

Table of Contents

- ***Wiccan priest sought to perform rituals for B.C. prisoners***
 - ***Religion course to remain mandatory in Quebec***
-

Wiccan priest sought to perform rituals for B.C. prisoners

The Canadian Press (05.09.2012) - Guidance with casting spells, invocation of the god and goddess and rituals involving the four elements could be offered to inmates in British Columbia as part of the prison system's roster of available spiritual services.

Canada's federal corrections agency is looking to hire a priest or priestess who will tend to prisoners who practise witchcraft.

Corrections Canada this week put out a request for a proposal for a Wiccan chaplain who will provide about 17 hours of service a month, about an hour less service than the department says it needs for the Jewish faith.

"I'm thrilled the government is recognizing the Wiccan faith and that there is a need," said Meredith Kimber, a 35-year-old Wiccan priestess who lives in Nanaimo, B.C. "They are entitled to what anyone else is. They should be able to access their faith as much as the person next door."

A generic job description is given in the tender, which also lists pay as ranging from \$25,000 to \$50,000. The chaplain would be required to deliver Wiccan spiritual services, pastoral counselling and crisis intervention.

The applicant also would plan and lead Wiccan services "with ritual, teaching and meditation" to reduce stress and anger generated by incidents within the institution, or to commemorate the faith's holy days. It would be their role to create a sanctuary atmosphere within the prison chapel.

Inside the walls of a penitentiary, Kimber explained those tasks could translate into anything from common-sense counselling that simply comes from a like-minded person to full-fledged rituals conducted in the Wiccan tradition.

"Wiccan is so hush-hush, people hear the word witch and they freak out," Kimber said. "There must be a high enough number within the inmates for this to be necessary."

Wiccans worship a variety of goddesses and gods and believing through action and ritual they can cause change in the world according to their will. Their main tenant is that so long as they harm no one they can practise as they see fit.

Although practising witchcraft is synonymous with someone who practises Wicca, it is completely different from satanic worship, Kimber said.

Some inmates have identified as Wiccan going back more than two decades, said Sam Wagar, a 55-year-old priest who founded the Congregationalist Wiccan Association of B.C.

The umbrella group is recognized by the provincial government and governs four temples in the province whose clergy are also licensed to perform marriages.

It's difficult to get a statistic on how many people in B.C. practise the religion, but Kimber's temple reaches about 600 members by email alone. Some 2,500 people attended the Pagan Pride Festival in Nanaimo in 2010.

Wagar said he's aware of Wiccan services previously being required in a Vancouver Island prison and another in the B.C. Interior, and also in Ontario's Kingston and Warkworth institutions.

"Wiccans are human beings. Some human beings screw up and end up in jail," Wagar said. "They may still need the same kind of spiritual care as people from other religions who end up in jail."

According to the Corrections Canada tender that's specific to B.C., Roman Catholic chaplaincy services average five hours per week. Both Muslim and Sikh chaplaincy averages 57.83 hours per month, while Buddhist chaplaincy averages 45 hours. Jewish chaplaincy averages 17.5 hours per month, while a designation called Community Chaplaincy averages 30 hours.

Wiccan chaplaincy would average 16.66 hours.

"This has been put to tender because there is a need," said Corrections spokesman David Harty. "The requirement of these services is on-going. It has been used in the past."

Harty could not immediately provide further details about the program.

"There must be enough of us in jail to make it worth their while," Wagar said.

But he took issue with any potential public backlash for Wicca's inclusion in prison.

"Everybody who isn't a Christian differs from the mainstream. Big whoopee, get over it," he said. "We have a way of being spiritual, a way of connecting to the gods, a set of ethics and beliefs and they help us to live our lives better."

"I think it's quite likely going to help some of them, anyway, rehabilitate and go back into society with a better set of values."

Setting up a Wiccan worship space in the chapel could potentially involve displaying the pentacle -- a star inside a circle that is the faith's main symbol -- the herb sage and candles, Kimber said.

She does, however, expect and accept that prisons will limit what materials can be brought inside for safety reasons.

A ritual might be performed for a number of auspicious days in the Wiccan calendar, such as "Sanheim" -- a harvest festival that coincides with Halloween -- and "Beltane," which occurs on May Day. Full-moons are celebrated as well.

Kimber said it was likely the chosen candidate would conduct a ceremony for the faithful too, modifying as necessary.

The ceremony would begin with a cleansing of the space to clear out negative energy, and then the Wiccans would cast their circle, she explained. Inmates would be invited to join, and the priest would then call on the goddess and god.

The priest would preach and spells might be cast.

"Spell casting is a form of prayer and a form of connecting with the divine," Wagar said. "It's a way of focusing your attention on goals you want to make, making commitments."

Religion course to remain mandatory in Quebec

IRPP (29.02.12) - Quebec's controversial ethics and religion course doesn't violate freedom of religion and will remain mandatory, the Supreme Court ruled Friday.

In a 9-0 ruling, the court rejected arguments from a Quebec family who said their children shouldn't be forced to learn about religions other than their own.

The court said exposing children to a wide range of religions doesn't force them to follow any of the faiths.

Quebec introduced the course in all elementary and secondary schools in May 2008.

It teaches a broad range of religions, replacing the Moral and Religious Education course that had been a mainstay in Quebec's old confessional school system.

The parents of two children in Drummondville, Que., east of Montreal, objected to the new course and asked the local school board for an exemption.

The board refused, and the parents lost their case before the Superior Court. They went to the Supreme Court after the Quebec Court of Appeal refused to hear their case.

Quebec's education department says the ethics and religion course respects the "freedom of conscience and religion of parents, students and teachers."

It says the curriculum allows students to "explore...different manifestations of Quebec's religious heritage" as well as "other religious traditions in Quebec," adding that youngsters will "thrive in a society which combines multiple values and beliefs."

About 2,000 other parents made formal requests for their children to be exempted from the course. All were turned down.

Montreal's Loyola High School, a private Jesuit Catholic institution, won the right in 2010 to opt out of the course. Quebec is appealing the Quebec Superior Court's ruling.
