

LONDON PRISONS MISSION NEWSLETTER



Introduction by Alasdair Mackenzie

London Prisons Mission (LPM) began its life as an initiative of Churches Together in Westminster. It is now an independent charity but its aims are unchanged: to support and assist multi-faith Prison Chaplaincy teams; to enable volunteers to work with a vulnerable and often neglected section of society; and to inform congregations of churches about prisoners, their families, prison staff, victims of crime and issues concerning the criminal justice system.

Our name implies London exclusivity but in fact the churches that have always taken the most active roles within LPM draw their congregations from outside London. The prisons with which we work currently, HMP & YOI Bronzefield, HMP Wandsworth and HMP Wormwood Scrubs, as well as the Immigration detention Centre at Heathrow, all serve catchment areas extending beyond Greater London.

It was a real pleasure and a privilege to be asked to put together a special edition of the CTiW newsletter, focusing on the work of London Prisons Mission. In this newsletter you will find out more about the range of volunteer work LPM members do, the work we have done presenting the artwork of prisoners and most importantly of all, the Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison project through which we are campaigning to secure safe, secure accommodation for all women leaving prison in the UK.

I have been a volunteer with LPM since October 2018 and am now a trustee and a regular attendee of LPM meetings. I am a volunteer with the Change For Good programme at Wandsworth Prison, where I mentor men leaving prison who volunteer to take part in the programme. In normal times, I would get to know them through a series of conversations in prison, and I then meet them at the prison gate when they leave to help them deal with all the necessary meetings and paperwork they must deal with to find stable accommodation and other support as they return to everyday life. I was also involved with the planning and running of the Summit for the Safe Homes For Women project in 2019.

I have found my time with the LPM and my colleagues there fascinating, rewarding and enjoyable. We very much hope that this newsletter will encourage churches to organise their own events and reflections focusing on those in prison, and perhaps inspire some of you to volunteer to join LPM and get involved with our activities. Please email johnplummer@londonprisonsmission.org for more details.



Feeling Black and Blue, HM Prison Littlehey, James Wood
QC Silver Award for Portrait



Find Me, Greenwich Youth Offending Team, Margaret Macdonald
Commended Award for Photography

Recent reports relevant to the Safe Homes for Women initiative

As part of their work on the Safe Homes For Women initiative, members of LPM monitor and share media stories and also reports from charities, third sector bodies and central and local government which are relevant to the experiences of women leaving prison. Here are brief outlines of two very important reports.

The first is from Hibiscus Initiatives (Hibiscus) - a specialist charity with 35 years' experience working with black, minoritised and migrant women at the intersection of the immigration and criminal justice systems. They deliver support and advocacy services in prisons and the community, and with regard to international resettlement. <https://hibiscusinitiatives.org.uk>

In February 2021, Hibiscus organised a roundtable discussion with Black women about their lived experiences of the criminal justice and immigration systems in the UK. The main themes for the discussion were chosen by the women themselves, based on the stories and issues they most wanted to share.

The women identified the following themes: contact with the police; courts and sentencing; impact on black mothers; lack of healthcare in prison; life after release; and experiences leading to involvement in the criminal justice system. This report does not contain recommendations for action, but rather highlights the challenges that black women face in the criminal justice system. Just as women generally face problems unique to them, distinct from those of men, in the system, so too do black women face their own specific challenges and difficulties. Two comments about life after release stood out in particular, challenges that the Safe Homes project wants desperately to tackle:

“I got out in 2016, but now have deportation order. I am a single Mum, their Dad died... I came here in 1996, I don't know no-one back home. When I think of taking them back to where I came from... They don't know any other life.”

“Even if you apply for a job, you have to disclose yourself, there is an attachment to your name. I have skills, I have worked with Connexions, [...] But now I am by myself, no-one is supporting me. I have fallen down on the other side. The justice system just sees you as you are nailed to the cross, and you will forever be on that cross.”

