

New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

Moral Rehabilitation Leadership Educational Training at Louisiana State Penitentiary

Abstract:

Although Louisiana's incarceration rate leads the nation, recent developments seek to address this issue via an innovative program that shortens sentences for inmates who agree to participate in a variety of wraparound services including mentoring. This novel approach necessitates trained mentors inside Angola Prison equipped to address the unique needs of inmates and prepare them for life inside the prison as they adapt to the rigors of prison life. NOBTS was asked to prepare such a training program, one with potential to become the MDiv degree preparing inmate leaders for lives of Christian service. This combination of mentorship training and advanced leadership training is the innovation at NOBTS funded by ATS.

New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS) applied for the Innovation Grant to extend our educational offerings in an effort to meet the changing needs of Angola Prison. The first goal was implementation of a series of two "stackable" leadership certificates preparing Angola students for mentorship roles with newly incarcerated inmates in Louisiana's innovative re-entry program. Our second goal was to begin a master's degree to more fully prepare Angola students who have earned an undergraduate degree for lives of Christian leadership inside the prison. The program has achieved these goals in part.

Our first goal envisioned two certificates working conjointly to prepare mentors. This was based, in part, upon a vision of offering students the MDiv degree. Two Administrative concerns arose: first, some students graduated with an undergraduate degree almost 20 years prior and thus might not have completed the program; second, that NOBTS may not have sufficient funding to offer a complete MDiv degree course of study. Thus, the seminary decided

to offer the first mentorship certificate, a 17-hour Mentoring Certificate, followed by courses sufficient to complete the MA in Pastoral Ministry.

Our second goal was to establish a Master's degree. As stated previously, this goal is underway. We have completed the accreditation requirements for beginning a new program at an existing site and are actively teaching the courses currently. Spring 2018 marked the completion of the 17-hour Mentoring Certificate. Students were able to apply these credits toward the MA in Pastoral Ministry degree. Thus, we have completed most of the work that was proposed in the grant application.

Recent collaboration with the prison has paved the way for the implementation of Compressed Interactive Video (CIV) as a delivery method, allowing instructors on the main campus to teach inmates remotely. This would reduce costs (a key cost is mileage) and allow a wider array of classes, potentially leading to the ability to offer the MDiv degree. At present the seminary is working closely with the Internet technology personnel at Angola to address concerns regarding access to the Internet by inmates as well as access to inmates by seminary personnel, both of which are important security concerns for the prison. While we hoped that inmates could participate in classes offered on campus alongside in-class participants, security concerns regarding the internet access as a vehicle for unmonitored relationships with the community outside of the prison walls has proven an insurmountable obstacle to such an arrangement.

There were several crucial issues that arose. While 45 students began the program, a variety of problems unique to the prison context (i.e. demands of prison jobs, transportation issues, disciplinary issues) along with academic challenges (i.e. students whose study skills had deteriorated, students whose desire for a master's exceed their capabilities), whittled this number

to 25 students who will complete the Mentoring Certificate and continue to the MA in Pastoral Ministry.

A second set of issues arose regarding concerns about the two “stackable” certificates originally proposed. We decided to reduce to one certificate when the decision was made to substitute the MA in Pastoral Ministry in lieu of the MDiv. Because the second certificate was comprised primarily of elements in the MA in Pastoral Ministry, it was decided to offer the degree instead of a second certificate.

The third set of issues surrounded the MDiv degree. Our first set of bachelor’s degree students began the program in 1995; in the intervening years their study skills had deteriorated. Second, these students were working part time at prison jobs and attempting to complete master’s work in the remaining hours. Finally, there was concern lest the funding raised by NOBTS be depleted before students completed the MDiv. With these challenges in mind, the administrators decided to offer a 36-hour graduate degree with requirements that could become the basis of the MDiv for the students sufficiently capable both academically and vocationally, and when NOBTS better understood the expenses of offering the MDiv in the prison environment.

The final set of issues involved the challenges of prison work and life. Most of the students were pastors, whose primary jobs were to minister and mentor other inmates. The prison administration allows our bachelor’s students to substitute full-time education in lieu of a prison job. However, removing 45 pastors (the initial number that began the Mentoring Certificate/Master’s program) from critical roles would undermine the integrity of their ministry and mentoring roles. Thus, the students and administration agreed that they would take classes part-time while continuing their pastoral work. This proved overwhelming for some who could

not compete academically and continue to minister successfully. It proved difficult for the prison administration who could not transport all of the students from the various camps to the educational building. There were also a handful who were disqualified because of disciplinary issues. Thus, the first Mentoring/Master's cohort was reduced from 45-25 by the end of the first three semesters.

