

**Knitting, card-making – and radicalising the inmates! Alison Ney has been visiting HMP Send for 16 years. Find out more in her contribution to our series “Everyday Neighbours”, in which we share and celebrate some of the acts of quiet, unobtrusive service that our parishioners undertake during the week, putting our faith into practice for the benefit of our neighbour.**

## **Visiting HMP Send**



SHOCK HORROR ! WHY? When I started going to HMP Send (a closed category women's prison) about 16 years ago and talking to people at Holy Trinity about it, they were surprised and curious. Now there are a number of people, both at Holy Trinity and St Mary's, who are involved and it hardly seems remarkable!

I began to go when the prison needed volunteers to run a Mothers' Union meeting once a month and were looking for people to befriend the inmates. I was nervous about starting at first, as I felt I might have nothing to say to 'people so different' from me. How wrong I was! Most of the women have children and so I could always have a conversation about family and children. They used to bring photos of their families and show them off proudly. We would then have Bible readings and sing a lot of choruses from 'Mission Praise' before praying for the people in the photos. At the beginning of March, we would take in the Women's World Day of Prayer service sheets. On one such occasion more than 15 different countries were represented. One Maundy Thursday we shared a communion with hot cross buns and orange juice.

Lydia Gladwin, wife of a former bishop of Guildford, realised that women in prison experience a great deal of sadness and loss, so she enrolled us to be trained in 'Loss Listening' and we started going to the prison for a second evening each month. At first, we just sat and tried to talk to the few who came, but it was not a success. People who are distressed often need to have a distraction while they talk, and so we started giving them old greetings cards to cut up and turn into new cards (with glue and envelopes supplied by the prison) while they talked. That became a real success! Now we go in on one Saturday morning a month as well.

More change came when a new chaplain was appointed. She needed to get a greater number of prisoners to come through the Chapel door and we were asked to supervise an 'Arts and Crafts' session (instead of our Mothers' Union meeting). It was run by two of the prisoners but, unfortunately, didn't last very long. One of its functions was to supply women with knitting, sewing and art materials and the rules for ordering these were changed by 'the Management'! Some of our card-making women wanted to continue coming and knit or sew.

We wondered what our next role would be. When I began at Send we had a large number of young foreign nationals. Now the number of prisoners aged over 50 is increasing. Many

complain that they find the younger prisoners noisy, apart from anything else. So we now run an 'Over 50s Club' on one Thursday, where we have quiet chats, play cards, make cards, knit and have a relaxed time. I have taught several women to knit and we now have a project to knit squares to make blankets for refugees *[photograph below]*. We also have Scrabble and jigsaws, but these are less popular.

HMP Send has a population of about 280 offenders, a quarter of whom are 'lifers'. Some years ago we befriended one lifer, who revealed she was a murderer. From the way she spoke about her husband I was sure that he was the victim, though she never actually said so. Imagine my surprise when she turned up to card-making (about eight years after we had last seen her) and told us excitedly that her daughter, whom she hadn't seen since she was 2 years old, had just written to say that she had passed eight GCSEs! She sent a photo of herself with her father and her certificate!! We never ask people why they are inside, but sometimes they tell us. Often, though, it is easier not to know, as you can then treat everyone equally.

My children used to laugh and say that I went into prison to radicalise those inside. In a way I suppose I do. I want to spread hope and a sense of mattering. I hope that the women I chat to feel valued for themselves and listened to. So many have such low self-esteem and come from backgrounds where they didn't feel cared for. There is a pair of sisters whom I have watched grow up from rowdy, disruptive, 20-something-year-olds four years ago, who now greet me when they see me and proudly tell me how they are getting on and preparing for life outside. I love going and this sort of story makes it all worth while.

On average, between 30 and 40 women come to make cards on a Thursday and so I am extremely grateful to all of you who give me your used cards – and so are the women!

*Alison Ney*  
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