

Winnifred Sullivan's Contribution to Prison Chaplaincy

by Donald Stoesz

Introduction

Winnifred Sullivan's explanation of prison chaplaincy in terms of webs of authority, *sui generis* nature of the religious experience, surplus spiritual purpose to obligations of religious accommodation, legalization of spiritual care, ministry of presence, and role of volunteer prison ministries represents a *tour de force*. Her multi-faceted religious, social, spiritual, and philosophical analysis ensures the place of chaplains alongside other staff and volunteers for some time to come.

State and Religion as Webs of Authority

Two paragraphs in *Ministry of Presence*, written by American lawyer and religious studies professor Winnifred Sullivan, echo my thirty-year experiences as an ordained Mennonite pastor and site-based, Protestant prison chaplain.

Sullivan suggests in the first quote that:¹

chaplains offer themselves as spiritual ministers without portfolio while still being bound by webs of authority, sacred and secular, past and present, that are not always fully acknowledged.

Webs of authority have to do with the ecclesiastical credentials necessary to become a prison chaplain. I graduated with a Master of Divinity from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in order to become a Mennonite pastor. I served as a youth pastor for two years within the Mennonite church before moving on to graduate studies.

After being involved as a chapel volunteer within the prison system, the Mennonite church licensed and ordained me to serve as a Protestant chaplain. I was the only minority faith representative within a large French Catholic inmate population. I accommodated the religious needs of Jewish, Islamic, Rastafarian, Sikh, and

¹ Winnifred Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 53.

Zoroastrian inmates. I offered worship services on Sundays and Bible studies on Wednesday evenings in my role as a Protestant chaplain. I collaborated with English Catholic, French Pentecostal, and Free Church congregationalist volunteers, along with Jewish rabbis, Islamic Imams, Buddhist monks, Rastafarian gurus, Sikh priests, and Wiccan representatives, in providing chaplaincy services. The title of “site-based” chaplain came into vogue twenty years later to undergird responsibilities I had throughout my chaplaincy career.

The state serves as a second web of authority. I adhere to the Mission Statement of Correctional Service Canada. I am committed to the reintegration of inmates. I serve as an ally with other staff in providing professional care within the good order of the institution. My chaplaincy role dovetails with the behavioural modification goals of program officers. Religious events complement the social facilitation functions ascribed to social program officers. I help inmates understand the authority of parole officers in providing support and accountability.

Roles changes in Canadian chaplaincy over the last two hundred years have been well documented.² Chaplains tend to echo the priorities of corrections, whether that has to do with punishment, silent treatment, all-seeing-eye of Bentham’s Panopticon,³ priority of work, or sweeping rehabilitation programs.

Chaplains adhere to these changing secular goals while responding to these policies with their own religious expertise and spiritual affinity. Sacramental priorities are in vogue when chaplains identify closely with their ecclesiastical authorities.⁴ Spiritual care becomes paramount when chaplains see themselves as reaching out to offenders who are not rooted in specific religious traditions.⁵

Chaplains have deep affinities to the core knowledge and leadership skills that they acquired as part of their pastoral duties in faith groups. Diversity, empathy, counselling skills, and emotional intelligence come to the fore when they begin their spiritual care duties in a prison.⁶ Chaplains find out that the intricacies of religious doctrine, congregational polity, worship practices, and initiation rites have little relevance in the world of corrections.

² James, J. T. L. *A Living Tradition: Penitentiary Chaplaincy* (Correctional Services of Canada. Ontario: Chaplaincy Division, 1990), Pierre Allard, *The Statement of the Correctional Service Values and a Biblical Perspective for the Role of Chaplain*, Unpublished Doctor of Ministry dissertation (North Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986). 47-69.

³ Note the discussion in Donald Stoesz with Hank Dixon, *A Prison Chaplaincy Manual* (Victoria: Friesen Press, 2020), 180-181.

⁴ Note Sullivan’s discussion, *Ministry of Presence*, 38.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 173-191.