From this we learned several valuable things. First, while the idea of "stackable" certificates leading to the MDiv degree was philosophically sound, it was not as practical as we had envisioned. By taking a handful of classes beyond the second proposed certificate students could complete an entire graduate degree (first two certificates were 32 credit hours, while the MA in Pastoral Ministry requires 36 credit hours). This proved to be both more efficient and more economical while still meeting the original objectives.

Second, previous work at the undergraduate level in maximum security prisons taught us to celebrate milestones along the way. Prison life can be discouraging and this can lead some students to leave the program before completion. By incorporating and celebrating milestones (certificate completion, MA completion, and possible MDiv completion), NOBTS provides opportunities for success even for those who do not complete the entire course of study. Those who cannot complete the full degree program, for the reasons highlighted thus far, will have multiple opportunities to leave the program with substantive evidence of achievement.

Third, there exists a substantive gap between the educational preparation, readiness and fit of those with existing bachelor's degrees who desire to complete graduate work. This was true even for students who graduated with the BA in Christian Ministry from NOBTS. In the years between graduation and the first Master's level class in the summer of 2017, there were some students who continued a rigorous course of reading and personal enrichment and others

who did not. While the seminary allowed 45 students to enroll in the program, it quickly became apparent that a few of these lacked the skills and knowledge required for Master's level work.

Finally, there are unique skills required for ministry inside a maximum security prison. Many of our students have life sentences which, in the State of Louisiana, excludes the possibility of parole. Meanwhile, prison is an environment closed to the outside world in many ways, and is thus an unreachable people group. Missiologists recognize the importance of indigenous ministry leaders inside difficult-to-reach cultures, those who understand the language, folkways, foodways, cultural differences, and lifestyles which are quite foreign to outsiders. Thus, the inmate ministers at Angola may benefit from an educational experience more focused upon the competencies unique to their environment, as opposed to adapting academic programs from the free world to their context.

While NOBTS has no immediate plans to pursue this avenue, the emerging work in competency-based education may have some benefit in a prison environment. To understand these competencies, however, would require some research to understand the lived experiences of the inmate ministers, distill their work into a set of core competencies unique to their environment, and then further adapt these into a course of education. While there are existing courses/degrees in prison chaplaincy and ministry, these are designed for those traveling to and from prison rather than those incarcerated for long sentences. There are additional competencies necessitated by life inside prison, where one is subject to the vagaries of a penal system which requires a set of skills not currently taught in seminary-based education. Given the burgeoning interest in prison-based seminary education, coupled with continued high incarceration rates in the United States, developing a competency-based curriculum designed for a prison setting could

address the unique ministry needs of this setting, foster new avenues for restorative justice work, and further transform prison settings as we have observed at Angola and elsewhere.

Key Practices:

- 1) The unique setting of prison education requires that classes be offered in a sequence to which the program rigidly adheres. This course cycle corresponds to the degree requirements. Classes are offered once per cohort and if a student is unable to take the class, or fails it, there will be a multi-year gap until it is once again offered.
- 2) Budgeting for the program must include textbooks. Students cannot access online or freestanding bookstores and thus all books must be purchased by the seminary for the students. This requires advance planning to assure that texts and materials arrive before the onset of the class.
- 3) Flexibility is important. Prison life is full of inmate counting, rigid schedules, security issues, and transportation difficulties that require uncommon flexibility by instructors. In a traditional classroom the instructor controls the milieu; in a prison environment the security forces do. Frequently the instructional environment needs to be tweaked on the fly to adapt.
- 4) There are multiple levels of approval required for instructors. While the academic institution approves academic credentials, the prison approves security clearance. This happens initially, when the instructor is approved to enter the facility, and each class day as the instructor passes through the front gates. Advanced degrees and other symbols of prestige become insignificant as one submits to questioning, delays, and even security scans to gain entry. This requires advance planning beforehand and humility as one submits to a process that can be cumbersome and onerous.
- 5) Tension exists between the glacial pace of academic change and the rapid innovations required at the prison level. Administrators of the program (NOBTS has an onsite director and a program coordinator at the main campus) must possess the ability to adapt to an environment where changes occur quickly. At the same time the requirements of the Academy (i.e. accreditation, credentialing, scheduling, etc.) necessitate advance planning and forethought. Prison education requires one to operate effectively in both worlds and to live with this constant tension.
- 6) Relationships with the prison personnel are very important to maintain. Prison policy can work against good educational practices (for example, most inmates are only allowed a handful of books in their room which makes it difficult to research for an assignment). Because our onsite coordinator is also a prison chaplain, the relationship between the prison and the seminary is strong. Students receive unique

