

Case Study: Reach the Forgotten Jail Ministry

WayFinder Helps Meet Longstanding Need

2024

EffectX



Introduction

In this case study, we'll explore Reach the Forgotten (RTF), a county-based jail ministry. For years members avoided conflict and, as a result, limited ministry potential as chaplains worked quite independently from each other. Today ministry members are exhibiting both hope and courage as they work together to build a culture that engages difficult issues in authentic ways.

The Challenge

Reach the Forgotten currently encompasses 30 chaplains serving in 32 counties across the state of Michigan. The chaplains lead a team of over 2,000 volunteers who ministered to 50,000 inmates in 2023. This dispersed team has operated as a federated organization since the 1980s.

“We have been able to refer back to our organization as historically one that has an anxious/avoidant culture. Naming that feels freeing as we lean into discussions on the culture we want to create.”

-WayFinder Training Participant

According to Rick Eschenburg, Director of Mission Advancement, historically they “operated with many silos,” and ministry members had a habit of avoiding conflict. As Rick explained, “We didn’t really approach conflict before. I’d say we had hard conversations before, and we tried to do it in a healthy way, but we had an avoidant culture.”

But there was an important need for agreement around key issues, including the doctrine that would guide volunteers and chaplains in their work with inmates. For over a decade, leaders had been trying to create a more unified organization and a healthier organizational model. Based on survey input, this was an important goal. Only 41% of RTF training participants indicated they felt confident leading their community toward healthy conflict before WayFinder training compared to an average of 53% for all WayFinder training participants.

The Change Process

As part of their organizational change process, Reach the Forgotten leaders pursued WayFinder training. A small core group went through introductory training then a Colossian Forum leader came to their offices and presented to a larger group. Today many organizational members have gone through the 2-day WayFinder training including board members and three-quarters of the chaplains.

“This isn’t a conference notebook that you put on the shelf. It’s actually part of our practice.”

-Rick Eschenburg

WayFinder practices are now being integrated into the organization's culture. Leaders have created an 18-month WayFinder implementation plan, new chaplains now receive WayFinder training as part of their onboarding process, and WayFinder tools are regularly surfacing during informal conversations across the ministry. In addition, board meetings formally include WayFinder practices and leaders regularly hold "Mining Sessions" where members are invited to surface concerns before the issues became significant sources of conflict.

The Impact

The result of these efforts? Reach the Forgotten is becoming more unified, and members are learning to work through contentious issues. They are beginning to have fruitful discussions around challenging topics for those working in the jails. As Rick explained, "[We're discussing] whether addiction is a disease and how their personal perspective affects their work with prisoners."

Leaders are also leaning into discussions around topics such as organizational anxiety. According to Rick,

"We actually had a conversation yesterday and I acknowledged that we have never held this conversation prior to this but it's a really important conversation. We didn't complete the conversation, didn't land it, but we engaged it. WayFinder helped bring us to a place where we all acknowledge that we have some felt anxiety about approaching this, but we have a model and we're going to approach it."

As a team, Reach the Forgotten members have established a regular rhythm of praise, lament, and hope, something they learned through the WayFinder training. One member described it as "framing our deepest longings in prayer." According to Rick Eschenburg, "We just had an all chaplain in-person meeting. It was almost organic to move into that rhythm of prayer with hard things. We'd been in a county for 48 years and lost that one because of politics. WayFinder has been a really unifying process."

"We are much better at engaging in conflict and viewing it from healthy perspectives."

-WayFinder Training Participant

On an individual level, post-training feedback indicates that people are utilizing WayFinder tools and finding greater courage through them. As one participant described,

"WayFinder has increased my confidence to handle and manage conflict. It still feels uncomfortable, but I feel armed with tools and shared vocabulary to guide me. I know we can always 'Go Godward' if the conversation gets heated or reaches a certain threshold of discomfort. That is comforting to me and encourages me to start the conversation whereas before I would avoid, avoid, avoid."

33%



Increased confidence in leading a community toward healthy conflict

Leaning into conflict instead of avoiding it. Experiencing courage and confidence instead of fear in the face of conflict. It's no wonder that today members are expressing hope as they share their thoughts about using WayFinder tools. "I'm thankful that we have engaged and been engaged. It is a way forward!"

And the percentage who now feel confident leading their community toward healthy conflict? It rose 33%!