⁶ See the diagram, Donald Stoesz with Hank Dixon, *A Prison Chaplaincy Manual*, 50.

The prison environment feels more like an emergency ward in a hospital than the calm, social atmosphere of a Sunday morning church service in the community.⁷ Triage comes before prayer. Listening comes before advice. Diffusion of polarities comes before clarification of truth. Resolution of conflicts comes before affirmation of fellowship.

The bundle of emotions, skewed facts, anger at authority, and confused religious experiences that represent an inmate's sharing in a chaplain's office indicates a new normal. Chaplains acquire skills not included in their formation in seminary, information modules provided by CSC, or spiritual care courses. Dynamics of security along with power and control issues make prison chaplaincy different from ministry experienced in a congregational or hospital setting.

Sullivan summarizes this new reality in another part of her book:⁸

Beholden primarily neither to a local congregation nor to a religious canon and hierarchies in the chain-of-command model of ministry, chaplains meet both a more diverse and often constantly changing clientele and are freer from strictures of orthodoxy in doctrine and practice than other religious specialists. They are committed to the mission of and usually paid by the secular institutions in which they work, whether that be a school, prison, branch of the armed services, business, hospital, park service, or other special purpose facility.

Chaplains integrate the webs of authority that religion and state represent to be effective. They constantly switch between wearing two or three hats. They are like a Jewish rabbi when facilitating Hanukah rituals. They are like an Islamic Imam when supervising Friday prayers. They are like a Buddhist monk when helping inmates with meditation practices and private devotion before shrines in their cells.

Sui Generis Nature of the Religious Experience

Chaplains are able to relate to inmates of other faiths because of what Sullivan describes as the "presumed universal spiritual nature of the individual."⁹ Chaplains' deep devotion to and understanding of their own religious tradition enables them to empathize with the particular religious practices of other believers.¹⁰ In fact, it is

⁷ See the introduction in Donald Stoesz, *Glimpses of Grace* (Victoria: Friesen Press, 2010), 6-7.

⁸ Winnifred Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence*, 53.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The ability of a chaplain to provide spiritual care to inmates from different religions is affirmed by Correctional Service Canada in their guidelines regarding religious accommodation, Correctional Service Canada, GL 750-1, *Inmate Religious Accommodation – FAQs for Chaplains, Suppliers, and Contractors*.

precisely because of chaplains' attention to detail and specificity of their own religious peculiarities that they are attuned to the spiritual devotion of others. Chaplains know how religion and spirituality have shaped their own identity, calling, commitment, prayer, worship, and fellowship. Their religious formation and practice enable them to understand what it takes for inmates to practice their own beliefs, whatever they may be.

Sullivan's affirmation of the *sui generis* nature of the religious experience¹¹ enables chaplains to make the switch between religions while remaining true to their own. Chaplains are engaged in religious accommodation because of their own attentiveness to the religiosity of these events. Other staff facilitate religious events in their secular roles as social program officers. They are not, however, able to help the inmate make a meaningful connection between the objective requirements of the ritual and the subjective significance of that event. Subjective appropriation linked to objective manifestation speaks to the integral link between spirituality and religiosity. Neither is real without other.

Comparison to the work of a psychologist helps explain the link between religion and spirituality. The purpose of a psychologist is to link the behaviour exhibited by an inmate to their psychological reasoning and wellbeing. A series of interviews reveals the internal causes of a prisoner's offending patterns. The offender becomes integrated in their personality as they better understand the underlying causes of their behaviour.

A chaplain uses a similar approach in their interviews. The inmate shares their beliefs that they learned as a child, practiced as an adult, or learned from another offender. The inmate asks about how these beliefs are related to religion. They ask about how this faith can be brought to bear on their current feelings of confusion, guilt, and shame. They ask whether it is possible to practice their faith within a correctional environment.

