

Sources of Hope – Prisons Week 2020



Prisons Week (prisonsweek.org), 11–18 October, was formed to pray for and raise awareness of the needs of prisoners and their families, victims of offenders, prison staff and all those who care. The theme for the week this year is 'You are not alone'. Each day of the week a prayer (available on their website) focuses on a particular group affected by prison or by criminal justice. We are also asked to reflect on what we as a church or as individuals might do or offer as part of our response.

Several members of the HTSM congregation already undertake prison work. Some have been doing this for many years, while others are recent recruits. All share a passion and enthusiasm for demonstrating God's love in whatever way they can to the children, women and men with whom they work. Their thoughts and reflections below paint a picture of how hope can be found in the most unlikely places. For security reasons all contributions are anonymous.

Admin in a prison setting

Admin, I have discovered, together with a good dose of prayer, is a 'vital organ' of all the work that Chapels do. Prison admin systems are like many other places – not very efficient, and utterly opaque to an outsider. But at the same time crucial to getting anything decided and happening. Everything needs permission and often security clearance, which take time and energy and often detective work on 'How do we do this?'. You would not believe how much stamina it takes to sort out phone cables that have probably been eaten through by rats! As well as tasks, the Chapel Office is a hub of comings and goings, all to be welcomed, noted and dealt with. Admin staff often escort prisoners to and from chapel appointments,

and the chats that happen during those trips can help a prisoner to be less anxious or let off a bit of steam. It is all go, and really important, and I love it.

Listeners

I retired from Samaritans a few months ago, but have long been involved in the training of Listeners. Listeners are serving prisoners who provide a Samaritan service to other prisoners. They are volunteers who are first approved by the prison authorities and then accepted and trained by the Samaritans. The training follows closely that provided for new recruits to the Samaritans. The Listeners work on a rota to provide support to any prisoner in distress at any time of the day or night. Anything a prisoner tells a Listener is totally confidential in accordance with Samaritan principles. The practical difference for Listeners is that all their contacts are face-to-face whereas almost all Samaritan contacts are by phone, email or text. The relationship between Listeners and the prison staff, especially the wing officers, can be difficult when confidentiality is an issue – it takes a strong-minded prisoner who is a Listener to tell a prison officer to his or her face that they cannot tell the officer what a prisoner has told them.



The Samaritan prison team will normally go to the prison regularly to debrief the Listeners and follow up any issues that may have arisen. Again these exchanges are totally confidential. Occasionally the Samaritans may themselves see a prisoner who has a particular problem.

At present no volunteers, including Samaritans, are allowed in HMP Coldingley and I assume the situation is more or less the same at HMP Send. In these circumstances the Listeners' role has become much more important – and they are very much on their own. During the pandemic prisoners have been, and still are, greatly restricted in what they can do and the prison authorities have said how vital the role of the Listeners is in maintaining morale in the prisons. For myself, I have always had great respect for the work of the Listeners even in normal times.

Making Connections



This week Mel (not her real name) was released from prison. She was

collected by someone from the rehab centre she was going to, and was very relieved that her ex-partner was not at the gate to hijack her freedom. It was a joy to see her so excited, hopeful and forward-focused. During the past six months she has been part of the mentoring programme, Making Connections, that the Chaplain at HMP Send has developed and pioneered. Under the scheme prisoners are offered a volunteer mentor to help them prepare themselves for their release: to plan practical details, such as where they will live and how they will get a job, but also to think through how they will resist the temptation of drugs, potentially abusive relationships and other hazards that often contributed to their offending. The programme also offers help to connect with a similar mentor outside prison, and has been shown to reduce reoffending significantly. Perhaps most of all it gives hope: for some women it is the first time ever that someone they do not know has shown a positive, caring, persistent interest in them, and the self-belief that starts to grow from that can be quite remarkable and very moving. It's well worth being a volunteer.



Mothers' Union

When people are sent to prison we might say they are 'being punished' for a reason. But what about their families and particularly, what about the children? Should they be punished too? Many families have to travel for some hours to visit their loved ones in prison, and it used to be quite traumatic for the young ones to make this visit. Not only did they have to go through all the security procedures but they were expected to sit still and be quiet for up to 2 hours! Play areas have now been set up in most, if not all, visits halls with toys and books to make the experience better for the children. The Mothers' Union volunteers have been supervising the play area at weekends at HMP Coldingley for 23 years and during the week at HMP High Down for just as long. Of course, with the virus lockdown there have been no visits but we are hoping the Ministry of Justice will find a way for us to go in as soon as it is safe.

