

## SOME GUIDELINES FOR DETENTION CENTRE CHAPLAINCY

*by Rev. Carl Wake, 15 May 2023*

To have access to a succinct set of distilled truths is an invaluable asset for which many seek. The book of *Proverbs* in the Bible has been a resource for millions since it was written. As I started university, *Desiderata*<sup>1</sup> became popular on radio and was found on posters in dorm rooms all across campus (except mine). Almost thirty years later, Baz Luhrmann released his very successful music single “*Everybody's Free (To Wear Sunscreen)*”.<sup>2</sup> Starting in 2003, the fictional character Leroy Jethro Gibbs, from the long-running TV show *NCIS* (Naval Criminal Investigative Service), demonstrated and taught his rules for investigating crimes.<sup>3</sup>

While working on teaching moments for a seemingly “always on the drawing board” prison chaplaincy manual, I realized that I was coming up with my own set of rules and best practices as well. Though not at all on par with Scripture, I do believe them to be of value to prison chaplains, old and new alike. Before I share these suggested guidelines with you, it is important right from the start that you understand the following:

1. They are based on my thirty-one years of experience at the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre;
2. They are offered only as suggestions to consider wherever you practice chaplaincy. Each institution is unique and you must decide how best to accomplish your goals;
3. They are, for the most part, not in any particular order. They basically developed as I systematically worked through my initial collection of sixty scenarios;
4. They are ongoing and fluid, being tweaked as I discuss my scenarios with others.

With this understanding, please allow me to briefly present three guidelines for ministry as a chaplain in a detention centre setting. Each guideline comes with sub-points that help clarify the major point. The guidelines are as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> As per Wikipedia, *Desiderata* is “a 1927 prose poem by American writer Max Ehrmann. Largely unknown in the author's lifetime, the text became widely known after its use in a devotional and after spoken-word recordings in 1971 and 1972.”

<sup>2</sup> Check out the entry for “Wear Sunscreen” on Wikipedia.

<sup>3</sup> Do a Google search for “Leroy Jethro Gibbs / Rules”.

1. This is God's work.
2. Know your institution.
3. The larger / older your institution, the longer its memory.

Let us now look at each one in turn.

## **GUIDELINE #1: THIS IS GOD'S WORK<sup>4</sup>.**

Let me get down to brass tacks right from the start. I have a strong faith in God that intimately addresses all areas of my life<sup>5</sup>. I choose to acknowledge His<sup>6</sup> existence and involvement in my chaplaincy ministry. If you, the reader, do not feel comfortable with references to God, you are free to ignore this guideline and move on to the second one. However, you may wish to continue reading and perhaps consider how the various sub-points might apply to you.

### **1.1 Excellence in all that you can do.**

When it comes right down to it, you are not working for your employer. You are doing God's work and He deserves your best<sup>7</sup>. Everything should be done for His glory<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, be a person of integrity. Work tirelessly to be a person of your word. Only make promises that you know you can keep<sup>9</sup>. Be thorough, for it could save someone's life. Avoid any situation that will / could damage your integrity and testimony.

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<sup>4</sup> We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind; and, love our neighbour as ourselves, so that we may live (Luke 10:25-28). Jesus further clarifies through the Parable of the Good Samaritan that we are to show compassion WHEREVER we see need (Luke 10:29-37). In the Sheep and Goat Judgment passage (Matthew 25:31-46), we are minister to those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, prisoners or need shelter. James 1:27 says, "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world." In prison, there are many orphans and widows in reality and figuratively. The Apostle Paul makes it clear that, "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve." (Colossians 3:23-24)

<sup>5</sup> I am writing from my own Christian theological perspective. I hold to the "Statement of Fundamental and Essential Truths" of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, with whom I hold my credentials ([https://paoc.org/docs/default-source/fellowship-services-documents/statement-of-fundamental-and-essential-truths.pdf?sfvrsn=153a1d6a\\_0](https://paoc.org/docs/default-source/fellowship-services-documents/statement-of-fundamental-and-essential-truths.pdf?sfvrsn=153a1d6a_0)).

<sup>6</sup> When I refer to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, I will refer to them in the masculine, because that is what I read in my Bible.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 12:1a "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God." In Leviticus 21-22, the priest was to offer only the best.

