**REPORT OF THE PRISONS MISSION TO THE ANNUAL MEETING**

**OF CHURCHES TOGETHER IN WESTMINSTER ON 21st JANUARY 2019**

**CRISIS IN PRISONS**

It is, at last, officially acknowledged that the British prison system is in “crisis”.  HMP Birmingham has been re-nationalised after riots and the Prisons Minister has identified the “ten worst jails”, which include HMP Wormwood Scrubs, here in London.  Unfortunately, these are only the outward and visible signs of a very deep and widespread malaise.  Our prisons consistently fail offenders, victims of crime and tax-payers.  The high levels of re-offending are further evidence of failure.  Most prisons are grossly overcrowded, have too few adequately trained staff and are required to detain many vulnerable men, women and children with acute mental health and educational needs, for whom incarceration offers little prospect of recovery.

The increased media attention might have resulted in greater public awareness, not only to the chaos in particular prisons, but to the systemic defects of the entire system.  There is little evidence that either church-goers or the general public are any more concerned, or determined to influence change and reform.  If such apathy persists at a time of “crisis” and “riots” and nearly 100,000 men, women and children are held in British prisons, there is clearly an urgent need for our Prisons Mission, and many other initiatives in this field, to become very much more effective and vigorous.

**CHURCHES**

The three founding churches, St James’s Piccadilly, St Martin-in-the-Fields and St George’s Hanover Square, have been joined by All Saint’s Fulham and Notre Dame de France of Leicester Square.  They are committed to the purposes of the Prisons Mission.

* To provide support and assistance identified and needed by the multi-faith Prisons 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.

Several other churches actively support the Prisons Mission, receive advice and information and are presently considering engagement.

**VOLUNTEERS**

Volunteers are recruited from these churches to undertake work inside prisons and related work in support of the purposes of the Prisons Mission.  They are supported by more experienced colleagues, attend regular meetings to review progress and problems and learn from each other.  They also make introductory visits to prisons to meet members of the multi-faith Chaplaincy Teams and discuss how best their individual skills, experience and available time can be matched with the needs of the chaplains and inmates.  The activities undertaken by the volunteers vary widely and usually expand and change as each volunteer becomes more familiar with the strange and often initially quite hostile environment.  Volunteers invariably find their regular visits and the time spent “behind prison walls” to be both challenging and rewarding.  More volunteers are needed and a Volunteer Recruitment leaflet can be found on the CTiW web-site.

**PRISONS**

Work continues at HMPs Wormwood Scrubs and Wandsworth and has developed at HMP & YOI Bronzefield.  The latter contains some 550 women and girls (aged 10-17) who are remanded while awaiting trial or sentence, as well as those serving either short or “life” prison sentences.  Work within the prison system is often intensely frustrating and requires endless patience and perseverance.  Many vulnerable people are further damaged by incarceration and thus less able to become independent, law abiding and useful; citizens on discharge.  Against this tragic and avoidable background, the efforts of our Prisons Mission can seem almost worthless.  Despite the difficulties, our experience convinces us that it is not only worthwhile, but essential.

**IMMIGRATION REMOVAL CENTRES**

The centre at Heathrow airport is used to detain some 600 men and 30 women.  Nearly 30,000 such people, who are subject to immigration controls are detained in such centres throughout Britain each year, while awaiting outstanding appeals and pending deportation or removal.  About 40% of these are eventually allowed to remain in this country, either temporarily or permanently.  Many such people are detained indefinitely, without charge, trial, conviction, or sentence.  They often suffer great fear and anxiety, especially those who have claimed asylum.

Our work in support of the multi-faith Chaplaincy Team at Heathrow IRC has been led by volunteers from Notre Dame de France, which church has a long record of work with generations of refugees and asylum seekers.  Additional volunteers are also needed for this important work.

**VOLUNTEERS OUTSIDE PRISONS**

Prisons Mission volunteers also undertake useful work without going inside prisons.  This includes working with a specialist, professional organisation to support recently discharged sex-offenders, and promoting Prisoners Penfriends to exchange regular letters with serving offenders.  Suitable training and security arrangements are provided. There is also a growing need for some volunteers to devote regular time to improving communications with churches.

**PRISONS WEEK**

Once again this year, considerable effort was invested in the production of our new booklet of resource material for Prisons Week.  This was circulated far beyond London and was widely described as the best yet.  It is intended to encourage and enable ordained and lay people of all denominations to devise interesting and effective services and other activities for Prisons Week.  The booklet contains much information about the prisons system and lists of relevant organisations, so that it can be useful for 52 weeks.

**SHOWS OF ART BY PRISONERS**

During the spring and summer the Prisons Mission arranged Shows of Art by Prisoners, curated by the Koestler Trust, at three central London churches - St James’s Piccadilly, Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church and St Martin-in-the-Fields.  The impressive displays of visual arts attracted many visitors, but the art was deployed as the focus for a series of lectures, discussions and events, which brought the knowledge of experts to the attention of a wider audience.  A full report of these shows and the related events is set out in CTiW Newsletter Number 13, available on the website.

**CHAPLAINCY AWAY DAY**

Multi-faith Chaplaincy Teams work under often intense daily pressures in prisons.  Almost all their “congregations” are very anxious, angry, depressed, distressed, resentful, remorseful, and often also mentally ill and addicted.  The chaplains are often rather detached from their own churches, temples, or mosques and have little external support.  After consultation about this, the team at HMP Wormwood Scrubs accepted an invitation to hold an Away Day, jointly hosted by the Prisons Mission and St Martin-in-the-Fields.  Twenty one members, including part-timers and chaplaincy volunteers spent the entire day at the church, as our guests.  This was the first time they had ever attended an off-site conference and found it extremely productive.  This programme will be repeated and extended in the future.

**COMMUNICATIONS**

The crisis in the British prisons system is such that the Prisons Mission must improve its efforts to achieve its third purpose – for congregations to “become better informed about prisoners, their families, prison staff, victims of crime and issues concerning the criminal justice system”.  For this purpose the Prisons Mission aims to publish a regular Newsletter to aid churches to do this much better in the future.

If you have any questions about this report or require further information about the Prisons Mission, please contact the Coordinator, John Plummer (johnplummer.audax@gmail.com)  Tel. 0207 272 1639.