The Centre for Homelessness Impact (<https://www.homelessnessimpact.org/>) is an independent organisation that supports the use of data and evidence in bringing about a sustainable end to homelessness. It has released a report titled “Women, homelessness and violence: what works?” The report focuses in particular on the significant proportion of women who experience violence in their lives; statistics consistently show that violence is perpetrated against women at much higher rates than against men. Violence against women in the home has increased significantly during the Covid pandemic. There is a strong link between violence and homelessness amongst women, making the Covid-related increase in violence even more concerning. For example, national data show that one in five women who have experienced violence become homeless, compared with just one per cent of women who have not experienced violence.

Through work on the Safe Homes Project we have clearly recognised the link between violence, homelessness and incarceration of women. One of the reasons for finding safe housing for women leaving prison is to prevent them going back into unsafe environments where they face violence, which in turn can lead to homelessness and a return to prison. The Centre For Homelessness Impact recommends:

- a more inclusive, housing-led response that rapidly provides all women experiencing (or at risk of) homelessness who have experienced violence with long-term, unconditional accommodation and appropriate support, whether through moving or retaining their current housing
- Increased provision of women-only temporary accommodation
- Models to be developed and tested that re-house perpetrators of violence and provide support to all parties.
- A commitment to developing gender-informed practice in all service delivery, through training and adherence to agreed principles

At LPM, we are working hard to ensure these recommendations, and the reasoning behind them, are supported and embedded in the Safe Homes initiative.

Working on the Safe Homes for Women initiative - The Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester and Anglican Bishop for HM Prisons

Restoration, reconciliation and transformation are at the heart of the Gospel rooted in our God of relationship. This underpins my passion for engagement with the Criminal Justice System, and in November 2019 I had the privilege of being invited by London Prisons Mission to chair the Safe Homes summit. This resonated with my episcopal role regarding women's prisons and my 'Fighting for Justice Campaign' not least in the House of Lords: <https://www.gloucester.anglican.org/parish-resources/communications/justice/>.

I am delighted to be the President of The Nelson Trust <https://nelsontrust.com/>, and alongside my promotion of the wonderful holistic work of Women's Centres comes a deep commitment to the need for gender-specific and appropriate accommodation for female prison-leavers. Approximately 4-6 out of 10 women are released without access to secure accommodation; they often cannot be reunited with their children, and frequently have multiple and complex needs including extremely low self-esteem.

Over 50% of women in prison have experienced some sort of abuse themselves, and while not condoning any criminal behaviour, it is rarely beneficial when women are given prison sentences for non-violent offences. Sentences are often short and sadly repeated, and simply add to levels of brokenness for the offenders, their families and the wider community. A sense of 'being at home' is not achieved for anyone. As a follower of Christ my ultimate desire is for all people to find their home in God, but for every person the concept of 'being at home' is far more than a roof over one's head, and is about a place of discovery, peace, flourishing and freedom.

In 2020 I took on the role of Anglican Bishop for HM Prisons in England and Wales, and persistently talk about 'join up'. Government departments and officials need not only to work better together across boundaries but also to recognise the expertise and experience of so many charities and organisations. The team behind the Safe Homes initiative are doing the join up and it has been good to chair an event for MPs and peers as well as participate in one-to-one conversations with ministers. Furthermore, the team's continuous engagement with women of lived experience is front and centre. It is a privilege to offer my support and input wherever possible.



Hope, HM Prison Albany, Hilda May Bronze Award for Drawing

Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison - an account of the initiative by John Plummer

Where did the Safe Homes initiative come from?

Prisons are very sad places, full to overflowing with people who are angry, disappointed, resentful, lonely, remorseful, aggrieved or bitter. Very few of the men, women and children behind bars look forward with optimism and confidence. Hope is in very short supply. Some have been neglected and abused since childhood. Many have spent years in care as “looked-after children” and are often excluded from school. They have been both troubled and troublesome and frequently have poor mental and physical health.

Since I started visiting young and adult men and women in prisons in the UK and elsewhere, I have talked and listened to many sad and troubled people. Some conversations have been dramatic, but most merely tragic. Among the saddest was with a young woman who was greeted by some staff and inmates when she was recalled to prison after only a few weeks outside. While she was disappointed to be behind bars again, she told me later that the last time she had gone to bed in safety was before she left the prison. That vulnerable woman was evidence of the failure of our whole criminal justice and penal system. She had been convicted of some relatively minor, non-violent offences and sentenced to a short period of imprisonment. Our expensive system had failed to equip her with the tools required for a fresh start, including suitable accommodation, and released her to the danger and destitution of No Fixed Abode. Resettlement and striving for rehabilitation could not even begin for her.

