

## **DMin Project & Dissertation Proposal**

### **I. Problem Statement**

As part of changing a life path that repeatedly ends in Santa Clara County jail, many inmates want to learn about and develop their faith and theology but lack resource access and the reading capability or education to move forward. Inmates who are Spanish language speakers, have reading difficulties, and those with mental health challenges are at a particular disadvantage and are often isolated and disempowered. America's punishment-based, racist and classist carceral system, and the constant population churn inside jails, militate against empowering inmates's spiritual well-being, success, and change of life. Tailoring educational and faith programs to particularly disadvantaged inmates may help to reduce long-term recidivism.

### **II. The Purpose**

To support the most invisible of the largely-unseen and severely marginalized population of jail prisoners in Santa Clara County, this project revises existing Bible study and theological reflection program materials to support inmates in three particularly-underserved and vulnerable groups: those whose primary language is Spanish, and/or have mental health challenges, and/or have reading comprehension difficulties. Making materials more accessible may help to encourage their faith walk, sustain their difficult journey, and discourage recidivism after release.

### **III. The Background of the Project**

Our Santa Clara County jail class is offered weekly for men in an Elmwood jail minimum-security Protective Custody dorm with the support of the Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy of Santa Clara County (CIC), as part of the Episcopal Diocese of El Camino Real's Saint Joan's Chapel (<https://helpingout.net/2022/12/13/st-joans-chapel/>). Protective Custody is for inmates in danger from the general population, often because of they left a gang, or for being

accused of sexual offences, or because of their own sexual or gender expression. About two thirds of inmates are Latino and many speak Spanish as their first language. Two sets of materials are presented year-round, one structured around the Christian Testament and the other on the Hebrew Bible. Scripture is presented with additional stories and materials from a variety of cultures. Each class starts with up to twelve participants, but students drop away as they are sentenced, transferred, or released. Classes open with a collect or psalm from the Episcopal Church's *Book of Common Prayer*, followed by discussion of the homework reading. After about two hours, we close with worship in both English and Spanish. Over 300 inmates participated since 2015. This will be the third revision of Elmwood jail materials since then.

#### **IV. Context of Ministry**

The academic background that qualifies me for this work is a Graduate Theological Union (GTU) Master of Theology (2021), Pacific School of Religion - Certificate of Spirituality and Social Change (2021), GTU Certificate in Interreligious Chaplaincy (2022), and University of the South - School of Theology Mentor Accreditation in Education for Ministry (renewed since 2011). I renew my security clearance with the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office every two years, both as a jail volunteer Chaplain (since 2015), and as CIC's Relief Chaplain (hired in 2022). CIC trains jail chaplains four times a year in the classes "Going In, Staying In - Jail Ministry Training," and "Trauma Informed Training: Creating Safety." I have over thirty years of experience as a Silicon Valley senior technical executive, Process Architect, and Quality expert. I was the 2010 through 2011 Process Architect of the U.S. State Department's TechWomen mentoring program for women in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia, for which I have gotten awards from both the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of El Camino Real, and the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State.

Jail and prison incarceration numbers reflect the lives of the most marginalized in American society. “The United States is the world's leader in incarceration with 2.2 million people currently in the nation's prisons and jails” (The Sentencing Project, “Trends in U.S. Corrections, 2020). In addition to criminal behavior, incarceration is associated with various personal and socio-economic challenges, acting alone or together. San José’s new Mayor wrote that 65% of inmates in Santa Clara County have an active mental health case and 35% report substance abuse (Matt Mahan, “Fixing Santa Clara County’s Mental Health System Would Save Lives and Money,” *Mercury News*, 25 October 2022). In U.S. prisons, “people of color — who face much greater rates of poverty — are dramatically overrepresented in the nation's prisons and jails.” (Prison Policy Initiative, “Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2022,” 14 March 2022). Many enter the jail system having experienced a lifelong toxic cocktail of homelessness, foster care, trauma, individual and family health challenges, low education level, and addiction.

Stakeholders in the status quo include those who benefit from mass incarceration, particularly the bail industry, organizations profiting from materials, services, and staff provided to jails, and politicians who gain power by scaring constituents with tales of dangerous criminals threatening honest citizens. Faith-based community organizations from many religions and spiritual contexts work with secular activist groups to improve the circumstances of jail inmates.

#### **V. Project Outcome and Goals**

Revise and interactively test jail program materials to make them more accessible and effective, especially for inmates whose primary language is Spanish, and/or have mental health challenges, and/or have reading comprehension difficulties. Specific revisions under consideration are, significantly shortening current class materials, using more illustrations or graphics, and presenting materials in both English and Spanish. Revision will be in the context of how these challenges can affect a person’s faith journey, and (as possible) to focus materials on

supporting life change by inmates. Since complex life changes require much more support than just one class, focus building students' understanding of their choice and agency, and supporting a sense of emotional and spiritual safety and well-being while in class. For example, by fostering peer support and study groups within the class. Seek opportunities to encourage prisoners to return to their communities as transformational leaders. Set up class materials to prepare for a future project in which materials could be published and distributed as a spiritual education program that can scale / expand within and beyond Santa Clara County.

## **VI. Methods of Research**

I propose two measurable research methods for this project. The first is to collect observations weekly from the Chaplains who lead the course. The second is regular feedback from inmate students. Each class is three to six months long, so there is time to optimize interactively based on test-as-you-go style. Because the class is given in jail, data collection is limited to paper forms completed with pencils, and inmate feedback must be optional and anonymous. These evaluation methods allow the course materials to be interactively tested and improved during one class's cycle.

