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What is Messianic Judaism? Is it Christian or Jewish? Is a chapel with an altar and a cross that important to Protestants? Can't they have their religious services in the prison housing units instead? What is a Wicca wand? Is it really a religious item? Is tobacco all that important to Native American religious practices in prison? Can an herb be substituted? What is Odinism? Is it a racist religion? Are other ethnic religions racist? What is the difference between Sunni and Shi'a Islam? Can the two groups practice together? Who are the Sikhs and why do Sikh inmates say that they must not cut their hair? With so many religions, how can prison officials accommodate religion in prisons in a fair and neutral way?

These are the sorts of questions that prison officials have asked since 2003 in prison chaplaincy directors programs sponsored by the American Academy of Religion at Annual Meetings. The program consists of a series of sessions where prison chaplaincy directors meet with prominent

AAR scholar-experts. The format is casual, with each scholar providing a short overview of the religion of their expertise, followed by open dialogue among the directors and the scholars. A comparative religion and law scholar provides a prison religion law update as well.

Over the years, more than twenty-five leading scholars and prison chaplaincy directors from approximately twenty states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons have participated in the program. The directors come with thoughtful, intriguing questions, and the scholars have found the conversation to be an enriching experience. Scholars' insights often have wide impact, as each of the directors is responsible for his or her whole state or, in the case of the United States, the entire Federal Bureau of Prisons. And some of the directors have been inspired to form an association in their own right — the National Correctional Chaplaincy Directors Association.

Making available AAR's wealth of scholar-experts for prison chaplaincy education was a brainchild of Dena Davis (circa 2000), then a member of AAR's Committee for the Public Understanding of Religion (CPUR). Equitable religious accommodation in prisons had resulted in complicated issues for prison chaplains, especially after the passage of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA) in 2000. RLUIPA requires that all religions must be accommodated in prisons without preference for one religion over another — neutrally. Needless to say, making neutral accommodation decisions requires considerable multireligious literacy. Davis believed that AAR scholars could make a tangible difference by filling that need.

Davis's idea came to fruition when she contacted Rev. Patrick McCollum, who suggested that the AAR do more than invite prison chaplains to join the AAR. His experience through many years as a prison chaplain and advisor on minority religion issues to state correctional officials led him to believe that educating the officials who *oversee* chaplaincy for their jurisdictions would provide the best opportunity to make a positive difference.

McCollum's experiences had shown him that, absent multireligion literacy, prison religion programming tends to be based on prison administrators' beliefs about what is normative for religion, derived from their impressions of the United States' dominant religions. For that reason, religious accommodation requests by inmate adherents of minority religions can be viewed as unimportant or as aberrations, if they do not fit that preconceived mold — which McCollum refers to as a "dominant religious lens factor." At the same time, misconceptions about dominant religions often prevail as well. If the AAR could help prison chaplaincy directors overcome institutional biases through multireligious literacy education, religious accommodation in prisons might become more equitable, McCollum suggested.

On that model, McCollum and Steve Herrick, then AAR's Director of External Relations, started the prison chaplaincy directors program in 2003, with Herrick contacting AAR scholars to participate in the program and arranging the venue, and McCollum contacting the prison chaplaincy directors to determine their preferred topics and to encourage registrations. The Center for Engaged Religious Pluralism, directed by Barbara A. McGraw (the author of this article) at Saint Mary's College, California, joined the planning and execution of the program in 2011.

Instituting the AAR prison chaplaincy directors program certainly showed foresight. The diverse religious needs of prison inmates began to enter public consciousness only later. In September 2008, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission published its study entitled "[Enforcing Religious Freedom in Prisons](#)," which cited McCollum extensively, including a reference to the "dominant religious lens factor." That report discussed the growing recognition of religious diversity in prisons. In addition to Christians, Jews, and Muslims, statistics were reported for Hindus, Native Americans, Buddhists, Pagans, Sikhs, and Atheists, among others. The report affirmed that accommodating inmate religious diversity serves inmates' civil rights, but that discrimination on the basis of religion was nevertheless occurring in the nation's prisons.

In March of this year, the Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life's study "[Religions in Prisons: A Fifty-State Survey of Prison Chaplains](#)" illustrated the need for multireligious literacy education. In that study, chaplains said that the religions growing in prisons include Islam, Pagan/Earth-based religions, Native American Spirituality, and Judaism. Yet, according to the chaplains surveyed, Protestant Christianity dominates prison chaplaincy, with a majority of state prison chaplains (85 percent) being Christian and (71 percent) being Protestant — most (60 percent) holding theologically conservative views — while Protestants constitute only about half (51 percent) of the inmate population, and Christians altogether about two-thirds. (The Pew Forum study, which includes a wealth of information about religion in prisons, is the topic of a CPUR-sponsored Special Topics Forum, Session A18–201 at 1:00–2:30 PM on Sunday of the Annual Meeting.)

Today one can find print and online articles about the intractable issues that religion poses for prison chaplaincy directors. The AAR program helps the directors address such issues from a position of greater awareness and understanding than often is shown in the press. Looking forward to this year's program, Joe Baldassano of the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services recently said, "Having experts who can speak on the practices of these religions in the community helps to establish parameters on allowable prison practices. My attendance at AAR conferences allows me the opportunity to return to my agency with best practices ideas, which

have been successfully implemented in our institutions." The ability to exchange ideas among the directors during dialogues with the scholars is also an important feature of the meetings. "I'm always grateful for the material we cover, and especially grateful for the knowledge that I'm not alone. We're all facing the same challenges," says Ron Turner of the Tennessee Department of Correction.

AAR's prison chaplaincy directors program will be held again at this year's Annual Meeting with the Moorish Science Temple, Messianic Judaism, and a comparison of Odinism and Wicca being a few of the preferred topics of the chaplaincy directors who will be attending. There is no doubt that prisons have become the bellwether of the coming greater awareness of religious diversity and more expansive thinking about religious liberty in the United States. The AAR prison chaplaincy directors are ambassadors of this greater interreligious understanding, not only to the prisons, but to the larger society as well.