

# A Review of Privatized Prison Chaplaincy Services

[NCCM](#) & [Islamic Family](#) 2021

**Executive Summary**    **2**

**Findings**            **2**

Recommendations    **2**

**Introduction**        **3**

**Findings**            **5**

**Reduced access to quality spiritual care for minorities**    **5**

Distribution of hours under Bridges of Canada            **5**

Hiring practices under Bridges of Canada            **7**

**Reduced resources for minority faith chaplains**            **8**

Reduced pay and funding            **8**

Reduced faith specific supports from employer            **9**

Reduced advocacy from employer            **10**

**References**        **12**

## Executive Summary

Federal prison chaplaincy services in Canada experienced a major shift in 2013 when the Conservative federal government announced that a single private company would be contracted to recruit and oversee chaplains serving in federal institutions (Beckford & Cairns, 2015). This was a departure from the previous model in which the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) provided a number of contracts to various faith communities who were then responsible for hiring, training and overseeing the work of their respective chaplains (Beckford & Cairns, 2015).

There has been concern about how the outsourcing of federal prison chaplaincy services to a single company, Bridges of Canada, has potentially impacted the quality of spiritual care available to prisoners.

## Findings

**Discriminatory policies:** By imposing a one size fits all approach to prison chaplaincy services, the private model for federal prison chaplaincy services has placed restrictions on minority faith chaplains that some have argued have reduced access to quality spiritual care for minority faith prisoners. With the rigid

policies placed on all faith groups across Canada, there is no room for nuance and tailored services for our most marginalized populations in Canada.

**Reduced access to quality services for minority faith groups:** Prisoner complaints over access to religious services have drastically increased, arguably as a result of the discriminatory policies under the private model of chaplaincy services.

**Reduced resources for minority faith groups:** Reduced pay, funding, material resources and faith-based support for minority faith chaplains.

## Recommendations

### 1. Remove Bridges of Canada as the administrator of prison chaplaincy

We recommend the removal of a single provider of federal prison chaplaincy services. More specifically, we call for the removal of Bridges of Canada as the sole provider of federal prison chaplaincy services. Having a single chaplaincy provider offer services to religiously, ethnically and geographically diverse populations is not sustainable and has potentially adverse implications for minority populations as this report details. Access to qualified and relevant chaplains is made more difficult under this model. As such, the removal of Bridges of Canada as the administrator of federal prison chaplaincy services will help to provide spiritual care that is of better quality and more relevant to minority faith inmates.

### 1. Return to the public model where Regional Chaplains are responsible for sourcing different faith communities to provide services to their respective faith groups.

Under the more public model of federal prison chaplaincy services (prior to 2013) regional chaplains were responsible for sourcing and contracting local faith communities and organisations to hire, train and oversee their respective chaplains. We strongly recommend a return to this model for the distribution of federal prison chaplaincy services. A single provider often applies a one-size-fits-all approach to the oversight of federal services and we see many indications of this in the current administration of federal prison chaplaincy services. There are nuanced and sensitive issues within each faith group that affect incarcerated peoples and local faith groups are best situated to navigate these issues and ensure access to quality spiritual care. Local communities grounded in their faith traditions are best suited to provide religious services to inmates. Regional chaplains under the Correctional Service of Canada are in a good position to source local faith communities in consultation with wider faith communities.

## 1. Contract faith communities to provide prison chaplaincy services through transparent processes.

This recommendation calls for the contracting of regional faith communities to administer their respective federal prison chaplaincy services. There are nuanced and sensitive issues within each faith tradition and group that affect incarcerated peoples; local faith groups are best situated to navigate these issues and ensure access to quality spiritual care. For example, there are numerous sects within Islam and it is essential that a Muslim chaplain knows how best to support multiple sects. An important resource for the chaplain in the administration of their services is their employer. When chaplains are employed under organisations well versed in their respective faith traditions, they have guidance and support in relationship to the content and quality of spiritual care they provide. The current model does not offer this support to minority faith chaplains and as a result there is little oversight in the quality of spiritual services offered to inmates. Local communities grounded in their faith traditions are best suited to provide religious services to inmates, it is important that these communities are contracted through transparent, merit-based approaches.

## 1. Offer standardized training/orientation for prison chaplains

This recommendation calls for standardized onboarding, through a module or another consistent form of asynchronous training, to better prepare chaplains for their roles before entering the institution. This training would include general and region specific content to ensure the chaplain has a basic understanding of their role within the institution. This training will also assist faith communities in better preparing their respective chaplains.

# A note from the researcher

Although this venture started as a generally curious pursuit, it has developed into a call for urgent and immediate action.

Canadians are coming to a reckoning that there are core problems within the conception of incarceration. When we think about redemption, healing, and recidivism, the question of faith-chaplaincy fits squarely at the nexus of these conversations.

