

Voices from prison



Hardly a day goes by without mention in the media of our criminal justice system and, in particular, the rehabilitation of offenders and rates of reoffending. Good news stories and good practice hardly ever get a comment. The Sycamore Tree course from Prison Fellowship is delivered in 41 prisons across the country with 2,600 prisoners taking part each year. Sycamore Tree is a Victim Awareness course using Restorative Justice principles. It is faith-based but not faith-promoting and is delivered by Chaplaincy volunteers 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 that, through taking responsibility and making changes, life can be different. Six sessions are held over a 6-week period. In the third session, a victim of crime joins the course to describe the impact that a crime has had on their lives. In the final session, 'Week 6', members of the community are invited in.

A number of people from HTSM have attended Week 6 either at HMP Send or HMYOI Feltham over the years, representing the community. Listen to what they have to say.

Jane Hedgecock, visiting HMP Send (adult women) On the day of our visit we saw a well-kept garden that looked beautiful on that sunny day, but with the salutary reminder that the women were locked in: the whole prison was surrounded by a massively high fence topped with barbed wire. From the programme, the women learnt about the effect of a crime not only on the immediate victim but also on families and the wider community. They were given the opportunity to make in public a symbolic act of restitution and it was noticeable how much courage it took for some of them to stand up and speak in front of invited guests and, particularly, their peers. One read a very moving poem she had written and another dropped pebbles into a bowl of water. On speaking to some of the women, it was obvious that Sycamore Tree had changed the way they thought about their crimes and victims. One may have been cynically 'jumping through the hoops' but we were not the ones to judge.

Pete Brayne, visiting HMYOI Feltham (young men, aged 18–21) Although I have visited Feltham Young Offender Institution before, it still comes as a shock to pass through Security in order to enter, and then sit in the waiting room with friends and relatives coming to visit their young boys in prison. The rattle of keys and clanking of metal doors sounds quite Victorian, although the general decor is modern. We are shown into a large room, with a diverse group of people, in age and ethnicity, the young people in ordinary clothes but nonetheless quite distinct and seeming a little nervous. We're given an overview of the Sycamore course, and told that this session is an opportunity for the young offenders to share their learning and express their feelings. Nervously, most, but not all, get up and speak. Nearly all comment on the input from the victim who had spoken to them earlier in the course – a mother who had lost her son through a stabbing. They had clearly been strongly impacted by meeting her and hearing her account.

Prison is an extraordinary environment in which to try and turn a life around. But the brief opportunity to connect with people, and to reflect on the behaviour leading to imprisonment, can clearly make a positive difference.

Jillian Doran, visiting HMP Send Why did it take me so long to attend a Sycamore Tree 'Week 6' session? How many times does it take for someone to ask you to do something – that they know you will love – and you procrastinate?

Well, I said yes to going to HMP Send one Thursday in early June. It was such an amazing few hours. A privilege to listen to powerful themes, real stories of women's experiences which stretched my small mind into areas way out of my comfort zone.

I cannot think about prisons in the same way ever again. The inmates pushed themselves, some writing amazing stories, standing in front of complete strangers – trusting their memories and lives to us. The main feeling, though, was one of meeting Jesus in so many people – the staff, the volunteers, the inmates and

the other people who, like me, had gone to witness. It was one of the most generous, moving and numinous times of my life.

I am so thankful and I will fight now to challenge anyone who belittles or speaks ill of prisoners.

Jo Jacques, visiting HMYOI Feltham Anne Marriott asked Anthony and me to come and represent the community at Week 6 of a Sycamore Tree course in Feltham Young Offender Institution. I had previously worked as Catholic chaplain in another prison, so any opportunity to visit the prison estate appealed. I had had no experience of the Sycamore Tree programme.

The final session, which we attended, is a 'passing out parade', when the offenders are given a chance to express their remorse – verbally, by letter, or even using rap. At the session with us were a couple whose son had been murdered (though not by anyone on the course). They had volunteered with Sycamore to assist the young men in understanding the consequences of their crimes for their victims and for others.

The squash and cake served afterwards was a great opportunity to speak to the course members, and to hear of their hopes for the future. I spoke to a young man who was a brick layer, and he gave me a great talk about how good he was at his trade and how he was looking forward to returning to work at the end of his sentence. It has been found that courses like Sycamore Tree cut repeat offending by about 14%, and save the justice budget something like £8 for every £1 spent. Sadly they are not available for every offender who wishes to take part but I hope that for the men we met, their course will be the beginning of a new start.

Thanks to Anne for taking us to Feltham. I urge anyone else who gets the chance to attend to grasp it with both hands. You are making a small gesture towards helping improve the lives of a few offenders.

Stephen Marriott, visiting HMYOI Feltham Surprisingly, it is harder to get into prison than get out! I guess it is a cunning plan to make Security unpredictable and chaotic. The boys at Feltham were ... boys, part unattractive, part vulnerable, always someone's son. The worthies, including me, were recruited to be witnesses representing the community at the Week 6 act of restitution. The 'I am sorry' session. Who knows what the boys were really feeling? There was swagger in front of their mates, embarrassment in front of their families, but also a clear feeling of 'Oops! This is worse than I thought'. Some will be back inside soon, but others are much more likely to look their crimes in the eye – and prison will become a distant fading memory.

Jan Hancock and Anne Marriott

Jan was interviewed recently about her experiences as a Sycamore Tree volunteer -
<https://prisonfellowship.org.uk/sycamore-tree/seeing-god-at-work/>