

and pleading for a God that you may not know, but pleading for help from a higher being.”

He now identifies as an Episcopal Christian and has been part of the church for about 13 years. Even though different jails provide different services, the Los Angeles County Jail also has various religious groups speak with the inmates throughout the week.

“Different facilities have different things, and [LA County] is dependent on behavior of the inmates for whether or not you could have something that day,” Kassoff said. “Sometimes the priests would come and get turned away, because is up to the discretion of the facility.”

While each jail may handle religious programs differently, every inmate is protected by the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA).

Back in November 2015, Drayton and Bret attended a three-day seminar to discuss religious programming in jails as well as the fundamentals of the Religious Act.

“The big take away for me was a better clarity of the law,” Drayton said. “RLUIPA really changed a dynamic that you cannot just say ‘no’ [to religious requests] for safety and security reasons. If you’re going to say no you have to articulate why that is.”

According to the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, the act “protects religious institutions from unduly burdensome or discriminatory land use regulations.” The law was put in place in 2000 after Congress found out that minority religions were “actively discriminated against by local land use.”

“RLUIPA really says ‘find a way to say yes,’” Drayton said. “That’s a huge change from the past and I didn’t know that before.”

A court case was filed about a violation of the Religious Act October 2014. An inmate from a prison in Arkansas was kept from growing out his beard, violating his Muslim practice.

“We don’t deny, to my knowledge, people to grow their beards,” Bret said. “We have to be able to take a jail photo for recognition purposes, but if a woman was here in a hijab or a head scarf, then she would take her picture with her scarf off and no men around and we would accommodate to the greatest degree possible.”

During Bret’s seven years at Coconino County Jail, there has been one Muslim inmate. Bret told the inmate which direction was east so they could pray, and in order to fully accommodate their needs, the sewing crew made the inmate a prayer rug.

Another religion Bret and Drayton came across in need of specific accommodations was the Asatru religion, a religion based on Norse mythology. The practice studies a book called the Eddas, which is a group of poems. Once the officers verified the inmate was sincere in his practice, they began necessary accommodations.

“I printed out 30 poems [from the Eddas] for him,” Bret said. “Then he wanted a battle axe and a Thor’s hammer, which is part of their practice.”

Because that request was a restriction on safety and security, they had to print out pictures of the axe and hammer in order to accommodate.

“Before RLUIPA, I don’t know if I would have given him the pictures,” Drayton said. “After going to the seminar and talking about the laws, there was no reason for me to say no.”

Not only does the jail provide religious needs, but they also cover spiritual needs for the Native American culture. Bret affirmed that 50 to 55 percent of inmates admitted at the Coconino County Jail are of Native American descent.

A spiritual event common among the Navajo is talking circles, which is a purification ceremony to cleanse one’s soul.



TOP: Female inmates at the Coconino County Jail watch a video during bible study Aug 25. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Every weekday the jail chaplain, Jeffery Drayton, comes to talk to the inmates and to teach bible study classes with the male inmates. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Inmates at the Coconino County Jail are allowed access to any religious reading material they would like during their stay. They can choose from books the jail has on stock or they can request books that the jail will order and bring to the inmates.

(PHOTOS BY ASHLEY MARIE NULL)

Talking circles take place in a specific spiritual building, known as the sweat lodge. In order to accommodate these spiritual needs, Coconino County Jail has a sweat lodge in one of the courtyards.

“To relate [talking circles] to mainstream Christian religion, it’s no different than an altar call, confession or testimony, only in a Native American spirituality way,” Bret said.

Each talking circle takes about four to five hours to complete. A fire is built outside the sweat lodge to heat up rocks, which are then taken into the sweat lodge. The lodge is then sealed with blankets and tarps, creating a spiritual environment for people to share their thoughts.

“You can’t force anyone to read or share, it’s always up to them,” Bret said. “The talking circle is for people to talk — nobody tells them how to fix themselves.”

A leader begins by sharing prayers, usually in Navajo, and then passes the stick around the circle for others to cleanse their souls. Even though the talking circles are part of the Navajo

spiritual culture, anyone is welcome to attend the ceremony.

“It’s a big deal that we do the talking circles,” Drayton said. “On the reservation, you have to pay to do those sorts of things, so to bring someone in to do this service is a big deal.”

Depending on availability, volunteers and weather, the talking circles are usually put on twice a month for men and once a month for women.

Despite the contradictory idea of religious freedom in jail, the Coconino County Jail staff does everything in their ability to accommodate specific needs under the branch of the Religious Act.

“I do see it as an important thing because with stories like mine, it really helped me,” Kassoff said. “I’m actually in the process of becoming a priest myself and when I speak with friends and colleagues that do prison ministry, I always tell them to continue that work — I do see it as important because it planted a seed for me and I grew a fruit.”