

## Chapter 12.

# With an Open Mind for the Unexpected<sup>23</sup>

## *Prison Chaplaincy: a Case Study.*

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### **Introduction**

Prison chaplaincy in the Netherlands is in several respects quite diverse. We name but three aspects: religious diversity among the chaplains, different services as their tasks and various pastoral approaches in the way they work. In the research community of the Case Studies Project we try to do justice to this diversity in order to give as reliable as possible a picture of chaplaincy in the context of custodial institutions. The research community is composed of Roman-Catholic, Protestant, Hindu and Buddhist prison chaplains, men as well as women.<sup>24</sup> Besides their religious diversity, they also have different theological preferences and pastoral specializations. In their case studies they try to cover the breadth of their work in only one of the services provided, namely individual conversation and counseling. In this paper, the Roman-Catholic chaplain presents a case study on unexpected meetings, using a specific pastoral method and inspired by a specific spirituality.

In what follows, we first mention some characteristics of prison chaplaincy in the Dutch context as background of the case study. Then the case study, which is typical in two ways (Walton & Körver, 2017, p. 261), will be presented. It is paradigmatic in relation to the approach of the chaplain, because she daily has all kinds of short, one-off meetings, with prisoners as well as staff. It is representative, too, with regard to those prisoners who

23 The case study was presented at the 2019 case studies research conference by Marja Went. The presentation by Martin van Hemert, Soerish Jaggan, Geerhard Kloppenburg on the second day concerned the Dutch context of Prison Chaplaincy, in particular denominational working. They are members of the Research Community of Prison Chaplains, together with Ron Colin, Jacqueline van Heel, Jan Kraaijeveld (until 2019-04-08), Arjeh Heintz (until 2019-02-18) and Bart van den Bosse (from 2018-10-08). Reijer J. de Vries, as supervisor of this community, authored this contribution, using the two presentations. The presenters and the other members commented on the draft.

24 A Jewish chaplain was a member of the community for almost two years. Despite multiple requests, participation by Muslim or Humanist chaplains has regrettably not been realized.

do not, as is the standard procedure, write a note to request a visit from the chaplain. We conclude that discussing this kind of case studies in the research community leads to consensus on the importance of this way of working in prison chaplaincy, for several reasons, as well as to a learning process of which four preliminary results will be mentioned.

### Dutch context

According to the rules of the Dutch Custodial Institutions Act (1998), article 41.1: “A prisoner has the right to freely practice and live his religion or belief, individually or in community with others,” and 41.2: “The director shall ensure that sufficient spiritual care is available in the institution, that is as much as possible in line with the prisoner’s religion or philosophy of life.”<sup>25</sup> In order to make this work, seven commissioning authorities from the seven so-called “recognized” denominations endorse prison chaplains to provide spiritual care to prisoners. In total, about 150 chaplains are working in the custodial institutions, commissioned by those seven denominations. The proportion is based on a preference poll among prisoners and is since 2018 determined as follows, in descending order: Islam (36%), Roman-Catholicism (26%), Protestantism (15%), Humanism (12,5%), Judaism (2,3%), Buddhism (2,3%), Hinduism (1,9%). Under the umbrella of the protestant denomination Eastern Orthodox chaplains (3,5%) are also “recognized” as a denomination (Inview Veldwerk, 2017). The chaplains are commissioned by their denomination, but appointed and paid by the government. In this way church and state are separated but work together on equal footing (dual and equal).

Working according to denomination means that the choice of the denomination by the prisoner is decisive. This choice implies that all spiritual care services have to be received from the chosen denomination (“integral working”), although the policy allows exceptions. Seven services are distinguished, including three main tasks: individual conversation and counseling, discussion groups (sometimes about the Bible or the Quran), and religious services (including prayer services, reflection meetings, etc.). The other four tasks are: intake, ambulatory presence, special meetings (related to an incident, for example a suicide, a broader religious or social theme or special religious celebrations) and assistance in crisis situations. The case study that is presented here concerns the service of ambulatory presence.

25 Overheid.nl, *Penitentiare beginselenwet*, chapter VIII. Cf. <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0009709/2019-01-01#HoofdstukVIII> (retrieved February 3, 2020; translation by the authors)

According to the presenting prison chaplains, working denominationally offers added value as well as frictions. The advantages include:

- Prisoners receive support from their own (religious/cultural) background;
- University training programs have been developed for the different denominations;
- There are explicit relations with society, with religious and world view organizations (churches, mosques, etcetera) and with persons, particular volunteers who cooperate with the prison chaplains;
- “Exemplary” cooperation between chaplains of different denominations counteracts prejudices and conflicts among prisoners.

