



PRISONS MISSION

Report to the Annual General Meeting 16th January 2017.

CRISIS IN PRISONS

The crisis in British prisons has been festering for many years. Most of the ancient Victorian prisons are grossly overcrowded, with reduced numbers of staff causing more inmates to be locked in shared cells for up to 23 hours each day, with little access to education, work, recreation, or "purposeful activities". The murder at HMP Pentonville in October, the riot in Bedford, Moorside and Lewes in November and Birmingham and Swaleside in December, attracted media attention. The 106 suicides in prisons throughout the year were little reported. The Prison Governors Association made an unprecedented call for an "independent public inquiry into the rising incidence of violence, self harm and suicides".

In December 2016 there were 96,365 men, women and children in British prisons. More, per head of population, than any other Western European country. Many of these people are further damaged by imprisonment and less able to become independent, law abiding and useful citizens when released. Against this tragic background, the efforts of a few CTiW member churches to undertake work in prisons and with prisoners can seem trivial and almost worthless. Our experience convinces us that this very modest ministry is not only worthy but essential. The people are held in prisons in our name. They are out of sight, but must not be out of mind.

PRISONS MISSION OBJECTIVES

Participants from the "engaged" member churches have two aims:

- Support and assist the multi-faith Prison Chaplaincy Teams in their task of providing opportunities for worship, religious education and pastoral care for inmates and their families, as well as Prison Officers. The inmates are often distressed, angry, anxious, worried and isolated.
- Inform congregations and members of their churches about their learning and experience of prison and the criminal justice system, so that knowledge about the facts are communicated and more people become concerned about our prisons.

CHURCH "ENGAGEMENT"

Our Prisons Mission involves more than the recruitment of a few suitable and well intentioned volunteers to become participants. Each church agrees to support at least two members of their congregation who undertake the outreach work with a Prison Chaplaincy Team. The churches receive and consider regular reports from participants about the activities and issues and explain such news and developments at church services and newsletters. The churches also agree to focus on marking Prisons Week each Autumn.

PARTICIPANT ACTIVITIES

The activities undertaken by participants depend on their skills, aptitudes and available time, as well as the needs and priorities of the chaplains, who often work under considerable pressure. Activities

include attending and supporting services in the chapel, Bible studies classes, one to one mentoring prisoners before and after discharge to aid resettlement, assisting children and families in the visiting rooms, administration in the chaplaincy office, accompanying chaplains on their rounds and generally learning and becoming useful.

SUPPORT FOR PARTICIPANTS

Becoming a participant for this Prisons Mission is not like volunteering to visit patients in a hospital. Prisons are an unfamiliar, foreign and even hostile environment, which is usually hidden behind high walls.

Participants are given training by chaplains and closely supported by the Coordinator. There are also bi-monthly Review Meetings at which all participants exchange information, discuss problems and support each other. A common difficulty is coping with the frustration of seemingly endless bureaucratic delays. The meetings also consider political developments in the penal and criminal justice system and changes needed to improve the effectiveness of our work.

PRISONS WEEK

This year we collected and compiled an improved booklet of resource material to help and encourage more member churches to devise interesting services and other activities to bring the issues and needs of prisons and prisoners to the attention of congregations. In addition to prayers and intercessions drawn from different denominations, the booklet also contained a quiz about prisons as an aid to church discussions and a list of helpful and relevant organisations. The material focused not only on prisoners and their families, but those who work in the system and victims of crime. The authenticity of the booklet has improved as more participants become able to apply their experience of work in prisons to the material. The booklet was widely used and we believe that more London churches than ever before marked Prisons Week effectively. Brief reports of several of these events are included in the November 2016 edition of the CTIW Newsletter.

OUTCOMES

The multi-faith Prison Chaplaincy Teams value the work of our carefully increasing number of competent and committed Participants with vulnerable inmates. The congregations of a greater number of London churches have become better informed and more concerned about the crisis in our prisons.

FUTURE PLANS

We aim to maintain, expand and improve the value and effectiveness of our work at HMPs Wandsworth, Wormwood Scrubs and Bronzefield and commence work at Pentonville and Brixton prisons.

We aim to "engage" with three more member churches and recruit and support additional participants to undertake the work in prisons and to report back to churches.

We aim to improve the quality of our Prisons Week resource material and encourage more member churches to use this to focus the attention of congregations on the crisis in our prisons and the possible solutions.

John Plummer
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Churches Together in Westminster