all are offered support for their faith journey.

Chaplains work in support of many programs that help offenders learn valuable life skills and reorder their lives in a positive social direction. These programs give offenders new perspectives on life, showing them that the cycle of crime they may have experienced in their families may be broken by pursuing a different path. Prerelease initiatives, with unit and parole chaplains working together,

provide timely guidance for successful reintegration into society.

Family unification programs, through marriage seminars and family days, support family integrity, bonding and stability. Chaplains, assisted by volunteers, facilitate spiritual growth programs and offer services that provide offenders with worship opportunities that discourage self-centeredness and encourage the pursuit a spiritual goal higher than serving oneself. Worship also provides an outlet for the appropriate expression of positive feelings, promoting healthy institutional adjustment in the midst of incarceration.

Chaplains work with Certified Volunteer Chaplain Assistants to supervise the agency's faith-based dorms. These dorms provide support and accountability, with a faith-based curriculum for individual life direction change, the development of new life goals, and promotion of positive culture transformation in the facility.

In coordination with the unit's administrative staff, chaplains guide the work of the Field Ministry program. Once they have

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graduated with their four-year seminary degree, Field Ministers become offender volunteers who assist with ministering on their unit of assignment. They are a positive asset to staff in the transformation of unit culture.

Parole chaplains work with the Parole Division to provide resource information, religious counseling and networking support, along with educational and worship opportunities for released offenders. They also interface in ministry with offender families and parole division staff. Parole chaplains recruit community volunteers to assist with offender transitioning efforts, and work with community organizations to promote successful reintegration.

Chaplains also provide much needed pastoral care, mostly unseen, to offenders and staff in the facility. During times of personal crisis relating to institutional adjustment, or loss of family members, chaplains are present with a listening ear and empathic, helpful responses. Chaplains minister to staff members with the same care, sometimes making visits to the hospital or home during critical times.

Through quality programs, spiritual guidance and pastoral care, TDCJ chaplains provide critical support which promotes positive change in offender behavior, thereby improving their chances of successful reintegration, reducing criminal activity and making Texas a safer place for all. ●