The theme for Prisons Week this year is 'You are not alone'. With prisoners being in their cells for up to 23 of the 24 hours a day it has been important to give the women at HMP Send something to make them feel they have not been forgotten by their Mothers' Union befrienders. So, through the Chaplaincy, we have been providing needles (plastic or bamboo!) and wool and art/creativity packs. We have always taken in knitting and card-making materials for the women when they come to the chapel on our regular evening sessions, and the supply of these packs has become even more important in terms of mental health support. One prisoner was heard to say to someone in the Chaplaincy, 'The Mothers' Union cards have saved my life'! Long may this be the case!

Prison Fellowship – Sycamore Tree

You are not alone ... but for a woman locked up behind prison gates, miles away from children and support networks, it can definitely feel as if they are alone. Like us, they want and deserve a fresh start



when things have gone wrong in their lives. Sadly they often cannot see how life can be different, and our society can be a bit short on offering hope and support on their release. The Chaplaincy at HMP Send works in many different ways to offer the women sources of hope for their lives in the present moment and on their release, saying through its activities: 'You are not alone'.

A role I have in the Chaplaincy is as a Tutor for the Sycamore Tree programme, a victim awareness course. This six-week Prison Fellowship course is delivered in 41 prisons across the country with 2,600 prisoners taking part each year. Restorative justice principles are used and Chaplaincy volunteers deliver the course to offenders of all faiths and none. And it changes lives.

The course aims to help offenders understand the negative impact of their actions on themselves, their victims and their community and show them that, through taking responsibility and making changes, life can be different.

One woman told me, 'I didn't want to do this course. I didn't think I had any victims. But now I realise that I have lots of victims. Sycamore Tree has changed my life and the way I see the future.'

God is at work in our prisons and being able to play a small part in that work is a privilege and a humbling experience.

The Sycamore Tree programme is delivered in Young Offender Institutions as well as adult prisons. It can be hard to get a bunch of young men, all determined to seem big and tough, to engage in serious discussion. Often this is the first time they have been pushed to consider someone else's point of view, to put themselves in someone else's shoes, and they find it uncomfortable and challenging. There are always a few who continue to deny that they have victims, especially drug dealers ('They're clients, not victims') but most do begin to see things differently, and one or two each time really seem to 'get it'. Once, in the last week of the course, when members of the community and of their families are present, one young man read a letter of heartfelt apology to his mum, who was there listening. By the end, we were all in tears.

Prison Fellowship – LetterLink



Some prisoners have no family or friends on the outside, or may have deliberately cut off all contact with them – or vice versa, of course. For about seven years now I have been involved in Prison Fellowship's LetterLink programme, whereby a prisoner who requests a 'penpal' is matched with a volunteer. Despite strict rules regarding security it is possible to develop a good relationship through correspondence. I have been writing to my current prisoner for 3½ years – we discuss books, the prison system, travel, the prison system again, politics and, recently, his plans for the future. Writing a letter once a month may seem of no great importance, and sometimes it does feel more of a duty than a joy, but my penpal once told me that I and all the other letter-writers should never underestimate the importance of those regular letters from outside, and how they help the one on the inside feel for a while like a 'real' person.

Health Adviser

Planning to bring innovations into prisons is tough at the most peaceful of times. However, Covid-19 has in fact allowed us to push some things through more easily.

Over a year ago I took part in discussions about bringing Health Advice (support and counselling) into prisons via the telephone. One reason for this was so that the workload of a single Health Adviser could more effectively be used over the five Surrey prisons. Another reason was so that the work we do outside in the community could be made equally available to those within the prison system.

To begin with, the wheels turned slowly, but now, with all the changes brought about during the Covid-19 lockdown I have been able to reach someone in each prison each week by telephone. I haven't been able to visit the prisons personally, but I have successfully begun the process of accessing prisons from my office!

It is my belief, and that of the organisation I work for, that offering equality of service to people within the prison system is a vital part of our work, and that residents should have access to free healthcare in the same way as the rest of our community. The telephone service has meant that, in effect, five prisons can be visited in one morning.

I am hoping that this way of working will be part of the new normal!

Literacy tutor

I am part of a group of volunteer tutors providing weekly one-to-one sessions in literacy and numeracy to boys and young men at a Young Offender Institution. Over half of them only have the reading age expected of an 8-year-old, most have not attended school since they were about 12 or 13, and they can be deeply averse to joining the formal classes provided by the Education department. Because we are volunteers, however, and because they themselves volunteer to come to us, we can offer a very different experience, where they do not feel judged or threatened by their peers, where we listen to them and build on their own interests and enthusiasms. I spent much of last year tracking down Irish song lyrics in order to help one young man with his reading! Since we are not uniformed authority figures they are often



more willing to talk to us than to their wing officers. It can be both eye-opening and humbling to hear the circumstances in which they have grown up – and yet they still bravely make plans for their future. It can be difficult and frustrating, particularly with the younger ones, but when things ‘click’ and you see someone grow in confidence, learn to make eye contact, to laugh and chat it is just wonderful.

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