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 1:3-14 NASB mentions three times that we were created "for the praise of His glory". See also 1 Corinthians 10:31-33 and Matthew 5:16.

<sup>9</sup> This touches on Guideline 3.3.1 Build your rapport with the clients: *Avoid making promises you cannot keep.*

## **1.2 Be devoted to prayer<sup>10</sup>.**

Each day as I drove in to work, I acknowledged that this was God's work. By an act of my will, I gave over my family and my job to Him. I asked for and received His protection, guidance and provision. As you move about your institution, there will always be times where you are alone and can offer up short prayers on behalf of the clients and staff members. Maximize the use of your time and recognize often that God is there with you. If my volunteers were ever turned away (as sometimes happens), I asked them to pray for the institution at least fifteen minutes in their cars before leaving the parking lot. Prayer is always time well spent.

## **1.3 Be yourself.**

There may be a certain fear and insecurity as you begin your ministry as a prison chaplain. But remember that God knows your institution and what type of person is needed to best meet the spiritual and religious needs of your institution. He chose you for who you are, because you are the best. Now accept yourself as you are and allow Him to use you. Do not try to be someone you are not. A young shepherd named David was compelled to use King Saul's personal armour to fight a menacing giant (1 Samuel 17). Victory only came, though, when David set that armour aside and fought Goliath using weapons with which he was familiar. He had to be himself.<sup>11</sup>

## **1.4 - Be sensitive to the leading of His Spirit.**

God is ever-present and working in ways you will never know. The Holy Spirit is present to lead and help us accomplish God's work, but we need to be sensitive to His voice<sup>12</sup>. Just like there are thousands of radio and cell phone signals going through us at any given moment, without a proper receiver, we

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<sup>10</sup> In Romans 12:1b, the Apostle Paul calls this "your spiritual/reasonable service of worship." Giving your best and your all is an act of worship to God. Romans 12:12 "Rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer," (I like the KJV "continuing instant in prayer). Proverbs 3:5-6 "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." Proverbs 16:3 "Commit your works to the LORD and your plans will be established."

<sup>11</sup> Romans 12:2a ""Stop allowing yourself to be conformed to this world". See also Romans 12:3-8; Isaiah 41:10; and 2 Corinthians 10:12.

<sup>12</sup> My Master's thesis ("The Role of the Holy Spirit in Pastoral Counselling: With Special Emphasis on the Nine Gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10") was based on this concept. If you are interested in a digital copy, please contact me. Some further passages: Romans 12:2b "But keep on allowing yourselves to be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."; Galatians 5:16-26; John 14:16; 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:10-16).

will never hear them. Just the same, the Holy Spirit is always speaking to us, if we choose to receive His leading. He cares about every detail of your life and ministry. It is therefore wise to humbly pay attention to His leading and follow it. Be flexible and expect opportunities to come out of the blue.

### **1.5 Wait Patiently.**

You cannot force your way into ministry with clients or staff members. You have to wait for them to open up to you. Continue being yourself and “sowing seed”. God will open the doors in His own timing. Be ready, for the opportunities will come when you least expect them. Proselytism will never be an issue, if you wait for the client or staff to approach you. Your task is to live your life in such a way that others will be hungry and thirsty for what you have (1 Peter 3:15). Patience is about praying and having faith that God will work out difficult issues that you do not know how to solve.<sup>13</sup>

### **1.6 You cannot do everything. Identify what absolutely has to be done and do it. If you have extra time, spend it doing something work-related that you enjoy.**

There is a certain tendency among pastors and chaplains to think that if we cannot be and do everything for everyone, then we have somehow failed God, which can lead to burnout. This guideline is a wise remedy for burnout that was taught to me when I first started at the detention centre. It helped me through my many years as a prison chaplain.

### **1.7 It is all about triage and weighing priorities.**

To borrow a term from the medical profession, chaplaincy is all about **triage**, or determining degrees of urgency for what you are required and requested to accomplish. Each day you have to make decisions and live with the consequences. You will soon learn what is considered a priority in your institution and what can be left for a bit later. My two overall goals are:

- To recruit, train, deploy, supervise and evaluate all those who come into this institution as Chaplaincy staff, field placement and/or summer students, volunteers and professional visitors, in order to ensure the provision of adequate and appropriate religious rights and spiritual care to clients and/or staff and their families.