HMP & YOI Bronzefield

Bronzefield prison is the largest prison for women and girls in Europe. It holds 550 people who are remanded in custody awaiting trial or sentence or are convicted and serving short sentences before serving the remainder elsewhere. A few are serving long sentences. Most of these women expect and hope to reside in or near London after discharging their sentences.

In the spring, the Independent Monitoring Board of Bronzefield published its Annual Report, which stated that 6 out of 10 women and girls were released to homelessness. Around the same time, London Prisons Mission co-hosted the first ever off-site Away Day for the entire multi-faith Chaplaincy Team at St Martin-in-the-Fields, which comprised 24 members of many faiths. One of the memorable moments of the day was when the team shared their thoughts about the most challenging and distressing aspects of their work. They all agreed that it was observing and helping troubled women striving to address their demons of abuse, addiction and mental health with little help. To see so many women released to homelessness followed by a seemingly inevitable return to prison, even more damaged than previously, was deeply distressing. London Prisons Mission volunteers undertaking regular work inside Bronzefield prison also learned that about 50 women each month were being released to homelessness and often returned after a short and distressing period outside.



Several States of Mind, HM Prison Dartmoor, Robin & Margaret Weiss Silver Award for Sculpture

The new project

We decided that we had to address this dreadful situation and a meeting took place with Director Ian White-side. He shared our concerns and was keen to join what became the Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison initiative, the aim of which is “to Identify and Strive Towards Realistic and Sustainable Solutions to the Plight of Women Leaving Prison to Homelessness”. London Prisons Mission was joined by the Prison Reform Trust and the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields in an informal partnership and work began.

The beneficiaries - women only

The focus of the initiative was unashamedly concerned with women prison leavers and not the much larger cohort of men, some of whom also leave prison to homelessness. This is because the journey of women through the criminal justice and penal system is fundamentally different to that of men. Secure accommodation and appropriate support are essential to even begin resettlement and rehabilitation. Without that support they cannot resume custody and care of dependent children, gain regular employment, register with a GP, maintain therapy started in prison, overcome addictions or secure entitlements to Universal Credit. If women are sofa-surfing or staying with previous abusers or criminal associates, they are likely to be abused and exploited and are more likely to be recalled or reoffend and be returned to prison.



Decisions are not Just Black or White, HM Prison Isle of Wight

Enquiries and consultations

A small team of London Prisons Mission's volunteers, advised by the Prison Reform Trust and the management of Bronzefield, began extensive enquiries and consultations to identify the causes of post-prison homelessness among vulnerable women and possible solutions.

There are many reasons for women being homeless on leaving prison. It may be that their lives were insecure and they were on the edge of homelessness before custody. Others are victims of domestic abuse or unable to provide safely for children with a dangerous partner. Others did not communicate properly with their landlord and lost their tenancy. Some have become voluntarily homeless by deciding that this is the time to break with an abusive or criminal partner and relocate to begin a new and safer chapter.

Soon after entering prison, every woman's family, housing and domestic circumstances should be reviewed by a suitably trained official to establish any extant or previous tenancies and the action required to maintain or renew them. If previously homeless, or determined to relocate, any possible entitlement to housing gained by previous residence should be explored. It is known that some women conceal previous homelessness or insecurity out of fear that knowledge of this might be used against them. Each woman's housing need on release should be reviewed well in advance of their anticipated release date. As soon as it is known that a woman is potentially homeless on release, the relevant local authority should be approached in line with the Duty to Refer set out in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. This legislation does not provide accommodation on demand, but it describes the processes intended to prevent homelessness.

The enquiries conducted by the Safe Homes team revealed wide variations in the ways local authorities respond to applications under the Duty to Refer. Some deal with these quickly, effectively, and endeavour to match individual needs with accommodation and also to arrange links with voluntary organisations to provide wrap-around support for women who have complex needs. Others refuse to even open a file until the woman actually walks through the prison gate to destitution and danger.