The chaplain provides grounding to the inmate's faith in the same way that a psychologist provides grounding to an inmate's identity. With the psychologist's help, an offender moves from insecurity and conflicted personality to self integration.¹² With the chaplain's help, the inmate moves from an eclectic basket of beliefs and practices to more authentic spiritual expressions that comfort the mind, soothe the soul, calm the heart, and provide a sense of (social) belonging. The

¹¹ For a broader discussion of the issue, see Daniel Pals, *Is Religion a Sui Generis Phenomenon?* Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 55/2 (1987), 259-282.

¹² Note discussion of a pastoral interview, Donald Stoesz with Hank Dixon, *A Prison Chaplaincy Manual*, 91-101.

chaplain's integration of mind, body, and soul in their own lives and in the lives of the "gathered fellowship" speaks volumes about the inmate's ability to do the same.

Positive Spiritual Growth in Addition to Constitutional Rights

In addition to navigating webs of authority and being partial to the universal religiosity of human beings, chaplains contribute to inmates' spiritual wellbeing over and above their accommodation of offenders' rights to religious services.

This is how Sullivan states the matter:¹³

The correctional chaplain has acquired a greatly enhanced role, one that arguably once again expansively integrates him into the prison project while embracing the prisoner as religious well beyond the specific constitutionally protected religious needs of the prisoner . . . Offenders are understood to need to acquire a *positive spiritual reality through spiritual growth*, not just to have a constitutionally protected right to the free exercise of religion (italics added).

Diverging trajectories of teleology and deontology clarify the difference between accommodating the "constitutionally protected religious needs of a prisoner" and the "positive spiritual growth" that they experience through involvement with chaplaincy. Inmates often tell chaplains that they have certain rights regarding religious practices. While agreeing with them, chaplains respond by saying that these rights come with certain responsibilities. Providing spiritual and religious care to an inmate comes with the corollary of helping the offender understand how faith provides the wherewithal for them to become law-abiding citizens. Deontological obligations are linked to meaningful past events of grace and freedom. Rule of law is meaningful to the extent that it speaks to teleological goals.

The Ten Commandments in the Old Testament provide a good illustration of how law and gospel work. The Decalogue is based on the fact that God saved the people of Israel from slavery (Exodus 20:1). This act of liberation provides the basis for having faith in God, respecting one's neighbours, and learning to live in harmony with each other.

¹³ Winnifred Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence*, 81. In the fall of 2018, Wendy Cadge and Michael Skaggs launched a "Chaplaincy Innovation Lab" website in order to "bring American leaders in theological education, social science, religious history, clinical education, and professional chaplaincy into conversation for the first time," *Chaplaincy? Spiritual Care? Innovation? A Case Statement*, www.chaplaincyinnovation.org, Retrieved April 2019, 1. They build on Winnifred Sullivan's insight into chaplains as "secular priests" and "ministers without portfolio," 3. For a website dedicated to establishing prison chaplaincy on a professional basis, see www.chaplaincysolutions.org, retrieved April 2019. Thomas Beckner has been the driving force behind with this consultant organization, cf. his book, *Correctional Chaplaincy: Keepers of the Cloak* (Orlando: Cappella Press, 2012).

The Ten Commandments' emphasis on taboos is diffused by the fact that love of neighbour and love of God represent the covenantal basis of these laws.¹⁴ Upholding the sanctity of life is the reason a person does not kill. Being satisfied with one's state in life is the reason a person does not get jealous of one's neighbour. Worshipping God on the Sabbath places human pursuits within divine meaning. Respecting private property is the reason one does not steal.

Setting taboos within fulfilling divine and human relationships and meaningful ends provide the motivation for inmates to change. One of the problems with programming courses in the institution is that they concentrate on the negative aspects of inmates' crimes. Programming staff teach inmates how to "stop stinking thinking," "how to take a time out," and how "to avoid certain negative situations."

Voluntaristic programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Celebrate Recovery tend to do the same thing. Both recovery groups start with the issue of denial in order to help the inmate name what has gone wrong with their lives. They encourage the offender to make an inventory of the persons they have harmed. They ask the participant to share these difficult stories with someone they trust.