Frictions are mentioned as well. According to some chaplains the principle of working integrally, i.e. denominationally, is at odds with post-modern “multi-religious belonging” and does not always fit the spiritual needs of the prisoners. Another problem concerns the chaplains of the smaller denominations who are unable to provide all services. On the other hand, if needed, referral to other denominations is possible.

### **Ambulatory presence: an experience**

In the research community, Marja Went presented a case study on unexpected meetings while walking on the corridor. Because such meetings are incidental, short and diverse, Went mentioned eight cases. For that purpose, she had to adapt the format of the Case Studies Project. She combined the cases with reflection on her pastoral approach and her theological sources. As a Roman-Catholic prison chaplain she feels inspired by three sources: the presence approach, her Christian background and Biblical stories, and womanist theology. Reflections on those three sources will be connected below to discussions in the research community.

First, an experience will be presented which is representative for the chaplain’s presence approach: a conversation about a painting. After a visit on the unit, the chaplain walks back to her office. In the corridor close to her office she sees a man, Robert, about 28 years old. She knows him a little, because he always attends the church service. He tells the chaplain about a painting. He shows it to her and tells her that he made it for the final meeting in the Alpha Group. It is just a few moments before the group will start and he would like to have a copy of his painting.

He says to the chaplain: “This is my life.” He tells about things in the painting and relates them to his life: the cross, a motorcycle, tattoos, dark pieces on the road. He asks the chaplain if she understands the painting. She responds that it is impressive and that it is great that in one picture he is able to show and tell about his life. The chaplain sees his face opening

up and concludes that he feels relieved. Together they walk to the copying machine and make a copy. The chaplain wishes him a good meeting. Sunday, after the church service, he tells the pastor about the meeting and how they liked his painting. In the following reflection, the chaplain's considerations will be pointed out.

### Presence approach

Can we call helping someone to make a copy call chaplaincy care? Is it important for the chaplain to do that kind of thing in a prison? And why is a chaplain doing it? Are such meetings typical for the work of a chaplain, alongside individual counseling?

When chaplains walk on a prison unit (in Dutch: "walking the ring"), a number of unexpected meetings and exchanges occur. That also is an aspect of their work. For both Marja Went and the other chaplains in the research community, it is important to take time for persons they meet unexpectedly, prisoners as well as workers in the prison.

As a chaplain Went feels inspired by the presence approach (Baart, 2001). The presence approach entails being open and unhurried for the other person, presence not being the opposite of absence, but the opposite of intervention.<sup>26</sup> There is no planned meeting, no specific question, no specific purpose for the conversation. It is about proximity and dignity. Starting point is what concerns the other person, what he/she wants to share: some experiences in prison, a meeting with the family, going to court, a good or bad message he/she got. It is about what is important for him/her at the moment, worries or happiness, such as a copy of a painting. According to the presence approach, the conversation is not only about problems and solutions, but about the whole of life. People are not just seen as "victims" who need advice and counseling. In the encounters there is also room for the happiness and strength of people. The most important thing is that people can feel seen and heard. Therefore, this kind of chaplaincy starts with an open mind, making oneself available, to see and hear the other person. Chaplaincy is not only successful when a concrete problem has been solved. It is about relationship and respect.

As is shown in the encounter, in this approach the chaplain is moving to the other. That is literally so: *to* the unit, the kitchen or the corridor; but also, mentally: *moving to* what is concerning the other. The chaplain and the other person are open to meeting each other and looking at each other. Sometimes the chaplain takes the initiative for a conversation,

26 This does not mean that intervention is excluded, but interventions should always be embedded in relational involvement.

sometimes the prisoner. In the research community there was a shared conviction that in prison this way of working is important, not only to see and hear the other person, but also to make connections between people: between prisoners as in this experience, between a prisoner and her family, or a prisoner and a guard, or between the guard and the chaplain, as the following experiences will show.

### **Why important and when possible?**

Now the second question is: what makes this kind of presence so important for chaplains as well as prisoners? And what are the conditions for making it happen? After mentioning another experience, some reflections by the research community will be discussed.

Sometimes people ask a question because they know the chaplain is Christian (or more specifically Roman-Catholic), for example, after the Sunday service. Although chaplain Went works on the units with men during the week, on Sundays she also leads a service with female prisoners. She does not know the women very well, having only short talks during coffee and tea after the service. On that occasion, one of the women approaches the chaplain and says that on the next Thursday she will be free. After being in prison for four months, she will be going directly to Poland, to her family and children. She asks the chaplain to pray for her and to ask for God's blessing. The chaplain asks what she wants prayer for. She requests prayer for all the women who have to stay in prison, that they will be okay; for a safe journey, but particularly for her children who missed her too much; and that in her own country the family will have a good future together. The chaplain prays for the women in the prison and asks in the prayer for a blessing for the woman and her children. Afterwards she wishes her all the best and a safe journey.