The summit event at St Martin-in-the-Fields

In November 2019, the Safe Homes team convened a Summit Event at St Martin-in-the-Fields for about a hundred pan-sectoral practitioners with the purpose of identifying and sharing solutions to the plight of vulnerable women leaving prison. The event was chaired by Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester and Anglican Bishop for Prisons. Speakers included the Acting Director of HMP & YOI Bronzefield, the GP at Bronzefield, the National Chair of the Independent Monitoring Boards, and two women with lived experience of prison, who had left without accommodation or support. Participants with different skills and experiences of aspects of the penal, criminal justice and housing system took part in discussion groups and many constructive suggestions were examined and exchanged.

All those who took part were well aware that an overarching problem is the chronic shortage of affordable and social housing, especially within and near London. Despite this, all resolved that means must be found to overcome the hopelessness of homelessness for vulnerable women leaving prison. The Safe Homes initiative began in and around London and most of the early enquiries and consultation focused on the issue and potential solutions relevant to the capital. However, it became increasingly apparent that women were leaving prisons throughout the UK to homelessness. Agencies from elsewhere were represented and contributed to the Summit, and many of their solutions could well be suitable for widespread replication. Ministers were not invited to the Summit as it was decided that this was not an occasion to hear what the Government had done or intended to do. All present wanted to clarify the Safe Homes recommendations before presenting them to Ministers.

The Parliamentary, GLA and media campaign to promote the Safe Homes recommendations

The Safe Homes team continued to conduct enquiries despite the Covid pandemic restrictions and by October 2020 the Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison report was completed and ready for publication. A Safe Homes team campaign was planned and managed with the advice and guidance of Tendo Consultants whose support was secured via an unsolicited donation from the Bernard Lewis Family Charitable Trust. High priorities were the presentation of the newly published Safe Homes report and recommendations to London's Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime, Sophie Linden, Justice Minister Lucy Frazer, Housing Minister Eddie Hughes and other key decision makers. The purpose of these meetings was to explain that the report's recommendations are realistic and sustainable and that the changes to policies and practices required to implement these would prevent women leaving prison to homelessness.

Meetings were arranged with relevant All-Party Parliamentary Groups and with scores of MPs and Peers with a particular interest in penal policy issues. Parliamentary events were arranged to promote interest in the subject and the feasibility of the solutions. This work attracted the support of 70+ cross-party MPs and Peers who frequently asked Parliamentary Questions and wrote to Ministers pressing for the adoption of the recommendations. Communications with the GLA have been successful and meetings took place with the Chairs, Members and officials of both the Housing Committee and the Police and Crime Committee, which now support the recommendations.

All this amounts to extremely encouraging progress. A subject which has attracted little interest, where few people even knew of its devastating impact upon vulnerable women and their children, is now much more widely understood. All too often when one raised concerns about women in prison, they were either dismissed or ignored. It was felt that as women comprised only 4% of the prison population, they did not merit much attention. Many more people, including Ministers and senior officials, now acknowledge that women's journey through the penal and criminal justice system is fundamentally different from that of men. Their circumstances and risks on release from prison are different and require different responses.

The task ahead is huge but achievable. The Safe Homes team now must marshal all the support gained to ensure that, within six months, major and minor changes to policies and practices are introduced by central and local government, relevant agencies and voluntary organisations so that no women leave prison to homelessness in future. Please help. You can get in touch here: johnplummer@londonprisonsmission.org



Meltdown, HM Prison Long Lartin, Patrick Holmes
Platinum Award for Painting



Into the Forest, HM Prison & Young Offender Institution Parc, Under
25s Special Award for Watercolour

Volunteering for the London Prisons Mission – Alistair Milward

I first attended meetings of what is now known as the London Prisons Mission back in the autumn of 2014. After meeting with the Chaplain of HMP Wandsworth, I carefully considered how whatever time I had to offer would be of most use to the recipients and both rewarding and sustainable for me.