Missing from some of these accounts are stories that show inmates how they can be healed from the hurts, habits, addictions, and behaviours with which they are so familiar. Inmates come to chaplains because they are looking for spiritual, emotional, and religious resources to help them move on.

Chaplains have an excellent opportunity to provide this care. Grief recovery programs, relationship courses, alternatives to violence workshops, and codependency topics show inmates that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Religious resources of divine love, grace, and forgiveness provide the wherewithal to move on. Real fellowship modelled in chapel services and volunteer groups reinforce the possibility of transformation. Religious formation and initiation into faith groups demonstrate how life in the (faith) community is lived.

The above examples show how chaplains provide *positive spiritual realities* to complement the taboo oriented nature of behaviour modification programs. Rule based policies and procedures are augmented by stories of divine destiny and promise.

¹⁴ The Catholic Catechism places the Ten Commandments within the third section of its Catechism, known as Life in Christ, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, second edition (Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2019), 498-611.

Professional Chaplaincy within the Legal Parameters of the State

A fourth way in which Winnifred Sullivan establishes prison chaplaincy on a professional basis is through her analysis of legal cases regarding religion.¹⁵ Various civil liberty bodies in the United States have taken the government to court over its provision of religious services in its institutions. These lawsuits have stated that the government, contrary to its obligation to separate religion from the state, is involved in religious affairs when it provides chaplaincy services to its clients.¹⁶

Winnifred Sullivan uses her expertise as a lawyer to analyse each of the cases. She shows that it is possible to provide chaplaincy without proselytizing or being vacuous. Chaplains build on their clients' perception of reality and belief systems to help them heal and experience spiritual comfort.¹⁷ Specific religious rituals and practices are offered within a voluntaristic atmosphere in which the client consents. Spirituality represents care that complements other services offered by nurses, correctional staff, psychologists, and doctors. A team approach to ministry assures success of the care provided.

Spiritual care is not vacuous because it provides religious insights, spiritual comfort, and counselling skills to show the client how they can be grounded in their faith expression. Chaplains do not need to proselytize because spirituality and religion are part of what make people human.¹⁸

Symbols of meaning are intrinsic to people's wellbeing, even if they are more (Dr.) Seussian in flavour or idealistic in intent than religious.¹⁹ Alternatives to Violence workshops, for example, are based on the idealistic symbol of Transforming Power. This power is indicative of human relationships as well as inviting in terms of motivational influence. Chaplains utilize a variety of resources on the religious and secular continuum to help clients find meaning in their lives.

Spiritual Ministry of Presence

Another way that Sullivan establishes prison chaplaincy on a professional basis is through her proposal of a ministry of presence. Chaplains provide meaningful moments of spiritual presence in their encounters with inmates.²⁰ The spiritual high

¹⁵ Winnifred Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence*, 1- 52.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33-50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁸ Note the discussion in Donald Stoesz with Hank Dixon, *A Prison Chaplaincy Manual*, 83-86.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 137. Cf. Gregory Baum's discussion of the relationship between religion and symbols, *Religion and Alienation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 115-139. Winnifred Sullivan mentions Seussian ideals in *Prison Religion*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 175.

²⁰ Winnifred Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence*, 175.

point of a Catholic priest comes when he celebrates Mass with his inmate parishioners. Holding the host up for all to see, he blesses the body of Christ and partakes with all in a gathered fellowship. The spiritual high point of a Pentecostal minister comes when she shares her ecstatic experience of conversion through the working of the Holy Spirit.

These significant religious events can be multiplied. I am moved in reverence as I observe the Islamic inmates lying prostrate in worship of Allah. I experience the real presence of God as I meditate together with Buddhist offenders before a lit candle in the sanctuary. Prayers are offered as needed in a variety of settings. Last week, I prayed with a Buddhist inmate who told me about his immigration to Canada, death of his wife, lost contact with his spiritual representative, lack of family, and difficulties of incarceration.