In the research community the conditions of this kind of unexpected meetings were discussed. First, the chaplain's attitude is important: being open and available in order to see and to hear people. On the other hand, limitations of the presence approach are mentioned. One's own agenda can be such a limitation. Sometimes the chaplain really has to head to an appointment, or one needs to speak to somebody right away because (due to the daily schedule) there will not be another opportunity that day. Another limitation is the chaplain's receptivity. The chaplain may have just had a serious talk with someone else and may not have the inner space for another encounter. And sometimes a man or woman just asks things that have to be referred to a colleague or another worker in prison.

Another condition is the trust that prison chaplains receive from prisoners. Prisoners know that chaplains will not talk to others about what a

prisoner tells him or her. Whereas psychologists or guards have to report, the chaplains can be a person, or create a place, where prisoners can talk freely, without a special (therapeutic or other) goal. And they know that what they tell the chaplain will remain confidential. Besides, the chaplains are well-known because of the Sunday services and the brief conversations afterwards in which one can ask for a Bible, a rosary or a visit. And chaplains regularly walk on the corridor. It also helps that the chaplains do not wear uniforms like many other workers in the prison do. The research community assumes that all that enhances different types of talks.

The theological foundation of these encounters is important as well. Chaplain Went is inspired by the story of Exodus in the Bible: people depart from slavery and travel to the Promised Land. But the journey takes a very long time. For forty years the people wanders in the dessert and does not know in the meantime when or if they will ever reach the Promised Land. They are worried; they complain; they ask God where He is. But in the struggling and in the surviving, God gives them manna, every day again, only manna for this day in order to regain their trust that also the next day God will provide care, enough manna to keep on going, to survive. Went sees many similarities with life in prison, where the struggle is like being in the desert of life. Prisoners do not know when or if they will reach the Promised Land. Chaplains can help them see and realize what might be the manna God gives them for the present day.

### **Struggles in life**

There is not always a happy ending or a solution, sometimes there is no promised land to be seen. Another two unexpected meetings show how a womanist theology works as a source for chaplain Went.

When the chaplain enters a unit, a Moroccan man greets her immediately. He seems very, very confused. His movements and expressions are restless, and he regularly looks in different directions. He seems to be about 25 years old. "Are you coming to visit me?," he asks. "Maybe," the chaplain replies, "but I don't think we know each other yet." The chaplain says that she works in the prison as a chaplain from the Catholic Church. She mentions her name. His name is Mohamed. He says that it is too hot today. It is hard for him. They have a short talk about how he is dealing with the situation. And after a while he shakes her hand and says: "Thanks for the talk."

During the many following times when the chaplain visits the unit, Mohamed comes to greet her with: "Are you coming to visit me?" or "How nice to see you again." And every time conversation continues with brief exchanges about the present day, the weather, how he is doing, what the

program will be for him, etcetera. Each time he is the one who decides when it is enough, thanking her for the conversations and her time.

Another experience concerns Rick, a Dutch single male, aged 37. Over a longer period, the chaplain has already had conversations with him. When the chaplain enters the unit a guard, Peter, tells her that Rick is not feeling well. The chaplain is surprised because two days ago he was not feeling bad. But now he feels depressed. The chaplain says that she has time to visit him and the guard happily agrees. Rick is worried about whether or not he can go to a mental hospital. He really wants to go to a place like that, to get more help when he leaves prison, because it is too difficult for him to do things alone. The institute of forensic psychology works on a report on him for court. Rick hopes that the psychologist will also recommend going to a clinic. Therefore, he wants to make a phone call and ask if the psychologist has already sent his report to Rick's lawyer and to court.

The chaplain and Rick walk back to the unit and ask the guard Peter if it is possible to make a phone call. That is okay and they are allowed to sit in the consultation room. Rick has a package of papers all put together in different plastic bags and it takes some time to unpack and to find the paper with the telephone number. The chaplain remarks that it is really well packed. Rick answers that in this way he can see that nobody is inspecting his papers. He gives the telephone number to Peter who makes the connection. While Rick is calling, he wants the chaplain to listen and the chaplain hears that the psychologist indeed will advise that Rick be sent to a mental hospital and that he will visit him tomorrow to speak about the report and his advice. Rick feels really relieved and tells the chaplain that he is happy that she came today. The chaplain says that it is only because the guard Peter told her that he was not feeling well. Rick is surprised that the guard noticed. When they return to the guard, Rick and the chaplain tell him about the visit the next day and that Rick feels relieved. The chaplain tells the guard that he made that possible and that she told Rick that, too. The guard seems to be surprised. Afterwards, the chaplain sees that Rick contacts Peter more easily, although Rick usually does not readily trust people. She concludes that there seems to be a better connection between Rick and Peter, but also between Peter and the chaplain.

