



Churches
Together in
Westminster

An Occasional Newsletter

Welcome to Issue 19 (Spring/Summer 2020) of our Occasional Newsletter. Please feel free to photocopy this for distribution amongst your congregation.

Much has happened since we sent you our last Newsletter in February, and in many respects the world as we knew it then has changed, perhaps irreversibly. Hopefully, we are now beginning to slowly emerge from the lockdown and are seeing a reduction in both infections and emergency measures.

However, as life adjusts to what is being called the “new normal” we must not forget on the one hand the lives that were sadly lost to Covid-19, and on the other the spirit of unity, felt even in self-isolation, when we applauded the NHS staff, essential workers, and the volunteers and good neighbours who have worked tirelessly in large and small ways to help others during this difficult time. We give thanks for them all.

Ingenuity and the Internet have kept us in touch. Livestreaming has permitted services to be broadcast from many churches closed to the public. Indeed, it is believed that these “virtual congregations” may well have exceeded actual normal weekly congregations, so much so that many churches are thinking about continuing livestreaming their services even after restrictions are lifted.

Sadly, we still have a long way to go. Companies have had to close, many people face losing their jobs and even their homes, or perhaps loved family members, causing hardship, worry and grief. Faith in God of those affected is being severely tested. They need our continued support and prayers.

As you will see on page 3, Central London Catholic Churches was just one of the many voluntary organisations providing food and help to the homeless and needy. The London Prisons Mission is working to find safe accommodation for women leaving prisons (page 5), and the London Churches Refugee Fund (page 2) is working to help destitute refugees and asylum seekers.

The CTiW Executive held a meeting via Zoom on 18 May, but it was not possible to hold our usual CTiW Annual Ecumenical Pentecost Service this year. Instead an Ecumenical Pentecost Mass, celebrated by Fr Dominic Robinson SJ, was livestreamed from Farm Street Church on Sunday, 31 May, and included recorded music by Soul Sanctuary Choir and the Choirs of Farm Street and All Saints, Margaret Street. We hope to be able to bring you news of future CTiW events later in the year once things are more settled.

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LONDON CHURCHES REFUGEE FUND

AN UNCOMFORTABLE CHALLENGE: LONDON'S DESTITUTE ASYLUM SEEKERS

People rarely flee their country unless they are desperate - fearful that they and their families will be killed, imprisoned, or tortured. Many risk their lives in order to avoid or escape persecution in search of safe and secure living conditions for themselves and their children.

But when asylum-seekers arrive in the UK the media focus is largely on the growing numbers rather than the conflict, injustice or oppression from which they are fleeing. They are treated as numbers, not as human beings. As a result, the people of London are blind to the ongoing plight of the thousands of refugees in their midst, thereby creating ever greater challenges for those dedicated to supporting the refugee community here in London.

In the face of such need the Bishop of Edmonton has said: *"We seek to help create a humanity which recognises that it is our collective responsibility to respond with compassion and love."*

The ecumenical "London Churches Refugee Fund" was established for just this purpose, making twice yearly small grants of up to £850 each to numerous front-line Church and Community Refugee Projects across London. With these grants Refugee Projects are enabled to purchase Travel & Phone Cards, and to make one-off emergency cash payments, to the thousands of destitute asylum seekers accessing their services (drop-in, advice, support, food etc), to enable them to phone friends, family and solicitors; to visit the Home Office to pursue their asylum claims; and to simply survive their destitution in what is an increasingly hostile environment.

In the 14 years since The London Churches Refugee Fund was launched it has made 425 grants (totalling over £250,000) to more than 80 different front-line refugee projects across London; many of whom re-apply for a grant year after year.

This Fund, unique in London, is dedicated solely to the support of *destitute* refugees – traumatised people in the most desperate need, with no access to public funds, housing, or other services, and who are not allowed to work. The Coronavirus pandemic has had even more impact on them than on other vulnerable people.

The Fund is totally reliant on the donations of individuals and churches, every penny raised is re-distributed in Grants following a simple application process and rigorous scrutiny and monitoring by the Trustees. All work is undertaken voluntarily by Trustees, they have no office and no paid staff.

"Your support enables the Fund to make grants that support front-line services. I cannot exaggerate the benefit your donations make for someone, man, women, a parent and child who is reduced to total dependence on other fellow human beings"

Revd. Chris Brice, Chair

MAKE A REGULAR CONTRIBUTION

The Fund is now launching a fresh appeal to Christians, and other people of goodwill, across London to become one of the **Foundation Donors** by committing to at least £10 per month by standing order, and gift-aiding it. They already have some 60 foundation donors and are aiming to reach 100 during 2020.

PLEASE DONATE NOW

Go the following link to download a standing order and gift aid form or to make a one off donation.

<http://www.help4refugees.co.uk/donate/4587053339>

OR

By post: Make cheques payable to "London Churches Refugee Fund" and send to the Treasurer, LCRF, 144 Ladywell Road, London SE13 7HU

And consider mobilising your Church

Could you:

- Hold a special collection at a Refugee Week (18-25 June) service or at a Major Festival such as Christmas or Easter?
- Hold a sponsored hymn singing or other sponsored event to support them?
- Place their flyers and a special collection box in church?
- Raise money for LCRF at a harvest supper or (online) event?
- Allocate part of your annual Mission Giving to LCRF?
- Invite a guest preacher from LCRF to one of your services?