For me, the families of prisoners deserve better from their involvement in the system and so working as a befriender with the Wandsworth Community Chaplaincy Trust seemed to suit me best. Although not strictly under the control of Wandsworth's Chaplaincy department I completed my training with the Trust by April 2015 and was then put to work. I visited men in the prison in the six-week period prior to their release and then met them at the gate on release day making plans to meet up with them on the outside. Two assignments were quite meaningful and I developed arms-length relationships with the men and (sometimes) their families for a limited period of time. I spoke up for one at a magistrate's hearing and another needed moral support at the immigration tribunal he was required to attend on release.

I've transferred my volunteering slightly closer to home now by supporting the Storybook Dads charity at HMP Wormwood Scrubs. The charity's aim is to facilitate contact between fathers in prison and their children by recording the men reading a bedtime story. The recording is edited at a prison in Devon and we send on the CDs to the families – sometimes with the book itself. Again, this is work that is supervised by Family Visits/PACT as opposed to the Chaplaincy team - but we certainly spend a lot of time borrowing their photocopier!

More generally and recently: I helped research and draft some content for the appendices to the report on Safe Homes for Women initiative; I have for a number of years, I think, compiled a quiz for the Prisons Weeks booklet that is distributed in churches and spoken at my own church, St Georges, on a few occasions on Prisons Week Sundays.



Woman In Armchair 3/20, HM Prison The Verne, Clara Alman Platinum Award for Watercolour and Gouache

Volunteering for London Prisons Mission – Sarah Jane Vernon

I was introduced to London Prisons Mission at a service at St George's Hanover Square for Prisons Week. For several years now I have helped produce the LPM Prisons Week booklet which aims to inform worship around issues relating to the Criminal Justice System and those affected by prison (last year's booklet is available on the CTiW website - <http://ctiw.london/resource-booklet-for-prisons-week/>).

Through John Plummer, the chair of LPM, I was introduced to several multi-faith Chaplaincies in London prisons and invited to volunteer at HMP & YOI Bronzefield in Surrey, the largest female prison in Europe. I was assigned to the prison's Safer Custody Team (SCT) to learn about its work. Chaplaincy teams work closely with the operational SCT ensuring and contributing to the delivery of daily statutory duties within a prison. One of these responsibilities is to actively support Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) - a care planning process for residents deemed at risk of suicide and self-harm.

So, in addition to the thorough training HMP & YOI Bronzefield offer their volunteers, I spent many months during 2019 with the SCT, shadowing operational staff and attending multidisciplinary meetings with residents identified as vulnerable to self-harm or suicide. I learnt a huge amount about many aspects of prison life both from the residents themselves and Prison Custody Officers. In January 2020 I began – by myself, but always with guidance where needed – to fulfil a Chaplaincy responsibility to visit and talk to residents under ACCT review. And then Covid 19 and a national lockdown ensued.

During the time I spent with the Safer Custody Team, I occasionally volunteered to assist the HMP Bronzefield "Through the Gate" Chaplain in his work meeting women in the 'holding cell' just prior to their exit. Many women leave prison with no one to greet them; some don't even know where they are going. He works with some of the most chaotic residents in the prison system but is of the view that "if the first hour goes well there is a chance the second and third will also go well, and that she might get to her appointments that day".



Inside the Droste Effect, HM Young Offender Institution Feltham, Arts Society Chiswick Gold Award for Drawing

Volunteering for London Prisons Mission – arranging prisoners art shows by Sarah Tubbs

LPM has organised two shows of prisoners' art to date: in Spring 2018 First Impressions – Portraits from Prison, was curated by Koestler Arts from their awards and was shown in St James's Church Piccadilly, Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church and St Martin-in-the-Fields; the second, Connections in October 2019, showing artwork by prisoners from HMP Lewes curated by LPM, with Sussex Prisoners' Families and Spurgeons, shown in Central Hall Westminster.

In Spring 2021 we had hoped to show art from two prisons that LPM work closely with, HMP Wandsworth and HMP & YOI Bronzefield. The intention was a show based on the Stations of Cross in turn inspired by the 2020 Vatican's stations using texts written by prisoners from Padua, family members, prison visitors and chaplains, and a magistrate. Those who took part found the texts very moving and we believe something similar could draw on written contributions from the UK criminal justice system.

