

Prison 'faith pods' mix religion, rehabilitation

Inmates may choose dorms that promote reform, spiritual bonding

Russ Bynum - Associated Press
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Alamo --- Twenty-four inmates, imprisoned for crimes from forgery to murder, sit around tables bolted to the floor for the day's lesson in anger management: Even Jesus could have a hot temper.

The story is that of Jesus driving the money changers from the Temple of Jerusalem. Chaplain Ron Day tells the prisoners that anger isn't evil, as long as it is controlled and used for good.

"The Bible tells us it's OK to get angry, but . . . ," Day says, pausing for a response.

"SIN NOT!" the inmates say, quoting Ephesians 4:26.

Religious studies and observances don't end with this hourlong daily lesson inside this dormitory at the 700 Unit of Wheeler Correctional Facility, a medium-security prison in southern Georgia.

Inmates pray and read scripture throughout the day. Some rise from their Spartan bunks at 3:30 a.m. to meditate. Smoking, cursing and any sexual activity are strictly prohibited. Prisoners watch some news and sports on television, but otherwise see only inspirational channels.

"There's some who really want to better themselves and also some who like the environment that's quiet," Day said.

The Wheeler County prison is one of 22 nationwide where private prison operator Corrections Corporation of America has opened "faith pods" --- living quarters that promote reform and spiritual bonding by separating soul-searching inmates from the general population.

Though prisoners of any faith can enroll in the six-month program, and conversion is not required, lessons ranging from marriage success to financial planning are taught with a definite focus on Biblical scripture.

The few enrolled inmates who aren't Christians, such as Abdul Neenahjah Muhammad, say they don't mind.

"We all have basic beliefs --- we all want peace, we all want unity. And that's what makes this program work, regardless of whether we follow the Bible, the Torah or the Quran," said Muhammad, a 48-year-old Muslim serving a five-year sentence for assault. "In the Quran, it says the closest people to Muslims are the people who are Christians."

According to Tennessee-based CCA, which receives state money to keep inmates in its private prisons, faith pods house roughly 1,500 prisoners in nine states: Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Mississippi, Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico and California.

The program, launched last year by CCA and the Arkansas-based Institute in Basic Life Principles ministry, isn't the first to reinforce religion-based rehabilitation by sheltering inmates from sin behind bars.

President Bush, who advocates religious groups aiding in government services, introduced a similar program in Texas as governor in 1997. His brother, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, dedicated his state's Lawtrey Correctional Institution as the nation's first faith-based prison in 2003.

But the chain-reaction growth expected from CCA's program illustrates how the concept --- seen by supporters as a cost-effective means of reducing the number of inmates who commit new crimes once released --- is exploding.

John Lanz, CCA's faith-based program manager, said he hopes to roll out faith pods at an additional 14 prisons this year. Georgia's Department of Corrections has been so impressed it plans to try its own version of the program at six state prisons, with an eye toward expanding it to all 37 of the state's prisons.

"This thing is getting so big, I'm getting overwhelmed by it," Lanz said. "The reason it took off is our wardens have discovered that, by establishing these faith-based communities, they're the best-behaved and cleanest on the unit. The inmates are literally looking better, acting better and smelling better."

Lanz said 320 inmates from seven CCA prisons have graduated from the program since it was introduced last year. He said it's too early to gauge the success in reducing recidivism.

> ON THE WEB: Corrections Corporation of America: www.correctionscorp.com