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<sup>13</sup> Mark 10:17-31; Isaiah 40:31

- To promote and develop the ministry of community faith groups in the provision of adequate and appropriate religious rights and spiritual care to clients who have been released into the community.

Having clear goals helps you to filter out what will take you away from more important work. One example would be the choice between responding to requests for reading materials and responding to an urgent referral for grief counselling. Your taking time to meet with the client can make all the difference in the world to that individual. The Golden Rule (Matthew 7:9-12) comes to mind here: “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.” I know that if I was in a similar situation, I would appreciate someone putting aside other important work to spend time with me when I am grieving.

Part of weighing priorities involves choosing your battles. It is important to think through the consequences *before* you choose a certain course of action. Will that action take you away from more important responsibilities? How will it affect your rapport with management, staff and the clients? If a battle is to be fought over a matter of principle, is it worth losing your job over? Patience is a virtue. Sometimes problems just solve themselves in time.

### **1.8 It is ALL ministry.**

Chaplaincy is not just one-on-one counselling with clients and staff. It is also setting up chairs, making phone calls, making up lists, logging attendance and volunteer hours, to name just a few examples. The job of a prison chaplain is incredibly complex. If you labour under the false guilt of not fulfilling God’s calling because you are not counselling enough, it will hobble you at best and destroy you at worst. All that you do as a chaplain is ministry on behalf of God.

### **1.9 Pass it on.**

As you grow in experience as a chaplain, take every opportunity to mentor and share your God-given passion for prison ministry with others. It IS worth all the extra work which that implies. My number one goal for my placement students was to make it the best placement they would ever have as a student. I involved them in every aspect of the ministry as soon as possible, treating them as colleagues and equals. Passing it on also involves teaching interested volunteers what you do as a chaplain. It helps them to better understand your ministry and cut you some slack, when things do not go as quickly as they think should happen.

## **1.10 Appreciate the network that God is giving you.**

When you are hired by an institution, you will inherit a network of chaplaincy volunteers and professional visitors, as well as other contacts in the community. You will need to make that network your own by connecting with each person as you find the time. Expect God to bring new people to you. Your network will grow naturally.

## **1.11 Use it or lose it.**

In a large institution, unused program space or time slots will not remain empty long, so monitor your programs and chaplaincy volunteers closely. Once Chaplaincy loses a program room or a time slot, it is close to impossible to ever get that back.<sup>14</sup>

## **1.12 Watch your attitude.**

Prison is full of angry and complaining individuals who are unhappy where they are. You will not stand out and help many of them, if you act like the majority. You are God's ambassador<sup>15</sup>, so represent Him well. Your joyful, positive attitude will draw needy individuals to you<sup>16</sup>. A sense of humour goes a long way in prison too.

## **1.13 They are people.**

Our clients are often labelled as something sub-human, as animals or as pieces of excrement. Correctional officers are at times seen as knuckle-dragging goons. But chaplains must remember that they are all people, created and loved by God and therefore worthy to be served. This lesson must be learned early, or effective ministry for God will not happen.

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<sup>14</sup> This is reminiscent of the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30, where the servant did not use what was given him and ultimately lost it.

<sup>15</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:20 (NASB) "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

<sup>16</sup> 1 Peter 3:15 (NASB) "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." James wisely says, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4 ESV).

## **GUIDELINE #2: KNOW YOUR INSTITUTION.**

My second guideline for chaplaincy ministry in a detention centre (or any facility for that matter) is not earth-shattering or new. For you to be effective as a chaplain, you must learn about your institution as quickly as possible. Though there are no short-cuts to this process, it is my sincere hope that the following will be helpful as you set out to learn.

