

## *Theological Libraries in Prison*

### **Providing Library Services to Prisoners: Calvin College and Calvin Seminary at Handlon Correctional Facility**

by David Brian Malone

Calvin College has sixty baccalaureate students at Handlon Correctional Facility in Ionia, Michigan, with twenty students having been added each year over the past three years. The academic rigor is the same as that experienced by students on Calvin's Knollcrest campus, and these students perform quite well (in the 2016-17 academic year, there was a cohort-wide GPA of 3.6 with 20% of the students enrolled earning a perfect 4.0 grade point average). These students accomplish this without access to the internet and its wealth of digital resources. So, a physical print collection is absolutely necessary to their study.

Alongside the print collection, each student has a laptop computer giving them access to an electronic catalog of the onsite library and the college's main library holdings, as well as an off-line index to JSTOR. Students may request book materials and JSTOR articles to be sent to the prison. Future enhancements hopefully will include ebook versions of classic Christian texts and other resources that we often take for granted in our ever-online world.

This past August, several Hekman Library staff spent nearly a week inside Handlon bringing the nearly 5,000 volumes into proper classification and order. No Internet access (or air conditioning) made the inventory and labeling work especially challenging. However, now that the work is done, our students at Handlon will have a collection that is organized and easier to use. Because of this work, faculty also have access to the holdings of the library at Handlon and are able to develop course assignments knowing what is available to the students. Now that this infrastructure is in place, all materials to be added to the collection begin with the main library so that resources are added to the catalogs and are classified in a way that helps the students find the materials on the shelves.

Good communication and planning is important, but be prepared to be flexible. We are guests and volunteers within a larger system that has many codified rules and regulations. Outside forces may overthrow all your careful planning. A drone may land in the prison yard and the entire prison will be on a 24-hour lockdown on the day you are planning to work.

Many people are drawn to help the students by donating books that they envision would be helpful. If control is not exerted over these donations, the work we have done at Handlon to organize, relabel, and barcode the materials there will soon be of no use. Students in the program also donate books and periodicals to the collection. They are very limited in the space they have to store personal effects. Between internal donations from the students and external donations from people of good will, the library collection grows very quickly with materials that may or may not directly support the curricular needs of the program.

The Calvin Prison Initiative students were justifiably proud and happy to be part of the library relabeling and organization project. As we worked there, one question we heard frequently was: "How will we keep the library in good order?" How do you keep materials in order, check in materials, arrange equitable use of materials, and deal with other access questions when there is no internal library staff? Deputizing students of the program is a natural thought, but this can be problematic. There are issues of race, power dynamics, and control that need to be considered.

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