I came into this work knowing that tensions exist in ensuring religious freedoms for people as well as ensuring the integrity of a securitized environment in correctional spaces.

What I did not know was that in an ostensible effort to save costs, it appeared we were compromising a fundamental freedom that should be afforded to all people in Canada, and that this compromise goes largely unnoticed by the public and the harms are largely felt by our most marginalized. The impacts of the privatized federal prison chaplaincy had the effect, we contend, of preventing prisoners from being

able to practice their faith. For example, we spoke to numerous Muslim chaplains who stated that they have not visited a women's institution in over 2 years.

I witnessed the exhaustion faced by chaplains serving our most vulnerable who are now under resourced; I spoke with formerly incarcerated minorities who experienced discrimination and had no ally in the space to advocate for their needs.

This is a call to action, a call to upholding our fundamental freedoms as Canadians and the need to protect our most marginalized. I am optimistic that change can come.

All the best,

Adar Abdulkadir, MA

---

Adar Abdulkadir serves as the research lead at the Islamic Family and Social Services Association and as a Justice Instructor at NorQuest College. She holds a Masters in Criminology from Simon Fraser University and is an experienced project manager with work in correctional settings, youth programming, and trauma-informed crime prevention projects. Adar is an avid advocate for racialized communities and is committed to working to improve systems to better support marginalized populations.

## Introduction

Federal prison chaplaincy services in Canada experienced a major shift in 2013 when the Conservative federal government announced that a single private company would be contracted to recruit and oversee chaplains serving in federal institutions (Beckford & Cairns, 2015). This was a departure from the previous model in which the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) provided a number of contracts to various faith communities who were then responsible for hiring, training and overseeing the work of their respective chaplains (Beckford & Cairns, 2015).

In an effort to reduce costs, in 2013 then Public Safety Minister Vic Toews announced that the CSC would no longer provide contracts to part-time prison chaplains. The overwhelming majority of part-time prison chaplains represented minority religions, with only two of the 71 chaplains employed full-time by CSC being non-Christian chaplains (CBC News, October 2012, pp 24). Many minority faith chaplains and prisoners argued against what they saw as a discriminatory decision to cut part-time chaplains. Toews announced soon after that the Conservative government would outsource chaplaincy services to a single private company as of March 2013 (Moore, March, 2013; Cobb, October, 2014). It is important to note that the initial shift away from a more public model of prison chaplaincy was widely viewed as inherently discriminatory towards minority faith groups.

Kairos Pneuma Chaplaincy (KPC), a for-profit company created by former Canadian Anglican prison chaplains, was awarded the initial chaplaincy contract from 2013 to 2015 (Beckford & Cairns, 2015). Bridges of Canada, a subsidiary of the American company Bridges International, outbid KPC and officially took over the provision of federal chaplaincy services in April of 2016 (Rodriguez, 2016, pp 29).

Adar Abdulkadir (2018) conducted qualitative research on the impact of privatization on minority faith prison chaplains in Canada. Through in-depth interviews with 10 minority faith chaplains who worked under both public and private chaplaincy models, the study found that: 1) increased levels of

bureaucratization have compromised the quality of spiritual care available to minority faith prisoners, 2) resources for minority faith chaplains have reduced significantly and 3) there is widespread discontent with working conditions under Bridges of Canada. This research is further supported by public criticism of Bridges of Canada and privatized prison chaplaincy services, there have been an increase in complaints over access to religious services (Burke, December, 2017).

Federal prison chaplains are responsible for: 1) establishing a visible presence within correctional institutions, 2) directing and coordinating religious practices and meditation, 3) offering religious educational services (CSC, 2012). Prison chaplains direct and coordinate religious practices for their congregation. Chaplains lead ritual worship, plan events and activities related to various holy days, validate and ensure that specific religious needs of prisoners are met within the institution and create and maintain atmospheres of worship within the institution (CSC, 2012). Chaplains also create and deliver educational services to improve prisoners' understanding of their religious traditions, train community volunteers and acquire and distribute religious literature and materials.

Minority faith prison chaplains face unique challenges in providing spiritual and religious care to prisoners who are often a product of the social and political climate and perceptions of these faith groups in Canada. An important responsibility for chaplains involves introducing and validating religious practices to the correctional institution and as a result a significant amount of their time is spent on administrative tasks such as ensuring that religiously permissible foods are available to prisoners and coordinating religious services (Gilliat-Ray et al., 2013).

An additional challenge faced by minority faith prison chaplains is that most individuals providing religious care to federal minority prisoners do so on a part-time or voluntarily basis (Beckford & Cairns, 2015). Part-time chaplains have limited time with the prisoners they serve and enjoy fewer professional rights compared to their full-time counterparts (Ajouaou & Bernts, 2015). Federal minority faith prison chaplains must perform their regular professional responsibilities while introducing and validating their religious traditions to federal institutions and working on a part-time basis.