Responding to the questions asked by the members of the research community, chaplain Went explained how womanist theology provides a resource for her work. In prison she sees that life sometimes is difficult and full of struggles, especially on the units with prisoners who have serious psychological problems. For some people life is simply a matter of

struggle for survival, but that it is still important for them to be seen and to be heard. And to see and to mention where people find the strength to survive. Or to stay at someone's side to help finding this strength.

Womanist theology starts with the experiences and stories of black women and the complexity of strength, forces and opposing forces in their lives (Williams, 2013). Although they hope to find freedom (literally or mentally), they realize that this is not always possible. Some womanist theologians feel inspired by the story of Hagar in the Bible. She flees to the desert and there she meets God. It is a God who gives her new strength to survive and a new vision, a new promise that she will not be alone.

In prison, too, people sometimes have been deeply hurt physically or mentally, as a result of illness, drugs or other experiences. People return again and again to prison or a mental hospital. Womanist theology taught the chaplain that one has to fight for freedom, for the happy end, but that sometimes that is not directly attainable. In the meantime, it is important not to be alone, to stay together and to strengthen each other. In womanist theology not being alone means being together with other people who stay with you, but also and in particular, together with God. As a chaplain, Went seeks to communicate implicitly the understanding that, if God is not present as a liberating God, God will be present as a God who helps one to survive and to improve quality of life. Even if one feels alone, it is with God on one's side.

## Conclusion

In the research community case studies such as the one presented by chaplain Went are discussed. So far, these discussions have led to at least two conclusions. First, the experiences with unexpected meetings are only a small part of chaplaincy care in prison. However, there is consensus in the research community that this manner of working as a prison chaplain is important for several reasons.

- As the cases show, in those brief encounters people can feel seen and heard as human beings and not just as prisoners. As one prisoner mentioned: "In these last two weeks, this is the second normal conversation I have had";
- Being present with an open mind, the chaplain is not directly focused on problems and solutions. The Moroccan man just needed someone to talk to. Although she can offer some support with regard to specific questions (of Robert, or the Polish woman), she does not solve problems;



- The case of Rick shows that in this approach, chaplaincy care is not only successful when there is a happy end, but that care is also important for the sake of not being alone in surviving and being able to improve quality of life;
- In these encounters (such as with Rick), people who sometimes seem to be invisible or who will never ask questions can become visible;
- Connections can be made between people, with guards and other workers, with family, or maybe with oneself or with God;
- By being present with an open mind, the chaplain offers prisoners the opportunity to share what they are concerned about. Sometimes there is so much aggression or anger, that a short exchange can help bring de-escalation. That opens up a space to talk without violence.

Last but not least, many chaplains like these unexpected meetings. It makes invisible people visible. Suddenly the chaplain sees unexpected things in a person. This helps to see the little things that are also there. And sometimes, in the harsh world of a prison, there are beautiful little gifts to be received. From a religious perspective, that helps the chaplain to see where God is at work. And maybe the other can see things in such a way too.

According to Van Hemert, Jaggan and Kloppenburg in their contribution to the conference, a second conclusion concerns the learning outcomes of the discussions in the research community. They mentioned four preliminary results:

- Reflection on the identity of the chaplains, or on their various identities, raises several issues. Is a chaplain primarily a representative of his/her own tradition or a spiritual caregiver in general? And should one be called a chaplain or pastor/pundit/rabbi/etcetera? There is ongoing discussion on how the fact that prison chaplains work with an endorsement from their sending agency influences the way they work;
- Discussions in the research community promote learning about each other's background as chaplains of different denominations and about different concepts of the responsibilities of prison chaplains. A rebound effect is the growing awareness of one's own background. For example, the fact that the Hindu chaplain felt responsible for family members of the detainee and contacted them, was almost shocking to other members of the case study group. An open question for the research project is whether these denominational backgrounds influence the choice of the case studies?;
- There is a growing awareness of one's own manner of working, stimulated by the use of a strict format as well as by the interdenominational

- composition of the research community. The question for the professional group is how this growing awareness enhances professionalization;
- As prison chaplains the group members become more aware of the unique features of prison chaplaincy in comparison with chaplaincy in other fields: providing sanctuary and not reporting confidential matters to others. And working on a denominational basis means that in many contacts religious or worldview background plays a significant role, although at the same time there is an openness towards all prisoners. Because ambulatory work (as in the case study of Went) and group work are essential for prison chaplaincy, the question arises whether the format of the Case Studies Project allows adequately enough for the uniqueness of prison chaplaincy.

Halfway through the duration of the Case Studies Project these questions are only preliminary and in the research community the need for further discussion is felt and expressed.