

# International Prison Chaplains Association (IPCA)



## REDUCING REOFFENDING THROUGH SPIRITUAL ASSISTANCE

**Response to UNODC call for contributions supplying “information relevant to promising practices in reducing reoffending, along with relevant background information” as informed by the work of IPCA.**

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## Executive summary

In addition to prison chaplains' contribution to restorative justice, this summary considers how their **unique, threefold role as a liminal interface – within prisons, with the outside world, and with the transcendent** – facilitates desistance at granular level.

## Introduction

Rule 4 of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the 'Nelson Mandela Rules')<sup>1</sup> acknowledges that reducing recidivism is a recognised purpose of imprisonment, that spiritual assistance is appropriate to this end, and that it should therefore be offered by prison administrations and other competent authorities with this aim in mind.

THE MANDELA RULES RECOGNISE THE  
ROLE OF SPIRITUAL ASSISTANCE IN  
REDUCING RECIDIVISM

The International Prison Chaplains' Association (IPCA) is a network of prison chaplains who, by virtue of their position, seek to offer this spiritual assistance, with one of the expected outcomes being a reduction in recidivism. IPCA is an ecumenical Christian organisation that extends hospitality at its events to chaplains representing all faiths. Its stated aim is *"encouraging and equipping a global network of prison chaplains as they share God's love and restoring justice"*. Founded in 1985, IPCA has had UN ECOSOC consultative status since 2014.

One distinctive feature of IPCA is that its members all have direct contact with prison chaplaincy at immediate, grassroots level; while informed by academic research, their experience and insights come predominantly from within prison wings and cells rather than from administrative or academic positions. IPCA's international scope allows it to have a global perspective on issues surrounding imprisonment, reoffending, and desistance. The two key ways IPCA contributes to reducing reoffending are **1) the promotion of restorative justice programmes and 2) assisting chaplains in performing their unique, restorative role.**

## What do chaplains do and how does it prevent reoffending?

The status and remit of prison chaplains vary widely across the globe, from chaplains serving as full-time members of prison staff to unpaid volunteers. In more professional settings, chaplains may be seen as "rehabilitative clinicians" or "manager-facilitators"<sup>2</sup>. Their contribution to reducing reoffending in such roles is not addressed here, since this will doubtless be better addressed by other organisations working exclusively within these clinical and managerial paradigms.

*"Restoring justice"* is part of IPCA's mission statement; **restorative justice programmes are a recognised means of reducing reoffending**<sup>3</sup>; while not exclusive to prison chaplaincy, they are used by many chaplains. Restorative justice ('RJ') is a vast field; details of one typical RJ programme deployed by IPCA members in Africa are supplied in the appendix to this document.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Nelson\\_Mandela\\_Rules-E-ebook.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Nelson_Mandela_Rules-E-ebook.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *Correctional Chaplains, Keepers of the Cloak* (2nd edition), W. Thomas Beckner, Institute for Prison Ministries, Wheaton, Illinois, 2021, p.40.

<sup>3</sup> For just one example (UK), see: <https://restorativejustice.org.uk/resources/moj-evaluation-restorative-justice>

## WHAT IS IT THAT A CHAPLAIN DOES THAT NO ONE ELSE IN THE CORRECTIONAL FACILITY CAN?

On the assumption that other contributions are likely to address restorative justice programmes in more detail, this summary focuses on the distinctive contribution to reducing recidivism made by chaplains *sui generis*. It considers the question “*What is it that a chaplain does that no one else in the correctional facility can?*”<sup>4</sup>

Prison chaplains are uniquely well-placed to ‘bring the outside inside’; this clearly has implications for when inmates return ‘outside’. Even chaplains who are paid staff benefit from a degree of independence from the institutions in which they serve (e.g. in terms of the confidentiality of their conversations with inmates). In general, they have direct access to inmates at the heart of prison environments without playing any direct role in social or probationary services or the judicial system, whilst their religious affiliation also links them to a broader community outside prison walls.

This unique positioning allows chaplains to be on equal terms with everyone within the institution from the director to the inmate in a disciplinary cell. Chaplain, researcher and IPCA Worldwide Steering Committee member Tim Dixon summarises this distinctive role and its place in reducing reoffending as follows:

*“Chaplains are themselves liminal figures, on the margins between their faith community and the institution they serve, and themselves somehow outside of the prison hierarchy. This itself makes it easier for them in some ways to identify with the liminality of the prisoner, who is inhabiting a limbo, often without a definite end or finishing point (...) One way they can help rehabilitation is by helping people through this time of **disorientation** into a place of **reorientation** where they can see their lives in a new light and find hope for the future.”*<sup>5</sup>

A chaplain thus “offers guidance through liminalities”<sup>6</sup> and performs multiple bridging functions: between all the actors within the institution, between the world outside and the world in prison, and by offering a link to the transcendent.