A new chaplain who was present asked me why I had prayed with this inmate. I responded by saying that the social, emotional, spiritual, religious, and cultural culmination of that moment compelled me to pray. With the inmate's consent, I asked God to provide rest for his wife's soul, comfort for the inmate's grief, solidarity with the offender's faith community, and fellowship with the spiritual leadership that had been part of his (previous) life. I may never see that inmate again. And yet there we were, communing in a deeply spiritual and religious manner.

Let me give one more example of how this religious link to spirituality works. Some years ago, I met a Greek Orthodox chaplain working with inmates in a segregation unit of a prison. He sent in materials and instructions about how to draw and paint an icon. Icons represented one of the most important religious aids in his worship services. Numerous icons were placed along panels six feet high in front of the altar.

The priest used this immediate mediation to God to help inmates experience the same thing in prison. The fact that they were in segregation made this religious experience even more meaningful. The drawing and painting of "their own" icons represented a physical connection to the reality of a spiritual God. They were communing with God through these icons in the same way that the Catholic priest communed through celebration of the Eucharist and the Pentecostal minister communed through her religious conversion.

Naming these spiritual ah ha! moments is the best way I know of helping new chaplains understand the link between their own religiosity and that of offenders. One brings the resources that one represents as a Catholic priest, Pentecostal minister, Buddhist monk, Muslim imam, or Jewish rabbi. A spiritual moment is enhanced as one links this devout religious experience with the framework of beliefs

and network of contacts that encircle the life of an inmate. The spiritually lived moment of an inmate's encounter with a chaplain reinserts the offender into a deep sense of social, religious, and emotional belonging.

Role of Volunteer Prison Ministries

The genius of Sullivan's research has to do with the fact that she is interested in the effectiveness of prison ministries. Chaplaincy represents but one small part in the larger reality of transformation witnessed on many levels by inmates and chapel volunteers alike. There are many more prison ministry groups in Canada and North America than chaplaincy staff. These groups offer a range of services to inmates: Bible studies by correspondence, pen pal correspondence, worship services, religious programs, support groups, recovery groups, music ministries, friendship groups, yearly calendars, address books, community care, COSAs, housing, and reintegration.

Sullivan asks the question: What makes these prison ministry groups successful? She came up with five answers during her study of InnerChange Freedom Initiative, a prison ministry group sponsored by International Prison Fellowship that was involved for ten years in an Iowa prison. IFI was effective because of its emphasis on *morality, spirituality, belief in change, self-identity, and egalitarianism*.²¹

IFI was first and foremost "trying to create civilized men who can flourish in that world because they will know how to deal with each other as equals working together to create a mutually beneficial society."²² This goal represents the secular end of things. It has to do with "the *moral life*, is rooted in instrumental rationality, shares a focus on the discipline needed to reform life on earth, and is non-hierarchical as well as non-idealistic."²³

Moral virtue, in turn, was founded on a cosmological order of meaning left over from pre-modernity that involved some type of reification in order to be symbolically effective. Stated more plainly, Sullivan believes that some type of *spirituality* and/or *disestablished religion* is "intrinsic to the nature of and dependent on the voluntary assent of the individual human."²⁴ The link of morality to meaning suggests that some larger frame of reference – whether spiritual (e.g. Christian) or secular (e.g. Seussian) – is needed in the modern and post-modern world to cope with reality. IFI's use of biblical and evangelical principles in their program of

²¹ This section is based on the discussion in Donald Stoesz with Hank Dixon, *A Prison Chaplaincy Manual*, 133-134, Cf. Winnifred Sullivan, *Prison Religion*.

²² Winnifred Sullivan, *Prison Religion*, 175.

²³ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

rehabilitation made a conscious link between meaning and morality. Sullivan suggests that this assumption of spiritual efficacy in relation to moral virtue should not be ruled out of hand because of its religiosity.

