



PRISONS MISSION REPORT TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 22 JANUARY 2018

CRISIS IN PRISONS

The crisis in British prisons continues. In December 2017 95,800 men, women and children were held in British prisons, more per head of population than any other western European nation. Suicides, self-harm and violence are at shocking levels and disturbances and riots common place. Overcrowding in dark and dirty, often Victorian, establishments with insufficient adequately trained staff, impairs the capacity to deliver effective education, meaningful activities and mental health services – all essential to reduce excessive reoffending levels. Many vulnerable people detained are further damaged by incarceration and thus less able to become independent, law abiding and useful citizens on discharge.

Prisons simply do not work in the interests of victims of crime, offenders, taxpayers or wider society. Against this tragic and avoidable background, the efforts of a few CTiW member churches to work in London prisons could seem almost worthless. Work within the prison system is often intensely frustrating and requires endless patience and perseverance. Despite the difficulties, our experience convinces us that it is not only worthwhile, but essential. We are determined to maintain and improve the quality and effectiveness of the Prisons Mission and we need the support and encouragement of members. Men, women and children are held in prison in our name. They are largely out of sight, but must never be out of mind.

CHURCHES

The three founding churches, St James, Piccadilly, St George's Hanover Square and St Martin in the Fields, have continued to learn and develop, with increasing numbers of volunteers working towards the purposes of the Prisons Mission:

- To provide support and assistance identified and needed by the multi-faith Chaplaincy Teams.
- For volunteers to practice their Christian ministry with a vulnerable and often neglected section of society.
- For congregations of the engaged churches to become better informed about prisoners, their families, prison staff, victims of crime and issues concerning the criminal justice system.

Volunteers from All Saints Fulham (CofE) and Notre Dame de France (RC) have become actively involved with the Prisons Mission and are expected to formally engage shortly. Several other churches are interested and regularly informed about the development of the initiative. Engagement by churches requires more than the recruitment of volunteers willing to invest time and energy into the outreach work. The commitment of the church is required and further expansion of the Prisons Mission is thus conducted with great care.

PRISONS

Prisons Mission volunteers continue to support the Chaplaincy Team of HMP Wandsworth, despite major changes to the management, staff and entire establishment. It is expected

that activities will become more substantial in 2018. Work at HMP Wormwood Scrubs is progressing well and all members of the multi-faith Chaplaincy Team are keen to make effective use of Prisons Mission volunteers, especially with a new pre and post-discharge mentoring programme and with the Visitors Centre by the gate. HMP & YOI Bronzefield is now the biggest prison for women and girls in Europe, with 550 adults and young people remanded or serving both short and long sentences. The Director and the Managing Chaplain aim to deploy volunteers imaginatively, in order to improve outcomes for inmates and to reduce reoffending. The Prisons Mission is not presently delivering services at HMPs Brixton and Pentonville, but is communicating with both Managing Chaplains and is ready and willing to do so.

IMMIGRATION REMOVAL CENTRES (IRCs)

Several CTiW member churches are actively involved with services for refugees and asylum seekers, and thus concerned about the plight of people detained in IRCs. These are prisons in all but name, managed by private sector companies, under contract with the Home Office. IRCs hold nearly 30,000 people each year, subject to Immigration Act powers. Many have applied for asylum, or have outstanding appeals against deportation, and about 40% are eventually allowed to remain in the UK, either temporarily or permanently.

The Prisons Mission Coordinator, Finna Ayres and Alistair Milward visited the IRC at Heathrow, which holds 600 men and 30 women, for meetings with the Managing Chaplain and a tour of the establishment. Subsequently, several groups of present and potential volunteers, from all the active churches, also visited. It is clear that the multi-faith Chaplaincy Team, and many of the detainees, would value the regular attendance of Prisons Mission volunteers. We are now considering how such volunteers might best be deployed.

SEX OFFENDERS

Men convicted of sex offences are a growing section of the prison population. They are often isolated and vulnerable to violence while in custody and have limited prospects of home, family, or employment on discharge. Our volunteers observe that these inmates are routinely excluded from pre and post-discharge mentoring programmes and other chaplaincy services.

The Coordinator and Finna Ayres made enquiries about the possibility of volunteers being able to play a part in the resettlement and rehabilitation of discharged sex offenders. This has resulted in three volunteers undertaking training with Circles UK, a specialist agency with an impressive record of achievement in reducing levels of reoffending through carefully managed group work with sex offenders.

PRISONS WEEK

In October each year, the Prisons Mission collects and compiles resources to encourage and enable churches to mark Prisons Week effectively. The Foreword to the 2017 booklet was written by Bishop Richard Moth, the Roman Catholic Bishop for Prisons. The growing experience of volunteers has added to the authenticity of the material, which is widely used by churches, of all denominations, well beyond central London. The Prisons Week booklet is a team effort, led by Sarah Jane Vernon and enriched by the use of artwork donated by the Koestler Trust. The objective is to bring the subject of prisons and the criminal justice system to the attention of congregations of churches where there is little previous knowledge or interest.

If you have any questions about any aspect of this brief report or require further information about the Prisons Mission, please contact the Coordinator.

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