Prisoners' artwork can be commissioned (once post-Covid access is properly available) to this theme and we are still considering whether a walking trail through 14 Westminster churches might be the best approach or just using one church to host a show of the stations in their entirety. It seems the public art walk, The Line <https://the-line.org> is proving popular and this type of exhibition might draw interest from church congregations, which you may remember is one of our founding objectives: to inform this audience of issues concerning the criminal justice system.



Prisons Week 2021

Prisons Week this year runs from 10 to 16 October. The week is supported by all the major church denominations and leading Christian organisations in the sector. Prisons Week has prepared prayer literature for the Christian community for over 40 years to use as it prays for the needs of all those affected by prisons: prisoners and victims, their families, their communities, those working and volunteering in prisons and the criminal justice system.

In past years, London Prisons Mission has prepared a booklet for churches in London to use, especially member churches of Churches Together in Westminster. This year we are unable to because all of our small team have been fully employed on the Safe Homes initiative. Our booklet from 2020 is still available at <https://www.londonprisonsmission.org/prisons-week> and it contains prayers and contemplations by Church leaders on issues surrounding prisons, and the views of policy influencers and practitioners in the field of penal reform. The focus of this booklet is the experience of women in prison, to tie in with the Safe Homes for Women Initiative we have co-ordinated.

We encourage all churches in Westminster to organise special events and reflections during Prisons Week to pray for those involved with and affected by the criminal justice system and to visit the Prisons Week website at <https://prisonweek.org/> where you will find a very useful prayer leaflet, video clip and other resources.

The Commons Select Committee on Justice inquiry into women in prison

On 26 April this year, the Select Committee on Justice in the House of Commons launched an inquiry into Government justice policy and its impact on women in prison. You've probably heard of or seen Select Committees, but it's not always clear what they are and what they do. In the House of Commons, there's a Select Committee looking at the work of every Government department (and some others that look at cross-departmental policy.) They typically consist of 11 MPs, with the party balance reflecting that in the Commons. All the MPs are Back Benchers (that is, not Ministers or Shadow Ministers) and they are all elected on to the Committee by their fellow MPs. As a result, they tend to be independent of Government influence and can freely criticise Government policy. Their aim, however, is to make recommendations to Government which will improve policy.

The overarching focus of this inquiry was how to reduce the number of women in prison, how to improve their conditions and resettlement after detention, and how to reduce re-offending. It became clear to the London Prisons Mission team that the scope of the inquiry overlapped significantly with the work we had co-ordinated in the Safe Homes For Women initiative. The first stage of an inquiry is typically to ask for written evidence in response to terms of reference – areas that the Committee wants to look at in detail, with questions to prompt those wishing to submit evidence. London Prisons Mission submitted a 2,500 word brief as written evidence, focusing on women's specific resettlement needs, adequate housing provision for women on leaving prison and the protocol surrounding women's release from prison. We embedded some of the key findings of the Safe Homes report as recommendations to the Committee.

We were very pleased to see that the Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, a keen supporter of the Safe Homes For Women initiative, and the Bishop for Prisons in England and Wales, submitted evidence to the Committee. In her evidence she referred to her work on the Safe Homes initiative and commended its findings. Many other key stakeholders who participated in the initiative also submitted evidence including the (London) Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, Clinks, Women In Prison, the Prison Reform Trust, Hibiscus Initiatives and Changing Lives.

The Committee took oral evidence – where MPs have an opportunity to question those who've submitted evidence in person – on 6 July and 20 July. We were very pleased to see they took the opportunity to talk to women with direct experience of the justice system. We await any further oral evidence sessions when the House of Commons returns after recess, and of course, the final report of the Committee including its recommendations to the Government.

For more details about the inquiry: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1211/women-in-prison/>



Petals in the Wind, Merseyside CRC - Liverpool, Frederik Davies Silver Award for Painting



Images courtesy of Koestler Arts.

Koestler Arts has been unlocking the talent inside the criminal justice system since 1962. Artworks in this newsletter were submitted to the Koestler Awards in 2020. Remarkably during the pandemic the resilience, creativity and drive of the entrants and staff supporting them shone through and there were only 1000 fewer entries than in 2019, 6419 entries in total.