### Within prisons

Chaplains’ flexible status and the fact that they generally enjoy a measure of trust on the part of staff and inmates alike mean they can play a **key role in reducing tensions and managing conflict** within prisons, frequently de-escalating situations that would otherwise result in further offences being committed even before release. Furthermore, inmates can acquire alternative conflict resolution behaviours as they experience or witness the successful handling of such situations by chaplains. Chaplaincy has been described as “*a safety valve to diffuse potentially violent situations*”<sup>7</sup>; research has shown that “*the presence of prison chaplains helped to reduce violence and rule-breaking among prisoners*”<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.45

<sup>5</sup> See T Dixon, *The Pastoral Care of Remand Prisoners and the Role of The Prison Chaplain*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Durham University, UK (2022).

<sup>6</sup> <https://chaplaincyinstitute.org/portfolio-items/liminality/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.impact.acu.edu.au/community/chaplains-help-inmates-to-combat-the-harshness-of-prison-life>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, see also ‘*I was in prison...*’ *An exploration of Catholic prison ministry in Victoria*, Dr Ruth Webber, Catholic Social Services Victoria, 2014, [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ruth-Webber-2/publication/274064424\\_I\\_was\\_in\\_prison\\_A\\_window\\_into\\_prison\\_ministry/links/5779fca408aeb9427e2c041e/I-was-in-prison-A-window-into-prison-ministry.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ruth-Webber-2/publication/274064424_I_was_in_prison_A_window_into_prison_ministry/links/5779fca408aeb9427e2c041e/I-was-in-prison-A-window-into-prison-ministry.pdf)

## The world outside

Inmates benefiting from spiritual assistance frequently wish to continue to do so on release. Assistance from the same chaplain after release may not be practical or desirable (and may be against the law in some jurisdictions), but chaplains can supply those nearing release with the details of local churches and/or other faith-based communities, thus facilitating continuity of pastoral care and informal support, helping former offenders to change their habits and stay away from bad company.

On release, connecting with a faith community offers former offenders rituals, language, and structure with which they have become acquainted (or reacquainted) in prison through religious services and other chaplaincy activities, and does so within society at large, in a setting in which, contrary to formal programmes, probation, and other necessary aspects of rehabilitation, ex-offenders will not be seen solely through the lens of their offence or required to give an account of themselves. This connection offers them **a safe environment for a fresh start** whilst maintaining continuity with an experience that they felt to be positive during their time in prison. It also helps **direct religious belief away from violent extremism** caused by alienation from the community.

### CONTINUITY OF PASTORAL CARE AND INFORMAL SUPPORT

In many cases this process is informal; as a result, evidence-based research into outcomes is lacking to date. One example of a more formal, research-backed approach is the development of **Community Chaplaincy** in the UK<sup>9</sup>. While not exclusively concerned with former inmates, it does serve as a next step from the bridge prison chaplains provide to the community:

*“The development of community chaplaincy came from a desire from within prison, and particularly from within prison chaplaincy, to find a way of continuing inclusive faith-based support to prisoners after their release.”*<sup>10</sup>

In considering the contribution of community chaplaincy to desistance, research notes *“the quality of relationships between staff, volunteers and service users, the individualised support provided for each individual, and the ethos of hope and perseverance that shapes the service”*. One service user is quoted as saying that community chaplaincy is *“to help me move forward, to keep out of trouble, to see a new future”*<sup>11</sup>. The twin themes of **hope and perseverance** provide a link to the third and final aspect considered here, the role of the *“transcendent core identity”*<sup>12</sup> of chaplains and chaplaincy services.

## Transcendence

No consideration of chaplaincy would be complete without drawing attention to the role of transcendence. Despite the diverse and often difficult history of relations between religion and temporal powers, there is widespread recognition by States of the need to cater for transcendence in the environments in which chaplaincy traditionally operates (the armed forces, hospitals, and prisons), including in ‘secular’ countries where there is strict separation of Church and State: in France, for example, the concept of *“spiritual assistance”*<sup>13</sup> is explicitly referred to in law applying to prisons.

<sup>9</sup> <https://communitychaplaincy.org.uk/>

<sup>10</sup> *Community Chaplaincy and Desistance: Seeing a New Future*, Dr. Jane Dominey and Dr. Elizabeth Lowson Centre for Community, Gender and Social Justice, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, October 2017 <https://communitychaplaincy.org.uk/file/2191/download?token=WZ3ywaOH>, p21.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, Section 5.3, p43.

<sup>12</sup> Beckner, p40.