A third factor in the Iowa project had to do with *belief in change*. IF's Initiative in regard to the transformation of inmates was significant because it represented an opportunity for "public reflection on the tension between religious, social scientific, evolutionary, and cognitive explanations of human intentionality."²⁵ The question of whether "criminal acts are the product of *deliberate individual choice*" (italics added) remains an important question for modernity.²⁶ The link IFI made between virtue and religiosity enabled participants to increase their capacity for personal responsibility, lawful citizenship, and moral virtue. Disestablished religion dovetails with the modern project insofar as it "makes disciplined moral citizens who are necessary to the modern order and modern state."²⁷

A fourth factor had to do with *self-identity*. Inmates became *virtuous*, believed in *change*, and utilized a variety of *religious* and *spiritual* helps as they became grounded in faith and life. Given the fact that people in the modern world have been reduced to minimum reifications regarding belief in God, Sullivan suggests that secular society makes them feel as though "they are on their own, alone, but dependent on others, . . . working out their salvation without the comfort of a comprehensive divine ordering of society."²⁸

IFI reintroduced the value of meaning in religious terms. They emphasized the importance of faith in shaping a person's self-worth, integrity, and responsibility. They linked confessions of faith to universal values in order to create modern selves. Their assumption of religious pluralism and commitment to democratic life demonstrate the modernity of their endeavours.

An *assumption of equality* represented a final factor that undermined pre-modern forms of hierarchy, elitism, and power imbalances. Sullivan quotes McGill University philosopher Charles Taylor in terms of the mutual benefits, freedom, and rights involved when participants become fully engaged in the pursuit of moral

²⁵ Ibid., 174.

²⁶ Donald Stoesz considers this capacity for change in his book, *Magic of Fiction in Illuminating Transformation* (Victoria: Friesen Press, 2019).

²⁷ Winnifred Sullivan, *Prison Religion*, 178. Michel Foucault analyses the prison's modern emphasis on discipline as a means of reform, *Discipline and Punish*, 135-140.

²⁸ Winnifred Sullivan, *Prison Religion*, 174. One is reminded of the biblical passage from Philippians 2:12: "Therefore, my beloved, . . . in my absence . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

virtue.²⁹ Peer support and peer pressure are assumed in the mutual commitment and interaction of moral agents as they influence each other to become law-abiding citizens.

Sullivan's five categories helped me understand the value of prison ministry groups such as Christopher Leadership course, Alternatives to Violence, and Celebrate Recovery.³⁰ Each of these programs have been highly successful because of their multi-faceted approach to change. Christopher Leadership includes value-added talks at the end of each session to differentiate it from functionally oriented courses such as Dale Carnegie and Toastmasters. Alternatives to Violence uses its symbol of Transforming Power to engage inmates. Celebrate Recovery bases its eight Christian principles on the twelve-step AA program to help inmates recover in an incremental fashion.

Each of these groups is peer-driven. Inmates can become facilitators of these courses after graduation and some leadership training. Community leaders work hand in hand with inmate participants to empower their leadership skills. This direct approach models the importance of religion, virtue, change, equality, and social fellowship.

Chaplains have a great deal to learn from these volunteer groups. A simple thing like an inmate confidentially sharing their inventory with a volunteer sponsor during Step 4 of Celebrate Recovery represents a form of confession in the best use of it within the Christian church. Even the Bible suggests that we should "confess our sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that we may be healed" (James 5:16).

Conclusion

The multi-faceted approach that Winnifred Sullivan brings to chaplaincy represents her strength. Chaplains fulfill secular tasks while maintaining integrity with their faith bodies. They offer spiritual care while recognizing limitations as professional clinicians. Worship services are offered as a religious means of grounding social solidarity. Integration into the mission of the institution is embraced at the same time as chaplains offer health and wellbeing through reintegration into the community.

²⁹ Winnifred Sullivan, *Prison Religion*, 178. Cf. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007).

³⁰ Donald Stoesz with Hank Dixon, *A Prison Chaplaincy Manual*, 135-140.