### **2.1 – Know the Place / Physical Layout.**

### **2.2 – Know the People (Their Roles and Routines).**

### **2.3 – Know Your Part (Role and Routine).**

### **2.4 – Know the Policies and Procedures.**

If you are employed in a government institution, let me assure you that there are **thick** binders of policies and procedures sitting on a shelf somewhere that can be plunked down in front of you to memorize. A new chaplain is somehow expected to know these, but is not given the structured training like correctional officers receive at the Ontario Correctional Services College. At best, one is given the opportunity to shadow an experienced chaplain in another institution for a couple of days, but reality soon hits as you “sink or swim” back home. The Ministry of the Solicitor General intranet site does have the official policies and procedures available to peruse at any time. These are generic, however. You still need to learn your local rules. It is a steep learning curve, but the staff members are usually understanding and willing to help. It is one way to build your rapport with them, as you humble yourself and seek help. Here are some of the rules/guidelines I had to learn:

- 2.4.1 Health and safety first
- 2.4.2 Human rights come a very close second.
- 2.4.3 Document, document, document!
  - It is so important to accurately document what you are doing as a chaplain on a day-to-day basis. It will all seem like a futile waste of time, until there is a call out of the blue for answers from higher up the food chain. This is when you are grateful for the time you took to have kept detailed records and intricate paper trails. To have readily-available answers for your manager makes them look good and scores you big points. Believe me, the opposite situation does not feel good! The sick feeling of looking incompetent is the motivation that drives you to never experience it again.
  - Closely related to this, is the adage, “If it is not on paper, it does not exist”. How often did I take a volunteer or client complaint to management, and was asked where the paperwork is? I lost count, but finally learned. I met some great managers through the

years, who were extremely supportive of Chaplaincy. They resolved issues on my behalf, but they were powerless without paperwork.

- 2.4.4 Always write with a black pen.
- 2.4.5 Occurrence reports have to be written before you leave work.
- 2.4.6 Keys must remain at work.
- 2.4.7 Vigilance in programs
- 2.4.8 Kosher diets are for Jewish clients; Halal is for Muslims.
- 2.4.9 Clients who ask to go to the washroom are not allowed to return to program.
- 2.4.10 Clients must not destroy government property.
- 2.4.11 All mention of suicide is taken *very* seriously.
- 2.4.12 All client mail is read.
- 2.4.13 Clients on suicide watch are allowed their sacred scriptures, with exceptions.
- 2.4.14 Only authorized personnel are allowed to enter in a lockdown.
- 2.4.15 No proselytism or making new converts is allowed.
- 2.4.16 Confidentiality is important.
- 2.4.17 Clients may choose to attend any Chaplaincy service or program they wish.
- 2.4.18 Chaplains are to have no contact with clients once they have been released.
- 2.4.19 A client on “Loss Of All Privileges” (LOAP) is allowed one book in his/her cell.
- 2.4.20 Professional visitors and volunteers are not allowed to drop off money for clients.
- 2.4.21 One prayer mat per person and for prayer purposes only.

## **2.5 – Know the Problems.**

In addition to knowing the rules, a chaplain must be aware of the spoken (and unspoken) issues that pervade the prison environment. The following are given as a “heads-up” on what to expect as you enter prison chaplaincy. Prepare as you might, real-life twists will compel you to regularly revisit your position and adjust your actions. Flexibility and an open mind, balanced by a keen understanding of Scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit, will help you navigate through the minefield.

- 2.5.1 - Public displays of emotion are a sign of weakness;
- 2.5.2 - Job dissatisfaction;
- 2.5.3 - Racism and prejudice;
- 2.5.4 - Sexual orientation;
- 2.5.5 - Use of force on clients;
- 2.5.6 - Resource management;
- 2.5.7 - Multiplication of workload;
- 2.5.8 - Frustration and resignation, which come from fighting the same battles;
- 2.5.9 - Human rights;
- 2.5.10 - Clothing for release;
- 2.5.11 - Respect for religious items of clients;
- 2.5.12 – Special perks for clients.

## **2.6 – Know the Past.**

The more you know and understand the history of your institution, the more helpful that will be to you as a chaplain. You will gain insight into why things are done in a particular way. This can keep you from falling into the same pitfalls that others have encountered. Seek out the background story of various policies and procedures. This is not wasted time.

### **GUIDELINE #3: THE OLDER / LARGER YOUR INSTITUTION, THE LONGER ITS MEMORY.**

Your actions as a chaplain are watched every moment by clients and staff alike. Poor judgment on your part can result in consequences that will hobble your effectiveness for years to come. This third guideline is an encouragement to be aware of and avoid some major pitfalls before they happen.