Over to you!

Jesus said,.... Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25)

A Report from Central London Catholic Churches Trafalgar Square Refreshment Hub by Jen Copestake

Over 150 homeless guests are welcomed five days a week at the Central London Catholic Churches refreshment hub in Trafalgar Square.

Our mission is to provide our guests with refreshment and friendship at a time of great need. The coronavirus pandemic has presented many challenges for us all. For those who are also homeless these challenges are multiplied. Services across the city have been shut and familiar ways of getting food, shelter and toiletries may not currently be available. For some, this is their first experience of being homeless and it is a very daunting time.

A group of volunteers from Farm Street Church, Holy Apostles Pimlico, Our Most Holy Redeemer Chelsea, Westminster Cathedral, the Catholic Union and Caritas got together with Westminster Council to create a new mobile service.



We provide anyone who needs it with a hot drink, water, energy drinks and snacks, from Monday to Wednesday and on Saturday and Sunday from 11am to 1pm.

We can also offer sleeping bags, toiletries and items of clothing. We have partnered with the Jesus Centre on Margaret Street to offer a shower referral service. This has been absolutely critical for our guests, many of whom have been without access to showers during the lockdown.

We are delighted to have recently welcomed our first volunteer from St George's Church, Hanover Square and would be very glad to hear from anyone else who would like to volunteer or donate to our work.

Please contact project coordinator Jen Copestake on CentralLondonCatholicChurches@gmail.com for more information.

LONDON PRISONS MISSION

Current Issues in the British Prisons System: The Impact of the Covid 19 Pandemic

As the Covid pandemic swept across Europe, I anticipated a very heavy death toll among both inmates and staff throughout the British prison system. Our prisons are overcrowded with men, women, and children of generally poor mental and physical health; often confined in insanitary conditions and with only limited access to health services. Most European governments introduced emergency measures when the lockdown was introduced to reduce prison populations by early release programmes and the suspension of new custodial sentences. There were riots in several Italian prisons, triggered by severe restrictions and the ban on family visits.

My anticipation of a very serious crisis was not wild or alarmist, but based on many years of experience of the prison system in the UK and overseas. It was also shared by many individuals and organisations with an in-depth understanding of the prison system.

In fact, as it stands at the end of May 2020, 22 prisoners and 8 staff are known to have died as a result of Covid, with a further 411 prisoners and 540 staff having been tested positive. This is a quite remarkable achievement, mainly attributable to two factors: one positive and one potentially very worrying. The first is that prison management and staff, directed by the National Prison and Probation Service (NPPS) have delivered substantially improved and effective internal communications. By these means, the new restrictions on activities and movement have been presented to inmates in such a way that they are widely accepted, observed and understood to be essential. The second is that extremely severe restrictions have been imposed, on the direction of NPPS, confining inmates to their single or shared cells for 23 - 24 hours each day. There are no prison activities being held out of cell – and a complete suspension has been placed on education, work, training, exercise and recreation events, as well as chapel worship for inmates of any faiths. There is very limited “association”, the period during which prisoners are usually allowed

out of cells and onto the wing, for 30 minutes or an hour each day. Now, only one or two inmates at a time are unlocked to go for a shower.

To reduce the risk of Covid transmission, all family visits have been suspended, which, in view of fears of the pandemic, causes significant anxiety and distress to both parties. Additionally, all professional, probation or resettlement-related visits are either prohibited or conducted by video link. Meanwhile, prison officers continue to go in and out of the prison daily.

There is no doubt that these measures have played a major part in containing the high risk of the rapid and potentially catastrophic spread of the virus throughout the system. However, the severity of the restrictions necessarily prevents the realisation of the primary purpose of imprisonment: namely, to work towards the rehabilitation of convicted criminals and enable their journey to independent, crime-free lives on exiting prison. The impact of the restrictions, particularly upon vulnerable prisoners, amounts to cruel and unjustifiable punishment. Such punitive measures are evidently not sustainable and might reasonably cause future harm to the prison population far outweighing the potential harm the measures sought to mitigate.

(The reports of the HM Prisons Inspectorate, which have undertaken brief one day Covid-focused inspections of a sample of prisons, are available to the public and make for very interesting reading.)

On 28th May it was announced that another five inmates held in prisons in England and Wales had taken their own lives over six days. Eleven had committed suicide since the lockdown was introduced. Richard Garside, Director of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (CCJS) explained that “We will never know how many of the 16 prisoners who have taken their own lives since the lockdown would still be alive today, had the government taken a more evidenced,

compassionate and visionary approach to tackling coronavirus in prisons. What we do know is that if further deaths are to be prevented, the government needs to change direction.” Deborah Coles, also of CCJS added “...indefinite solitary confinement is the harrowing reality for men, women and children across the prison estate, with harmful consequences for both mental and physical health.” She goes on to call on the government to “...rapidly reduce the prison population. This course of action can best protect the lives of both prisoners and staff”.