<sup>13</sup> Article R351-3, French Prisons Code (*Code pénitentiaire*), [https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/article\\_jo/JORFARTI000045472065](https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/article_jo/JORFARTI000045472065)

## INSTILLING AN ETHOS OF HOPE AND PERSEVERANCE

In the person of chaplains, inmates find themselves face-to-face with an 'other': someone who is not a fellow inmate, social worker, prison officer, or magistrate; this 'other' from outside the system allows them to see themselves a little more clearly. Because chaplains

operate from a faith perspective, they also act as mediators of a transcendent 'Other': consideration of this 'Other' adds further depth to inmates' self-understanding and adds ethical and moral components that are conducive to behaviour changing for the better. Making room for transcendence nurtures the "*ethos of hope*" and sows the seeds of the "*perseverance*" referred to earlier.

Individual transformation through religious belief is necessarily a personal journey, informed by differing moral and ethical premises depending on the religion in question, so generalisation is difficult; more research on the impact of religious belief on desistance is needed. However, there can be little doubt that this dimension of transcendence offers **the potential for behavioural change for the better in the long term**. For the Christian chaplains IPCA represents, this ethic is encapsulated by a brief quotation from a part of the Bible that also forms part of the Jewish scriptures: "*What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*"<sup>14</sup> When implemented, this clearly sets individuals on a life trajectory away from reoffending.

### Conclusion: the challenge of defining the intangible

By its very nature, the heart of prison chaplaincy defies easy quantification and formalisation. The mainspring of its strength lies in values and actions that are difficult for institutions to apprehend because they are inherently relational, involving a high degree of unprogrammed spontaneity and a transcendent dimension; when these values and actions translate into reducing recidivism, they do so via an intensely personal process that is hard to systematise or replicate. The desistance they give rise to is no less genuine or important for all that. **Criminal justice and related institutions should take care not to discount the value chaplaincy delivers** in this respect (at little or no financial cost) simply because it is difficult to measure<sup>15</sup>.

IPCA therefore encourages UNODC to consider the distinctive contributions prison chaplains and chaplaincy services can make when drafting model strategies on reducing reoffending, thanks UNODC for the opportunity to be heard in this respect, and looks forward to further similar opportunities in the future.

David Buick

President, IPCA Worldwide

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<sup>14</sup> Micah 6:8, New International Version

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Micah%206%3A8&version=NIV>

<sup>15</sup> More generally, beyond its traditional spheres such as prisons, hospitals, and the armed forces, the chaplaincy model offers highly promising avenues for facilitating constructive, functional bridges between religious belief and communities on the one hand and civil society and institutions on the other.

## Appendix: chaplaincy-run restorative justice programme in Africa

In South Africa, the *Ukuphula Iketanga* ('Breaking the Chains') programme has been developed for prison chaplaincy aimed at reducing reoffending<sup>16</sup>. The programme uses biblical content to address the present-day situation of inmates.

Incarcerated offenders are dealing with many difficult personal issues. These may include denial of their past actions or their effects, resentment at the deprivation of liberty, guilt and shame for what they have done and how they have hurt the people they love and others they may not even know, anger toward those who have hurt them, sadness over lost opportunities or the estrangement of loved ones, loneliness and needs in their present life, fear about the future, and so on.

These and other similar concerns may involve internal conflicts or troubled relationships with loved ones, friends, acquaintances, or even strangers. Unless the inmate deals with them, such concerns are likely to grow and pull them down, and may cause them to reoffend and return to prison after release.

The Breaking the Chains (Bridges to life) programme is a structured, faith-based approach to dealing with such conflict and restoring peace to inmates' lives: any person who is seeking more peace in his or her life internal life and in their relationship with God and fellow humans will benefit from it. While the course is based on Biblical principles, it places special emphasis on the diversity of life experiences.

An extract from the foreword to the course by Dr. Chris Pepler, Founder & Chairman of the South African Theological Seminary explains:

*"Above all, the editors have structured Ukuphula Iketanga around both the needs of prisoners and the truth demands of the Kingdom of God. It is Gospel orientated, yet it also contains important material dealing with sociological issues such as sexuality and anger.*

*Two philosophical threads stitch the whole series together. The first is the firm belief that only Jesus Christ can bring about radical, real and lasting personal transformation. The second is the conviction that His truth claims need to be presented and assimilated within the context of current real-life situations<sup>17</sup>."*

The intention is to restore the inmate, who will ultimately become an ex-offender, back into family and everyday life effectively and meaningfully to reduce the re-offending rate.

As a result of this programme, many former inmates have experienced life-changing situations and become the productive citizens in their countries, including South Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. IPCA has many testimonies from former addicts who have changed in prison after attending the programme; recidivism rates are reduced among those attending the programme; in many prisons, there is high demand on the part of inmates to participate.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.breakingchains.org.za/index.html>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.