## Findings

### Reduced access to quality spiritual care for minorities

#### Distribution of hours under Bridges of Canada

Prior to privatization, chaplains could use their contractual hours to provide direct services to prisoners, as well as to perform a variety of services both inside and outside of their institutions (Abdulkadir & Long, 2021). The chaplains were afforded flexibility and autonomy in allocating their time. However, after privatization more rigid structures for the allocation of paid hours were put in place (Abdulkadir & Long 2021).

The first major change to the allocation of payable hours for chaplains was that paid time was now limited to time spent within correctional institutions. Chaplains are no longer able to help prisoners reintegrate into the community upon release. Prior to privatization, chaplains were mandated to facilitate ties with their respective faith communities for the benefit of the prisoner's reintegration. The lack of paid community time is especially disadvantageous to minority faith chaplains. Because religious texts and

artifacts cannot be supplied by correctional institutions for all faith groups, minority faith chaplains rely on contributions from their faith communities to ensure that prisoners have access to relevant materials (Abdulkadir & Long, 2021). While they were no longer paid to perform these duties, many were still collecting resources for prisoners voluntarily on their own time.

After privatization, a more rigid structure for the allocation of working hours for chaplains was introduced. Monthly hours were divided into what was referred to as ‘task assignments’. Task assignments mandated that a fixed number of hours be spent in each correctional institution in a chaplain’s catchment area. For example, if a chaplain was contracted to serve three prisons for 30 hours a month the task assignment system would specify that they spend 10 hours in Prison A, 15 hours in Prison B and 5 hours in Prison C, based on the religious distribution of federal prisoners at the time. These did not account for the logistical barriers in serving a population divided by varying security levels and unique needs. While the chaplains used to borrow extra hours from one prison to serve another when necessary, that option is no longer available to them. Correctional environments are often unpredictable and because task authorizations are often slow to account for sudden influxes and outflows in prison populations, they restricted the chaplains’ ability to provide timely services to prisoners (Abdulkadir & Long, 2021).

For a prison to be allotted chaplaincy hours, the task assignment system requires that there be at least three individuals of the same faith group in one institution. This requirement has severely impacted minority faith women prisoners’ access to relevant spiritual services. Abdulkadir (2018) found that some minority faith chaplains had not visited women’s prisons for over 2 years. This issue needs to be remedied immediately in order to meet minority faith women offenders’ section 15 Charter right to equal rights under the law.

When chaplains work for their faith communities under a more public model of chaplaincy services, individual employers can afford chaplains flexibility and a nuanced approach to the allocation of their hours to ensure that the needs of their community are being met, including women offenders. A one-size-fits-all approach to prison chaplaincy in Canada is not conducive to meeting the needs of unique marginalized communities.

The restrictive measures placed on the provision of prison chaplaincy services impacts minority religious groups in a very distinct way. Minority groups do not have religious texts and artefacts readily available within federal institutions. By restricting chaplain’s paid hours to time spent within correctional facilities chaplains who wish to collect materials in the community do so on their own time. It is likely this has resulted in less relevant materials being made available to minority faith prisoners. This impact will likely not be felt by those belonging to majority religious groups because mainstream Christian texts are often accessible within federal corrections.

## Hiring practices under Bridges of Canada

Hiring practices for minority faith prison chaplains under Bridges of Canada have been described as “rushed” and lacked rigor in ensuring the individuals were qualified to serve their respective faith communities (Abdulkadir, 2018). Two chaplains described their experience being hired by Bridges of Canada: “you did not even give me an interview, how could you accept me? ... They were so desperate to just do things quick, quick, quick” (C1);

They called me and said would you like to work in a federal prison, I said for what? He said as a chaplain and immediately I was appointed... immediately in fact I didn't have a clue, I said what is this? I [‘ve] never worked in a federal prison as a chaplain... The thing is they didn't know much

about my background, who I was... it was a good opportunity for me, so I said yes (C6).  
(Abdulkadir, 2018, p. 37).

Numerous chaplains who spoke to us characterized the rushed hiring processes as careless and participants often questioned Bridges of Canada's ability to adequately vet minority faith chaplains. Bridges' lack of familiarity with various faith groups meant that they were not equipped to adequately vet potential minority faith chaplains. Under the public model, faith-based organization's familiarity with their respective faith tradition placed them in a better position to assess the qualifications and community support of prospective chaplains (Abdulkadir, 2018).