The views expressed above are those of John Plummer and not necessarily of the London Prisons Mission.

LONDON PRISONS MISSION - WORK DURING THE PANDEMIC

The work of the London Prisons Mission (LPM) usually involves regular attendance by volunteers inside several of London’s prisons to undertake a range of activities in support of the Managing Chaplain and the multi-faith Chaplaincy Team. This work, along with all other external visits, has been suspended during the pandemic lockdown. When the pandemic restrictions ease, additional volunteers will be needed urgently and suitable training and support will be given for a wide variety of tasks.

Volunteers are presently spending more time communicating information about the prison system, to churches and congregations. Such communications are another of the primary purposes of the LPM. Many articles have been written for the E-Bulletins and Newsletters published by churches about the impact of the Covid pandemic, the role of Chaplains and brief personal stories to keep the subject in front of church people and encourage well informed discussion. Some of these articles have been republished far beyond London.

SAFE HOMES FOR WOMEN LEAVING PRISON

The LPM is the leading partner of a group of organisations determined to identify and strive towards realistic and sustainable solutions to the plight of vulnerable women discharged from prison to homelessness. The other partners are the Prison Reform Trust, HMP & YOI Bronzefield, St Martin in the Fields and the Mayor’s Office for Police and Crime (MOPAC). A Summit Event was held at St Martin in the Fields last November attended by 100+ leaders of public, private and voluntary sector organisations with special interests and responsibilities in this field. This was Chaired by Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester and Bishop for Women’s Prisons.

Since the Summit, extensive consultations and enquiries have been undertaken and are continuing in preparation of Reports and Recommendations we are preparing for presentation to Ministers of the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, the Ministry of Justice and the Mayor of London. These reports will aim to convince the Ministers and Mayor of the necessary changes in policies and practices to avoid discharges to homelessness in future. These recommendations will be accompanied by several models of good practice which could be considered for replication elsewhere.

This is the biggest and most demanding project undertaken yet by the LPM. It has benefitted from a grant from Westminster Abbey, the entire Christmas Carol Service collection of St George’s Hanover Square and a grant from the Hornby Lonsdale Charitable Trust. More help is however needed.

PRISONS WEEK AND SHOWS OF ART BY PRISONERS

Since 2015, the LPM has published booklets of material to encourage ordained and lay leaders of churches of all denominations to arrange interesting activities to highlight the very worrying issues around prison system to diverse congrega-

-tions. This has been very well received and used by churches far beyond London.

Prisons Week this year will be marked from 11th to 18th October (two Sundays). The booklet will again include new art work provided by Koestler Arts, a quiz and other useful material, parts of which are easily cut and pasted into Orders of Service or church newsletters. Sarah Jane Vernon is presently collecting new material for the booklet and would welcome contributions or suggestions.

A small team, led by Sarah Tubbs, is also working towards a new series of Shows of Art by Prisoners - which it is hoped will be displayed in several central London churches in the spring of 2021. The purpose is to use the artwork as the focus for discussions and lectures about the penal and criminal justice system, and the role of prison chaplains.

This team is also exploring the prospect of devising a special version of the Stations of the Cross based on the journeys of a set of people, each of whom has a particular role or experience of the prison system – be that magistrate, inmate, lawyer, chaplain, family member etc. The aim is for this to be completed, and presented alongside visual artwork, for use by churches at Easter-tide 2021.

RECOMMENDED READING

“The Prison Doctor – My time inside Britain’s notorious jails” by Dr Amanda Brown (Harper Collins)

Dr Amanda Brown is a doctor at HMP & YOI Bronzefield and a keen supporter of the Safe Homes initiative.

“One Mile to Make a Difference – Journeying with former prisoners on their road to true freedom” by Simeon Sturney (Grace Publishing)

Simeon Sturney is the Through the Gate Chaplain of HMP & YOI Bronzefield, and also a keen supporter of the Safe Homes initiative.

“Koestler Voices – New Poetry from Prisons” (Koestler Arts)

A new collection of poetry and reflections written by men, women and children in prisons, which is frequently used within church services.

For further information about any aspect of the present and future work of the London Prisons Mission please contact its Coordinator, John Plummer, Tel: 020 7272 1639 Mob 07967 761841, Email johnplummer@londonprisonsmission.org

Additional Regular Volunteers Needed

The London Prisons Mission urgently needs to recruit more regular volunteers to work inside prisons, as well as to support a wide range of interesting and very useful functions outside.

Volunteers are given suitable preparation and training and are closely supported by Prison Chaplains. They also attend bi-monthly Review Meetings, at which they share learning, experiences and difficulties with other volunteers. The work requires commitment and is sometimes challenging and frustrating, but many volunteers also find it absorbing and rewarding. Please contact the Coordinator for further information.

The London Prisons Mission also needs more churches to take steps to ensure that congregations become accurately informed about the crisis within the criminal justice and penal system. This suffers chronic overcrowding, inadequate staffing, poor education and rehabilitation services. The present arrangements fail the victims of crime, the offenders, the tax payers, those who work prisons and the wider community.