

Reflections on My Role as Chaplain Within a Women's Prison

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I began as a Catholic Chaplain in the BANDYUP WOMEN'S PRISON in October 2004.

I brought to this new ministry much of what I learned in the years before 2004. However, what was expected of me in this new role would unfold as I became familiar and more comfortable with life within a secure women's prison.

My previous experience as a Loreto Sister had provided me with many opportunities to develop skills as a teacher of both primary and secondary students. I spent several years working within an adult education team from the Catholic Diocesan Education Office in Parramatta. This was followed by an experience as Leader of a developing Catholic Community in a new suburb in Sydney's west. I had facilitated Women's Conversation Circles and was comfortable with interfaith dialogue between Muslim, Jewish and Christian women. I had thoroughly enjoyed all that these positions offered me. I had also been given the opportunity to study for a Masters in Pastoral Studies in Chicago.



Each of these experiences had required me to interact with different people as they negotiated the ups and downs of life's journey.

Coming into the Prison Chaplaincy would call upon much of what I had learned in the past and yet in this new position I would learn so much more.

So, having been a Prison Chaplain since 2004, what have I learned and what do I consider essential aspects of this privileged ministry?

During the first six months or so, I followed in the footsteps of an experienced Sister who had been working within the prison system for about 25 years. I observed how she interacted with the women. How she listened, supported, encouraged and challenged. Slowly, I was able to bring my own experience and personal skills into my role as Chaplain.

Recently, I attended a National Conference on Ministry at which a young author, Alice Nelson, delivered a keynote address. I was taken and challenged by her reflections on a question she posed, "How can a global civilization with a heart be created?"

She said: "What I've discovered is that there is an equally strong set of needs that we call spiritual or meaning needs: people want their lives to have some higher meaning and purpose than simply accumulating money, power, sexual gratification and fame – they want their lives to be connected to something about which they can feel that it has transcendent value. And they hunger for personal relationships, families and communities in which they can experience themselves as being cared for and recognized in all of their specificity and uniqueness and spiritual beauty – not only for what they can 'deliver' or 'do' for others, not how they will be 'of use', but simply because they are valuable and deserving of love and caring just for who they are as embodiments of the sacred....."

As Church – (and in our ministry as Chaplains), we are an intentional group of people who see ourselves as allies to each other in advancing this way of thinking, people who are unashamedly utopian and willing to fight for their highest ideals, yet unashamedly humble in knowing that we don't know all that we need to know to do the healing that needs to be done."

So, what do I consider are essential aspects of the ministry of a Catholic Chaplain within a Women's Prison?

I would like to start with the need and responsibility we have to familiarise ourselves with Prison Policy, Vision and the Strategic Plan, for example, the most recent Background Paper, WOMEN'S WAY FORWARD, (July 2009) - which leads into the WOMEN'S CORRECTIVE SERVICES STRATEGIC PLAN 2009-2012.

This document provides us with disturbing facts e.g. the over representation of Aboriginal Women in custody and the need we have to look at new ways of addressing their needs. Women, white or black have different needs to male prisoners and what are we going to do about it.

Programs must reflect the cultural and social realities for women.

We must respect and value each woman as an expert on her own life and for Aboriginal women their membership of a community.

We need to encourage women to learn from one another and view them as survivors as opposed to victims and foster their strength and creativity to help effect change in their lives.

It is also absolutely key that Chaplains compliment the work of the Officers and other staff while understanding that our roles are different.

While not every woman would articulate her needs as expressed by Nelson, many of the women I have met in the Prison do desire at a deep level to do something good with their lives, even if in their present circumstances, they are incarcerated because they made poor choices.

As a Chaplain, I consider moving around the prison and taking the women where and as I find them, is the most appropriate way to engage with them. Conversation may be nothing more than a simple greeting. Yet by doing this they become familiar with us and we can come to know them by always pausing to ask after their welfare. It is important to take time to be with the women. In this way, they come to trust and have confidence in us.

This may lead to helping them connect with family or to assist them in seeking support following release re housing etc.

Compassion, empathy, listening, encouraging and challenging form a significant part of what I consider is the ministry of the Chaplain within the Prison.

If it is possible to train for and provide programs, for example, THE SEASONS OF GROWTH program which assists and supports women who have experienced loss and grief – this too, I believe is part of our role.

The Sunday Service, whether it is EUCHARIST or LITURGY OF THE WORD WITH COMMUNION, is a very important time for the women to seek and connect with the sacred and to assist in the integration of the joys and difficulties they have and are experiencing. Storytelling, and listening and sharing with each other at this time is often quite profound. This provides the women with time to integrate some silent time for prayer, time to articulate prayers for their own concerns and time to listen to the scriptures and to sing appropriate songs.

At the end of a day working within the Prison, it is important for me to spend time reflecting on who I have met and spent time with and what I have learned about myself and them along the way.

I believe that I have learned much from my experience as Chaplain within the Women's Prison. I am grateful for those whom I have been able to help along the way and for those who have taught me that "there but for the grace of God go I".

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