## Reduced resources for minority faith chaplains

### Reduced pay and funding

Many minority faith chaplains' hourly rate of pay reduced under Bridges of Canada. Before privatization, federal prison chaplaincy was not an especially lucrative career. However, the pay cuts were too drastic and unfair to the chaplains whose salaries were negatively affected (Abdulkadir & Long, 2021). After privatization chaplains' lost access to community funds raised by their previous managers and stipends provided by CSC (Abdulkadir & Long, 2021). Participants used to receive small amounts of excess funding through CSC at the end of the fiscal year to buy books and other materials for programming. After privatization, these stipends were no longer available to chaplains.

The restrictive measures placed on the provision of prison chaplaincy services impacts minority religious groups in a very distinct way. Minority groups do not have religious texts and artefacts readily available within federal institutions (Abdulkadir & Long, 2021). By restricting chaplain's paid hours to time spent within correctional facilities chaplains who wish to collect materials in the community do so on their own time. It is likely this has resulted in less relevant materials being made available to minority faith prisoners. This impact will likely not be felt by those belonging to majority religious groups because mainstream Christian texts are often accessible within federal corrections.

Chaplains are also no longer reimbursed for mileage and travel time to prisons. Reduced compensation for mileage and travel time is particularly disadvantageous for minority faith chaplains because they often serve a religious demographic across multiple institutions.

### Reduced faith specific supports from employer

Minority faith chaplains that we spoke to often felt that Bridges of Canada does not understand their faith traditions. Standardizing the work of prison chaplains does not account for the unique challenges faced by some minority faith communities and participants felt that their work was at times more challenging in comparison to Christian chaplaincy because their faith traditions were less 'firmly rooted' in Canadian society. For example, for a Muslim chaplain in the month of Ramadan, their monthly hours would be adjusted to account for the needs of both the chaplain and inmates. This accommodation is not afforded under Bridges of Canada.

Bridges of Canada cannot validate minority faith prisoners' religious claims because of their lack of familiarity with minority faith traditions. At times, religious accommodations offer prisoners advantages within correctional facilities. For example, the quality of some religiously permissible foods is seen as better than the food provided to mainstream populations. Because of this, prisoners are not always truthful in their requests for religious accommodations. It is the responsibility of prison chaplains to verify various religious claims. Bridges also proves reluctant to seek advice from faith-based organizations. Many

participants felt that faith communities' valuable expertise were being ignored which is problematic because Bridges is not in a position to be an authority in religious matters for minority groups. There is not an effective means of checks and balances – the chaplains they hire are the resident authorities without explicit ties to minority faith communities. After resigning as prison chaplains, two participants offered to provide advice to the private contractor on a voluntary basis, to ensure that the needs of their populations were met. Both expressed frustration that their offers were not accepted and that their expertise was rarely used (Abdulkadir, 2018).

## Reduced advocacy from employer

Prison chaplains are meant to be in the institution but not of the institution. There are times where prison chaplains need to advocate on behalf of the prisoners they serve and challenge the institutions they work in. With Bridges of Canada offering a competitive rate to CSC for the administration of chaplaincy services, they have a vested interest in pleasing CSC and there is a lack of effective advocacy to address the needs of minority faith chaplains and inmates. Minority faith chaplains felt that after privatization they often worked in isolation, they were no longer permitted to work directly with CSC employees and they did not feel supported by the private contractor.

## References

- Abdulkadir, A., & Long, I. J. (2021). The Impact of Privatization on Minority Faith Prison Chaplains in Canada. *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 75(3), 199–206. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15423050211032124>
- Ajouaou, M., & Bernts, T. (2015). Imams and Inmates: Is Islamic Prison Chaplaincy in the Netherlands a Case of Religious Adaptation or of Contextualization? *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 28(1), 51-65.
- Beckford, J. A., & Cairns, I. C. M. (2015). Muslim prison chaplains in Canada and Britain. *The Sociological Review*, 63(1), 36-56. doi:10.1111/1467-954X.12224
- Burke, D. (2017, December 23). Inmate complaints on the rise over access to religious services. *CBC News Nova Scotia*, pp. 2-13.
- CBC News, (2012, October 4). Non-Christian prison chaplains chopped by Ottawa. *CBC News British Columbia*. pp 7.
- Cobb, C. (2014, October 30). Prison imam leaves post to protest cuts; government cutbacks privatization of chaplaincy impacts safety, he says. *The Ottawa Citizen*.
- Correctional Service of Canada. (2012). *Statement of work for prison chaplain*.
- Gilliat-Ray, S., Pattison, S., & Ali, M. (2013). *Understanding Muslim Chaplaincy*. Ashgate Publishing Company.

Moore, D. (2013, March 19). B.C. inmates suing over Ottawa's decision to cut minority faith chaplains. *The Globe and Mail*.

Rodriguez, D.L. (2016, February 4). Federal government urged to improve chaplaincy services for prison inmates. *The Calgary Journal*, pp. 29.