

Partnership between Faith and Prisons

Roger Grimshaw and Leslie Sanchez look at how faith-based organisations, prisoners and the modern chaplaincy are working together.

Since both are concerned with rectifying wrongs, religion and imprisonment have, for good or ill, formed close relations in recent centuries. How those links have actually evolved has been a complicated story that shows no signs of losing its fascination and relevance.

Ever since enlightened approaches to imprisonment were advocated, religious values have been a source of criticism as well as a basis for conscientious action to change prisons and to work with prisoners in new ways. The Quakers Elizabeth Fry and her brother J.J. Gurney placed their hopes on voluntary lay visitors bringing the influence of kindness and virtue to bear on prisoners. Religious conversion was a common aim of prison reformers and so chaplains were seen as a vital part of the prison (Morris and Rothman 1995).

On the other hand, 'official' religion associated with the established church has sometimes been viewed as a possible vehicle for the legitimisation of poor or indifferent practice in prison. There is historical evidence showing how prisoners perceived the perfunctory and compliant attitudes of some ministers (Pratt 2002). It would not be surprising if this time-serving image was rejected by committed believers working in today's prisons.

More recently there has been a good deal of soul-searching about issues that have arisen from the diversity of faiths in modern societies. Within the criminal justice system the increasing numbers of prisoners from different world religions has led the Prison Service to make considerable efforts to bring about a more inclusive and multi-faith approach to religious activities and provision. As part of this opening to a wider social scene there have been movements to broaden the range of organisations working with prisoners so that they can access a much stronger social support network, just as ordinary believers can access a community of support locally. The Community Chaplaincy in the UK is an example of this reorientation, replacing individual ministry with a grouping of organisations that form a bridge into the community.

Currently we see how prison strategies and management are focusing on mechanisms of change in prisoners that, in interesting ways, echo the ambitions of religious believers. Policies now call for prisoners to address their offending behaviour through programmes of cognitive change, and there is much emphasis on the need for support to achieve the goals of successful resettlement and a 'crime-free' lifestyle. Anyone familiar with an established religion knows that it can demand departures from a previous lifestyle, learning new principles from an approved literature, and forging relationships with like-minded individuals and groups who act as reference points and mentors. Moreover, religion may have a cultural role as a mediator of the social and personal change envisaged by correctional services. With growing diversity the relevance of religion to some prisoners may be increasing, rather than diminishing in accordance with the prophecies of secularism.

A survey of voluntary faith-based activity in prisons

A recent research project initiated by the Chaplain General of the Prison Service, conducted by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies and supported by CLINKS, has given an insight into the current extent of faith-based organisational work linked to prisons. This is significant, with several thousand chaplaincy volunteers contributing to prisoner activity each year. Part Two of the research, due to start shortly, will identify how to strengthen this work across the prison estate. Additionally, with the national focus on effective resettlement of prisoners it will also explore how the important contribution made by the faith sector within prisons can be sustained within the community.

The prisons in the sample were drawn from a spectrum across the estate. They included 29 training prisons, 26 local prisons, 12 female prisons, 15 designated male YOIs, 4 dispersal prisons, 4 open prisons, and 3 resettlement prisons.

Faith-based organisations

464 organisations were named as working in the prisons. The most frequently described organisations were Prison Fellowship, the Salvation Army, the Mothers Union, and Gideon's. Many of the rest were local and particular organisations, most of them Christian. Few of the organisations were linked to minority faiths: for example, seven Muslim organisations were named.

What are the activities performed by the voluntary faith-based sector? Unsurprisingly, prayers, worship, religious education, discussion groups and befriending were very common activities, and personal counselling was reported in over half. Less predictably, a substantial minority of prisons hosted faith-based voluntary work on issues such as relationships, family support, suicide prevention, victim awareness and accommodation/support after release. Also a significant proportion of prisons featured activities on culture/language, race relations and drug/alcohol work.

Work with ex-prisoners

Replies to the request for information about organisations working with ex-prisoners showed a mixed picture. There were many prisons where no such organisation was mentioned, though Prison Fellowship, the Salvation Army, Alpha, Victory Outreach, and Emmanuel Prison Ministries were represented in more than one prison. Interesting examples included: the Muslim Welfare Association which was working with ex-prisoners from HMP Acklington; and the Community Chaplaincies described at Gloucester and Swansea Prisons.

Good practice

Chaplains were asked to describe an example of good practice in work involving partnership between a faith-based organisation and the Prison Service. Examples were given of several types of support to prisoners.



Julie Grogan

The London Central Mosque, Regent's Park.

Resettlement support - Downview Chaplaincy stated that the Mothers Union was organising monthly meetings and putting women in contact with an organisation in their home countries on release. The Salvation Army was organising visits from its workers with women sex workers to visit women during the sentence so maintaining continuity of care and support.

Wandsworth chaplaincy referred to two voluntary chaplains who have experiences running hostels for ex-offenders, and they have also been able to find accommodation for several inmates, as well as helping to coordinate Alpha courses. Acklington chaplaincy stated that there had been a number of situations where they had been able, through the work of the Salvation Army, to help with accommodation on release. Further, a number of volunteers have continued to support inmates on release and offer advice and help where necessary.

Parenting - Stoke Heath chaplaincy described a recent course called 'Being Dad' for young offenders with children, which is run jointly with Lichfield Diocese and the chaplaincy. Two volunteers and a chaplain run the course. The education department and the prison helped provide money for toys and a minibus for transporting children and partners. The governor presented certificates. A prison officer will help deliver the course in future, according to the current plan.

Victim awareness - Whitemoor chaplaincy reported that volunteers worked closely with prisoners who are difficult to manage. A Sycamore Tree course is run with Prison Fellowship volunteers. Now the psychology department was recommending the course to prisoners.

Cultural needs - Buckley Hall chaplaincy stated that with the increase of Jamaican prisoners, a different style of worship on Sunday was needed. A Pentecostal church comes in every two weeks to lead Sunday worship and provide a Pentecostal minister. Ashwell chaplaincy stated that their gospel group

provides a worship style that the chaplaincy team cannot provide, and also for Christians of ethnic minorities, "much encouragement and support".

Multifaith work - Blakenhurst chaplaincy reported a Spirituality group, meeting two hours a week. It consists of music and meditation, prayer and discussion, as a multi-faith initiative involving Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and people of no faith.

What does the future hold?

It can be seen that the agenda in correctional services has intriguing affinities of principle with a religious agenda. The question is how substantial and valuable a partnership can be. Will it bring forth fruit in the shape of services that prisoners will truly value? To be successful those services must take account of a diversity in prisons that includes religion as well as ethnicity. Part of the answer is about the internal working of prisons but another part is about external support. The changing profile of religious affiliation in prisons demands adaptation in the profile of support groups and organisations. For minority religious groups, links into their faith communities deserve attention equal to that given to the links with mainstream communities. The more complex and delicate issue of religious groups providing a choice of services to prisoners, irrespective of their religious affiliation, also may need to be discussed more fully.

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References:

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