

Jail chaplaincy: No place for a closed mind



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

Standing close to the dusty steel bars, far down the dimly lit corridor, I was speaking quietly with “Andre,” a young African-American man awaiting trial for a drug charge. This was the typical setting for a “chaplain visit” — a rather bizarre venue for hearing, let alone listening, to a person in crisis.

To say that he and I were “speaking quietly” is amusing. The television, bolted to the wall, blended its blaring nonsense with all the other televisions down the line. Add to this din the voices of a hundred other men, doors slamming and people shouting through the facility and you get a sense of the impossibility of having a quiet, let alone private, conversation.

As I heard Andre tell me the pain he felt for the way his actions hurt his grandmother, his sense of loss, his struggles with addiction that kept bringing him back behind bars, suddenly the steel door opened automatically and we were standing face to face.

“Gonzales! Roll it up!” yelled the sheriff’s deputy from the other end of the corridor. I stepped aside as an older Latino man rolled up his mattress from the floor, wrestled it out the door, stumbling down the line to the awaiting deputy. Gonzales was being released. The other men quickly stretched out, glad to have a little more breathing room in the overcrowded space.

The heavy cell door closed with a thud. Andre and I picked up our conversation.

This snapshot offers a small glimpse into a practice of chaplaincy for which

neither church, seminary nor faith adequately prepared me.

I was often aware and amazed how trusted I was throughout the jail. Left to wander unmonitored, locked in with the hundreds of men and women in their separate units, I felt invisible at times, attempting to care as best I could under the radar of security (from the Latin *securus*, “without care”).

Jail commanders made all the difference, as did desk sergeants. If they were “by the book” people with a heavy-handed approach to managing the facility, I might be restricted in my movements, not as respected for my role. If it was clear they were more easy-going and seemed actually to care about prisoners, I might actually be consulted from time to time.

This was true with one lieutenant who walked with me through the units, smiling at inmates, shaking hands, asking people how they were. We talked about the noise level. He was aware that the clatter made it harder for both inmates and staff. He talked with me about ways to make the steel doors close without constantly slamming (in the “slammer”).

On my rounds each week I asked to be locked into the protective custody (PC) cell. It held eight to ten men separated from the rest of the jail due to the serious nature of their charges — men accused of rape, molestation, domestic violence and even murder.

They were older and younger men with an array of backgrounds, ethnicities, orientations. Some were there simply because the administration didn’t know where else to keep them safe from those who might wish to harm them.

The most segregated offenders were offensive to the rest of the jail population, including some staff (people asked me why I would go in to see “those

guys”).

PC was a strange place, with a strangely calming atmosphere at times — a good setting for a chaplain to be “real.” Mostly there were “private” conversations with men while they were sitting on their bunks.

If a group of the guys wanted a “service,” the television would be switched off and we would sit at the steel table surrounded by others on their beds. We would have a few songs, a reading (a poem, scripture or wise thought), some deep discussion — or light with laughter — a quiet prayerful meditation and closing song. Several men were very talented musicians, strumming a guitar and singing.

We were all humanized, in some sense, separated from the offended world.

Sounds a bit crazy doesn’t it? To have

such meaningful, even delightful, moments and hours locked in with people accused of such terrible things.

But it was important to remember they were “accused” not convicted. Jail is not prison. Though some are sentenced to jailtime, most people are waiting — “detained” — before or during trial (many can’t afford bail). Or they may be released in a few days, weeks or months. If someone is found guilty, they may be moved to a prison.

For a chaplain, just being inside, present with people, guilty or innocent, becomes a privilege hard to explain.

It takes an open mind, heart, eyes and ears to make a difference in the closed places securely hidden from sight or thought.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years.

