

# Value of State Prison Chaplaincy

## *“They’re at it again . . .”*

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Like a broken record and failing to learn from history, the “government” seeks to cut funds or basically eliminate *chaplaincy* - a vital aspect in what we like to call “the criminal justice system” in Texas. Seeking to overcome an enormous deficit, chaplaincy appears a lucrative choice to “save” a few bucks. Those with some history in prison ministry must admit we have *seen this day coming*. I became involved in this ministry in 1971. I owe a great debt of gratitude to chaplains (many now retired or passed on).

Through the years I have heard of other states that have decided to eliminate chaplaincy only to reinstitute it later. Clearly, someone must fill this monumental void. We fail to fully appreciate what we have until it is gone.

Personally, I wonder why a person would *want* to be a chaplain but I rejoice that we have so many outstanding chaplains in Texas. Chaplains do not do what they do for the salaries received. Not only does a chaplain serve the varied spiritual needs of offenders, the institution’s staff has spiritual needs and are blessed by this office. The paperwork required is staggering. The chaplain must utilize and coordinate the best possible use of volunteers. They hear constant complaints and are seldom praised. The daily stress level is: Orange.

I simply desire to add my voice to others asking that every consideration be made to preserve our state’s chaplaincy program. Will spiritual ministry continue without state-paid chaplains? In some form, the answer is – yes. Still, effective ministry to tens of thousands will suffer and valuable time will be lost in the needless shuffle. For the dollars involved I do not envision the transition as an improvement.

Citing the study by Beckner/Riggs, the State of Colorado decided on a two-step plan to defund chaplaincy in 1993. Two years later, 100% of their chaplains were gone. It is true that they eventually agreed to meet spiritual needs through an agreement with *Good News Jail & Prison Ministry* (GNJPM). Much of the day-to-day work (scheduling use of space, determining lay-ins, count, supervision and security concerns, etc.) still must be carried out by state-paid employees as is done now. This expense will not end and I imagine there will be “hidden” costs to any alternative. While I am not critical of GNJPM, I simply believe that the work of *chaplaincy* is not best served in this manner.

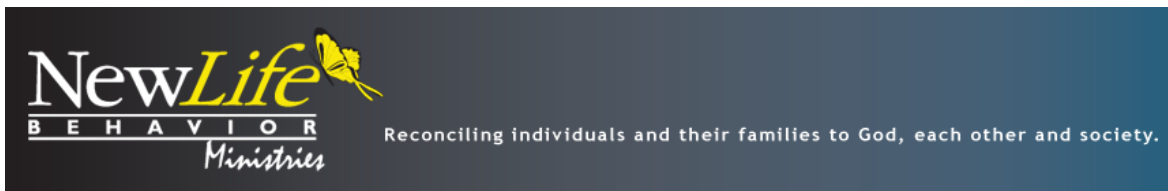


Volunteers assisting our state-paid chaplains represent some of our nation’s finest programs. I will not try to name them. However, since I serve as President of *NewLife Behavior Ministries* (a curriculum-based program begun in 1984), I can speak for us. NLBM is not interested in assuming the role of institutional chaplaincy. Putting any independent group in such a position is (in my view) *dangerous* at best. My experience has been that “friction” – when it has existed – between state-paid chaplains and volunteers or ministries has resulted in what is best for offenders, their families, the staff, and society in general. State-paid chaplains must take the higher road and possess a broader view than most volunteers fathom. Both are necessary but each is different in what is brought to the table.

I was once called to a special meeting at Nueces County Jail (Corpus Christi) to discuss the future of its chaplaincy program. Various religious groups had numerous grievances with the county *as well as with each other*. There was considerable discussion of the county turning chaplaincy over of one of the several religious entities present. There was no lack of interest among the groups to grab control. In addition to various individual churches fighting for authority, there were separate battles between the “regular” Ministerial Alliance, the *Mexican-American* Ministerial Alliance and the *African-American* Ministerial Alliance. In a sense, naming one of these would be a convenient way for the Sheriff, Commissioners and jail administrators to “wash their hands” of the matter. My comment was and still is: “Either YOU run this jail or *someone else will run it for you*.”

To the State of Texas, I would say: “Either YOU run your prison’s chaplaincy or *someone else will run it for you* – and you will not like it.”

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