privileges that allow them access to books and computers during evening hours. While prisons tend to rigidly follow established policy, good relationships can result in flexibility.

- 7) Despite rapid technological changes in the world beyond prison, most prisons do not allow internet access. The lack of access to electronic library resources necessitates having strong library holdings. NOBTS has maintained a presence at Angola since 1995 and has an extensive array of books that correspond to the material being taught (i.e. theology, pastoral counseling, preaching, etc.).

The Moral Rehabilitation Leadership Educational Training at Louisiana State

Penitentiary continues to address the goals delineated in the initial application. The first goal was completed in late May, 2018. The second will follow in August, 2019. With sufficient funding (inmates cannot pay tuition and thus all programs require significant private donations) it is believed the program is sustainable, as evidenced by the longevity of the undergraduate programs. Thus, the Mentorship certificate and the MA in Pastoral Ministry degree program, both of which are substantially completed, are underway and fully implemented.

At the request of student inmates, and because of the potential for CIV to be offered at Angola, there is consideration of expanding the graduate offering to include the Standard MDiv degree. Because the Mentoring Certificate and the MA in Pastoral Ministry degree fulfill many of the requirements for the MDiv, there exists the possibility that NOBTS will petition ATS to extend our degree offerings at the graduate level at our Angola extension center. This will depend, however, upon the purchase and installation of CIV equipment at Angola. The use of CIV is believed to be a first in the world of prison education, and thus an important accomplishment in line with the expectations of the ATS Innovation Grant program.

Further Resources:

The Associate Press. (2016, April 13). Angola inmates mentor others in prison once notorious for violence. Retrieved March 6, 2017 from:
http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2016/04/angola_inmates_mentor_violence.html.

Eckholm, E. (2013, October 6). Bible college helps some at Louisiana prison find peace. *The New York Times*. Retrieved March 6, 2017, from
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/06/us/bible-college-helps-some-at-louisiana-prison-find-peace.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

Hallett, M., Hays, J., Johnson, B., Jang, S.J. & Duwe, G. (2016). *The Angola prison seminary: Effects of faith-based ministry on identity transformation, desistance, and rehabilitation*. New York: Routledge.

Kossover, A. (Producer), & Kossover, H. (Director). (2010). *A new hope* [Motion Picture]. United States: NAMB, Kossover & Company, AK Films.

Mire, M. (2016, March 28). Louisiana's Expanding Reentry Efforts Promise Cost Savings and Safer Communities. Retrieved March 6, 2017, from
<http://www.thepelicanpost.org/2016/03/28/louisianas-expanding-reentry-efforts-promise-cost-savings-and-safer-communities/>.

<http://globalprisonseminaries.org/> Global Prison Seminaries Foundation was founded by Burl Cain, former Warden of Angola, to help advise prisons and schools as they establish biblical education and programs of moral rehabilitation inside prisons.

Angola Prison Seminary

MA Pastoral Ministry Course Cycle

Semester 1

Worship Leadership (completed August 2017)

Semester 2

Supervised Ministry I (Completed Fall 2017)

Stress and Conflict Management (3 hr. version) (Completed Fall 2017)

Counseling in Ministry (January 2018)

Semester 3

Supervised Ministry II (Completed Spring 2018)

Interpersonal Relationship Skills (Completed Spring 2018)

Mentoring in Gospel Ministry (Completed Spring 2018)

Introduction to Spiritual Formation (Completed Spring 2018)

Mentoring Certificate completed Spring 2018

Semester 4

Pastoral Ministry

Church Evangelism

Semester 5

Proclaiming the Bible

Exploring the Old Testament

Systematic Theology 1

Semester 6

Preaching Practicum

Exploring the New Testament

Systematic Theology 2

Semester 7

Intro to Biblical Hermeneutics

Projected Degree Completion Summer 2019