

Alumni Spotlight: Vance Drum (MTS '74)



Current Title: Peer Ministry Consultant

Family: Wife, Donna (45 years); three grown children, and five grandchildren

Favorite Professor: Richard Lovelace

Favorite Class: Evangelical Awakenings

Favorite Memory: Sitting in the library at the top of the hill and looking out toward the ocean, I wrote a poem, “God and Me.” It was an impulse, (I am not a poet), inspired by the moment in a beautiful, sacred place.

What have you been doing since you left Gordon-Conwell and where are you serving now?

At Gordon-Conwell, I was intent not on preparing for ministry but on learning the Bible, hence, the MTS instead of MDiv. I did a number of jobs (outside of my calling) for 15 years. However, I finally heard God’s call to minister, first to a pastorate in Dallas County, TX, then in prison ministry through the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), Eastham Unit. How I got into prison ministry was a pure “accident” and another story, but we know God doesn’t do accidents. The maximum-security Eastham Prison was described as “America’s Toughest Prison” (*Newsweek*, October 6, 1986). Eastham was the former unhappy residence of Clyde Barrow (i.e. Bonnie and Clyde). Over the years, mostly through peer ministry, God amazingly transformed the bloody Eastham Prison. Serving as a staff prison chaplain for 32 years, I retired in 2017 as the Director of Chaplaincy Operations for the TDCJ and am currently working on a memoir about my time there.

I also do contract work with [Prison Seminaries Foundation](#), placing seminaries in prisons nationwide to train selected inmates to be ministers to their fellow prisoners, and have been a bi-vocational pastor since 1999.

What do you love about pastor a rural church? What are the particular joys and challenges of serving a rural church?

I love my rural church, which is now 119 years old. The people are the “salt of the earth.” They have lots of patience. If the pastor loves them and attends to them, they love the pastor back. The challenge may be that it’s rural: not many people live here (1200 in the nearby town), and the church is out of town in a field—the same spot it’s been in since 1903. I am the longest-serving pastor, now 23 years.

What do you love about your work as a prison chaplain? What are the particular joys and challenges of being a chaplain in your context? Finally, how does your work as a chaplain and a pastor fit together?

I love my work as a prison chaplain because the inmates are so receptive to help. So many of them know they need help and are receptive to it. The help I try to provide is to educate them about life choices and to empower them to begin to make prosocial choices. I encourage faith in God and in Jesus Christ, while ultimately respecting their freedom of religion. I love bringing new ideas to inmates about life and work. So many hear thoughts they’ve never heard in their lives—

about God, morality, work, and positive interaction with others. The biggest challenge is not having time to do all one would like to do. Therefore, having volunteers—from both the prison inmates and the surrounding community—is vital.

I believe that if America is saved, the salvation—from God—will come from transformed individuals released from the prisons and from the private schools. I also believe that although America has many malignities, one bright spot is God's work in the prisons.

Prison work for 32 years has taught me patience. Patience is also required in the pastorate. Early in my current pastorate, I considered leaving because I didn't like what I saw in the old leadership. God said to me, "Why don't you ask me for some love for them?" I did (22 years ago), and He gave it to me—and I'm still here.

How has God woven together your Gordon-Conwell education with other life events to bring you to where you are now?

When I decided to apply to be a staff prison chaplain, having volunteered in the Dallas County Jail for three years, I called the TDCJ Director of Chaplains in 1985 for an application. He asked, "Have you completed your seminary education?" I said, "Yes." (He didn't ask what my degree was, and I didn't say as an MDiv was not required.) He hired me, and the rest is my life's history. Without my MTS from Gordon-Conwell, I would not have gone down the blessed road I've been on since. In 1974, I had no thought of doing ministry, much less prison ministry—but that is where God led, and I followed.

What has been Gordon-Conwell's biggest impact/influence on your ministry?

Coming out of extremely exclusionary fundamentalism, Gordon-Conwell opened my eyes to evangelical ecumenism. It has been a rich blessing in my life. Gordon-Conwell introduced me to mere Christianity also in congregations; I met my wife in such a Boston-area church—what a blessing!

What piece of advice would you give to young alumni who are just entering pastoral ministry?

Perseverance has its rewards. To have perseverance, one must have patience, love for God and people, and a strong sense of call. Ask God for what you need (patience, love); he will respond to you. My first 10 years in the prison were with wardens who did not respect God or people. My first few years in my current congregation were difficult. I learned patience in the church by God's revelation that they were not from the same place and had different life experiences than I had. Love them anyway; God does. Love them and preach the word. One must also learn to budget one's usually limited resources. Excellence and God's faithful provision will be your supply.

Publications:

- With Warden Burl Cain: "[The Warden-Chaplain Relationship: An Interdependent Team](#)," *Corrections Today* (*Journal of the American Correctional Association*).
- "[The Faith Factor: Prison Culture Transformation Through Religious Efforts](#)," *Corrections Today*.
- "[President's Messages](#)," for the American Correctional Chaplains Association
- "[Professional Correctional Chaplains: Fact and Fiction](#)." Presented at the 137th Annual Congress of Correction for the American Correctional Association