During each weekly class, the two Chaplains could observe jail inmate engagement with / response to the newly developed materials. After class, each Chaplain could record observations on their own data collection form that includes multiple choice questions and space for freeform text. At regular intervals, ask each student to complete an optional and anonymous form that includes multiple choice questions and space for freeform text. Forms could be available in English and Spanish. Transfer form information to a spreadsheet to make it easier to find data patterns, discontinuities, and ways to improve the form and class. Use observations and feedback to inform content changes for the next iteration of class materials.

Because classes are small, sample sizes will not be statistically valid for larger jail populations. However, evaluation of data from this project can result in valuable indicators for future work. Since reading comprehension is a known challenge for the group giving feedback, this may negatively influence their responses on the form. In jail, class trust builds over time, so feedback forms collected later in a training cycle may be more complete and accurate.

For data validation, external evaluators such as Chaplains or educators could observe the class and submit data collection forms. A mental health professional knowledgeable about jail could be invited to evaluate course materials and suggest improvements. Former students in reentry may be interviewed on their class experience and how they would improve it.

## **VII. Biblical and Theological Basis**

Three scriptures that have guided my thinking in jail ministry are, Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46) including his exhortation to visit prisoners, the story of Joseph in prison in Egypt (Genesis 39-41), and the account of Paul in prison in Philippi (Acts 16:22-40). Of particular interest in Biblical depictions of lived experience in prison are how Joseph and Paul interacted with other prisoners and with those in authority.

Using the theologies of social justice and liberation, and theological themes of self-worth and faith, consider these prison-related scripture passages using a hermeneutic of suspicion. Suspicion is inherent to the prisoner's life. Inmates are suspicious of the prison and justice system, and that system and our larger society suspect and fear them. Our jail-based classes often use the hermeneutic of suspicion to interpret scripture.

Theologians whose work inspires me include Ivone Gebara, and Gustavo Gutiérrez, both of whom are associated with liberation theology, low Christology, and an emphasis on the humanity of Jesus Christ. In each of my three guiding scriptures, as Gutiérrez writes, "faith and

life are inseparable” (Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1988). A third theologian whose work guides me is Howard Thurman, particularly in *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949) where he considers the socially disinherited and the dominant in the light of Matthew 25.

### **VIII. Contribution of the Project to Transformational Leadership**

At the end of a class cycle, prisoners often tell incoming students that this is a class like no other, that it changed how they engage with their faith. Participating offers an opportunity for learning that can be transformational for both students and Chaplains, especially after the class has been revised to be more accessible to the most marginalized prisoners. Many prisoners talk in class about community changes they want to support when they get out. In this jail class, I feel I am on holy ground. My experiences with the incarcerated in jail and those in reentry to society have changed my perspective and life. I intend to pursue my vocation in jail ministry long term. My relationship with the inmates moves in a loose range between Chaplain, teacher, and mentor. Yet, I find I learn as much or more than the inmates in each class.

### **IX. Assessment**

Analyze data collected through observations by Chaplains, feedback by students, and external evaluators. Identify patterns, discontinuities, and interactive changes made. Consider the extent to which Section V. Project Outcome and Goals have been met and whether this project is complete and successful. Also, assess if those were the right goals, or if additional goals were identified during the project.

The effect of the class and its materials will be largely measured subjectively based on Chaplain observation and prisoner feedback. Success measures may fall into categories like practical changes (such as shortening class materials, adding graphics or illustrations, and translation into Spanish), student observation and feedback (potentially indicating greater

engagement, satisfaction, feelings of encouragement and greater understanding), and retrospection (considering what else should be done for greater effectiveness).

Education and faith programs have been presented as notably effective means to reduce recidivism; however, recidivism patterns are complex, often cyclic, needing to be measured over many years. While long-term project benefits are anticipated, measuring in a time scale of years is out of the scope of this Doctor of Ministry project. Even in the short-term, making faith-based education materials more accessible may help to encourage prisoners's faith walk, sustain their difficult journey, and discourage recidivism after release.

## **X. Proposed Outline**

- A. Introduction: Problem / Need Statement, Goals
  - Providing orientation for the reader, context about the problem, solution, and project goals. This includes why the project needs to be done, why I am doing it, as well as the scope of the work, language, and methodology.
- B. Background on Incarceration, Social Analysis
  - Information about mass incarceration in the U.S. and in Santa Clara County jail. Social analysis with a particular focus on race, class, education, and mental health, differences between prison and jail.
- C. Theology and Incarceration
  - Section provides a biblical and theological review of literature supporting jail ministry and this project, with a focus on inspiring theologians.
- D. Research Results and Analysis
  - Presenting the data and analysis, assessment of success or failure of project goals, what (if anything) is still unclear.
- E. Next Steps – Conclusion
  - What short-term and longer-term work could extend the success of this project. What are the project findings and what questions, and steps remain?
- F. References and Bibliography, Appendices
  - Data collection instruments, excerpts of course materials, as well as book and reference lists.

## **XI. Action Plan / Schedule**

- A. Spring 2023 - Work with BST committees to complete dissertation proposal, get human subjects research approved by BST & Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy
- B. Summer 2023 - Fall 2024 - Write, revise, and test course materials
- C. Fall 2024 - Spring 2025 - Write thesis, iterative review by committee
- D. Fall 2025 - Graduate!

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