#### **3.1 - Avoid setting precedents.**

Within any institution that has a large number of clients and staff, your choice as a chaplain to innocently do one thing for one person rapidly snowballs. Soon everyone else will be demanding the same for themselves. This will dominate your time and sidetrack you from what you should be doing. Even if you choose to stop, the requests will still come in for months or years after because of that long memory. Better to avoid setting precedents in the first place. Choose well.

#### **3.2 - Build your rapport with staff.**

What you do as a chaplain depends on institutional staff, beginning with opening that front gate as you come in and as you leave, as well as everything in between. You have the opportunity to build a reputation that will be remembered for a long time. How do you want to be perceived? Believe me, life and ministry can be pretty miserable if your relationship with staff is strained. It is therefore in your best interest to build your rapport with them. Not only will this allow you to accomplish your work with clients, it also opens doors of ministry to individual staff members. There are institutions where chaplains are clearly mandated to only minister to clients. Fortunately, I was always able to carry out a three-pronged ministry towards clients, union members and management. Continually building rapport in the good times means open doors for ministry in the bad times.

Here are some ways that help in that process:

- 3.2.1 Watch for any opportunity to affirm staff;
- 3.2.2 No surprises for your boss or colleagues;
- 3.2.3 Your actions as a chaplain should not impede the work of correctional staff;
- 3.2.4 Talk directly / privately to individual staff members when you have an issue with their conduct;
- 3.2.5 Show solidarity with correctional staff in front of clients;
- 3.2.6 Consultation is key;
- 3.2.7 Efficiency of movement.

### **3.3 - Build your rapport with clients.**

Just as it is important to build your rapport and reputation with staff, it is equally important to do the same with the clients. Word spreads amongst the population. How do you wish to be known? Here are some pointers:

- 3.3.1 Avoid making promises that you cannot keep;
- 3.3.2 Do only for a client what they cannot do themselves;
- 3.3.3 Ask clients to self-identify their religious affiliation before addressing their requests;
- 3.3.4 Be discrete;
- 3.3.5 Clients might use intimidation to achieve their ends;
- 3.3.6 Admit when you are wrong;
- 3.3.7 Scams happen.

I must hasten to add a word of caution here. Being too chummy with clients can bring suspicion that you are a “thug hugger”, thereby putting your rapport with staff in jeopardy. This calls for wisdom as you walk the fine line. This is reminiscent of Matthew 11:19 (cf. Luke 7:34), where Jesus was accused of being a friend of sinners.

### **3.4 – Keep those under your supervision away from controversy.**

Should a Chaplaincy volunteer or professional visitor earn a bad reputation, it will take years for that impression to change. That is why it is essential to train them well before launching them into ministry. Close supervision and communication allows you to nip problems in the bud. They should not be fighting their own battles. You are there to intercede for them and smooth the way for their ministry to flourish.

### **3.5 - Systemic change is a long time in coming.**

The larger the institution, the longer it will take to bring about change in thinking and action. This happens in incremental steps, one person at a time. Be patient and keep your eye on the goal. Strategic planning with others for encouragement is essential.

### **3.6 - Make decisions only after you have done the appropriate research.**

Correctional staff and clients all too often expect decisions from you immediately. At times there is incredible pressure to give an answer before knowing all the facts. Sometimes you choose well, but many times you will need to back paddle and change your decision. This makes you look wishy-washy and becomes part of the institutional memory of how you perform as a chaplain. It is therefore better to say at a grill, “I hear what you are saying, but I need to look into this more. I will get back to you today.” When kitchen staff want information about a client’s religious diet, it is better to respond, “Let me check in my office and get back to you by noon,” if you are not absolutely sure. Give a definite time period based on the amount of research required, and then keep your promise. Make it a priority to deliver on your promise. You are building your reputation.

## **CONCLUSION**

There you have them, my suggested guidelines for chaplaincy ministry in a detention centre setting. As mentioned at the beginning, they are offered only as suggestions to consider wherever you practice chaplaincy. Each institution is unique and you must decide how best to accomplish your goals. If even some of these guidelines are useful to you, then this has all been worth it.