

Book Reviews

Ministry to the Incarcerated

by Dr Henry G. Covert

Publisher: Loyola Press Chicago Illinois (2022)

ISBN: 978-1-60126-827-3 (paperback)

Price £9.22 (paperback)

Reviewer: **Ray Taylor** is a former prison officer.

Henry Covert's thoughtful book takes a Christian theological approach to the work of prisons and of prison chaplains, which is unsurprising given that the publisher is Loyola Press, Chicago, a Catholic (Jesuit) publisher.

Covert is an ordained minister with the United Church of Christ and prison minister at the State Correctional Institution at Rockview, Pennsylvania. In addition to supporting men undergoing the routine stresses and crises resulting from their incarceration, Covert supports those convicted and sentenced to death. In December 2024, Pennsylvania held 95 such prisoners, awaiting legal dispensation or execution (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Corrections) although at the time of writing, there was a pause in executions in force in Pennsylvania.

Coverts is clearly a man of profound religious conviction. His perspective on issues relating to his mission, and the general role of prison ministry, is interesting to read and contrasts with other, more secular, accounts. He describes, for instance, his views on 'pastoral spirituality... the willingness to experience pain for the sake of others,' and 'attitudes of the heart... that are in God's realm.' (p. 6). This spiritual side of

his understanding of the needs of prisoners is also counterbalanced by a more secular perspective.

He acknowledges that his work includes supporting men of other faith than Catholic Christianity, as well as those with no religion, and the inevitable numbers of men who are skeptical about the role of prison ministry.

Much of the book focuses on matters that are specific to Christian ministry, seeing the aims of a prison chaplain to include 'helping inmates to search out the dark corners of their lives and encourage them to share their findings with God' (p. 7).

This need for personal reflection can also, of course, be relevant to those of other religions and those with no religion, and may be seen as reflecting the practice of secular therapeutic interventions.

In the context of rehabilitation, the book speaks of the need for managing expectations and following realistic goals in order to avoid the constant frustrations that will often attend a person's efforts (p. 8).

Coverts considers, in some detail, his own religious perspective on psychological and behavioural research (Chapter 2). He touches on the power dynamic among male prisoners, who hide their fears and anxieties through the expedients of role-play, bravado and machismo. He goes on to explore familiar carceral themes of lack of control, downward pressures on self-esteem and separation from vital outside familial and social relationships.

These challenges Coverts relates to his personal experience,

citing various specific examples of stressful situations prisoners find themselves in, as a result of these separations during times of their own, or their loved ones' crises. Likewise Coverts relates, through personal experience, many stories of how the prison environment creates so many additional stresses on residents.

More specific to the role of chaplaincy, the author discusses prison weddings. As he says, the desire to marry can come from prior relationships or can arise through correspondence. In either case there may be many benefits to a prisoner marrying during their sentence. These can of course include emotional support but more practical needs such as housing and financial stability. On the other hand, expectations from either partner can also be unrealistic, particularly when the individuals are initially unknown to each other. On the basis of interviewing prospective partners, Coverts expresses pessimistic views, citing naivety and immaturity as being primary causes of what generally results in a 'brief and devastating union.' (p. 48).

Much of the rest of Chapter 2 deals with themes that are familiar to most institutional workers. These include frustrations in dealing with the legal system, economic loss, and issues of medical and care needs.

Covert is surprisingly negative about experiences of dealing with terminally ill prisoners. While the pastoral carer may well find encounters with people dying of chronic illnesses distressing, surely dealing with illness, death and bereavement are a major part of the job description of a minister of

religion? 'What can be said to comfort an inmate who is dying alone in a state prison?' he asks. Prison ministry, says Covert 'has taught me not to struggle for the proper words.' Rather 'a prayerful and compassionate presence is important to a suffering person' (p. 53).

The short section on the author's experience of the process of preparing a prisoner for execution of a death sentence spoke more of the prison's experience than that of the condemned man. During Covert's time as chaplain there were several death warrants signed, all of which were given a stay of execution in good time except two. For one, the execution was halted within 48 hours of the appointed time, while for the other, sentence was carried out by lethal injection. The whole process and the state's taking a person's life was understandably viewed with horror throughout the prison (pp 60,61). More detailed reflection of the one experience of

supporting a man about to be executed is provided as an afterword (p. 121).

Chapter 3 discusses biblical foundations for the Christian minister in prison, comparing prison ministry to the work of Christian churches in the community. Much of this is of little relevance to those who do not seek religious explanations for offending and the experience of incarceration. Perhaps the most relevant part of this chapter is a list (p. 95) of 'areas of ministry' that share a common approach with those providing secular support in prisons or to people needing support generally. The include things like 'being present', 'listening,' 'sharing,' 'supporting' and of course 'challenging.'

Chapter 4 covers improvements required for individual ministers as well as the overall regime, environment and condition of penitentiary incarceration. General issues of prison conditions are discussed, including such essentials as

purposeful activities, incentives, and therapeutic interventions. Again, these areas are well known to general prison practitioners but may be of interest to a non-prison audience, and to those with no direct experience of the carceral environment. There is also considerable reflection on the parole process.

To conclude, this work is likely to be of most interest to other prison religious ministers, rather than to prison staff in general; in particular, those of the various Christian denominations and perhaps those committed to a ministry outside of prison. It may also be of interest to anyone wishing to learn about the individual approach and attitudes of one such minister in the context of the US penal system.

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