

Rehabilitation or Evangelism? Christian organisations in prisons

Clare Sparks looks at the service offered to prisoners by Sycamore Tree and the Alpha Course.

There is a long tradition of Christian organisations working in prisons, be it providing services to prisoners or with the aim of introducing the Christian faith to people in custody, a history discussed by Mike Nellis and others elsewhere in this issue. This continues today with a significant number of the voluntary organisations working in prisons being faith-based — a development that has been encouraged by the government. While many of these faith-based organisations provide services for people in prison of any faith or none, some are clear that part of their role in working with prisoners is to encourage them to develop their own faith. For the most part, this evangelism takes place alongside the provision of services to prisoners. But is this appropriate? Are prisoners being encouraged to profess a faith in return for additional support on release? Are the churches themselves being taken advantage of? Two of the most prolific Christian organisations working in prisons see at least part of their role as bringing prisoners to a Christian faith: Prison Alpha and Prison Fellowship's Sycamore Tree Project.

The Alpha course in prisons

Over 80 per cent of prisons in England and Wales are now running Alpha courses, with around 28,000 people in prison having been on one. Alpha is a 15 session introduction to the Christian faith which is designed primarily for people who do not go to church or express a faith and those who have recently become Christians. The Alpha course has been running in churches in England and Wales for about 20 years, having been started by the vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, a large church in central London. The first Alpha course in a prison was run in Exeter in 1995. It started because a prisoner, whose girlfriend had done the Alpha course at her local church, approached the chaplain to see whether he could do an Alpha course in prison. The chaplain contacted Holy Trinity Brompton and the first course in a prison was started.

Alpha is now running in 80 per cent of prisons in England and Wales. It takes place under the auspices of the chaplaincy, and courses do not take place without their support. It is the chaplaincy who issue the invitation to Alpha to prisoners on their arrival. Those who are interested attend a short 'Alpha appetiser' evening which introduces them to the full course and invites them to attend. The course

itself looks at a set pattern of questions, including 'Who is Jesus?', 'Why did Jesus die?' and 'How can I be sure of my faith?' The team at Holy Trinity Brompton offer a range of literature, videos, training materials and conferences for churches and chaplains who are running Alpha courses.

It soon became clear to the team at Holy Trinity Brompton that Alpha could not stop at the prison gate. Paul Cowley, who heads up Prison Alpha's work, started to receive calls from churches around the country which were receiving prisoners who had done an Alpha course. They did not know what they should be doing to help the ex-prisoner. So the 'Caring for Ex-offenders' programme has been developed. On a much smaller scale than Alpha – 400 prisoners have been linked with local churches – the programme aims to provide a formal link for prisoners with a local church on their release and to provide information and support for churches working with ex-offenders. Holy Trinity Brompton now supports 14 ex-offenders in its congregation. Each of these prisoners was met at the prison gate and offered help in finding work, accommodation and rehab where necessary. A compact establishes the responsibilities of the church in providing support and assistance and the offender in abiding by any rules or boundaries set by the church leaders. Other faith groups are interested in developing the programme within their own community. For Paul Cowley the church has a key role to play in resettlement "I think the church is quite capable of filling the gaps (in provision) – like meeting someone at the prison gate. It would be great if we could do it for everybody." Currently there are only resources to meet ex-prisoners who are Christians and have done an Alpha course.

Sycamore Tree

The Sycamore Tree Prison Fellowship provides a range of services to people in prison, regardless of faith. Their Angel Tree project provides Christmas presents for prisoners' children. Sycamore Tree is a victim awareness programme and Compass is an introduction to faith. Around 90 Sycamore Tree courses will be run in 39 prisons and one YOI over this year. The course espouses the principles of restorative justice and aims "to enable prisoners to understand the impact of crime on victims and accept responsibility for their actions and responses". On the course, victims and offenders (of separate crimes) meet for eight two-hour sessions, usually over a period

of eight weeks. The facilitator leads the groups through a series of topics, encouraging victims and offenders to discuss how they feel and how they wish to move forward. Offenders are invited to explore ways of making restitution for the harm they have caused. Victims are given the opportunity to consider ways in which they can take control of their lives.

Prisoners clearly find the course challenging, commenting that "Sycamore Tree has made me look at myself, what kind of person I am. I want to change", and that "Hearing from a victim really hits home." While participants do not need to profess any faith, the Sycamore Tree Project is based on biblical principles and uses stories from the Bible in illustration. Indeed the starting point of the course is the story of Jesus meeting the cheating tax-collector Zaccheus who pays back his victims in full and more. The next step for Prison Fellowship is to get Sycamore Tree accredited as an offending behaviour course. The focus is clearly on encouraging offenders to consider the effect of their behaviour of victims and society.

Prison Fellowship and Alpha are running activities in prison which aim, in part, to demonstrate the faith of those who run the course, and attract prisoners to that faith. But there is certainly no feeling in the organisations that prisoners are being 'recruited'.

Prison Fellowship's Peter Zimmerman is clear that projects such as the Sycamore Tree, Compass and Angel Tree are underscored by the 160 local church prayer groups who link up with their local prisons, ex-prisoners and prisoners' families at a variety of different levels. While every prisoner receives an invitation to Alpha, there is no pressure to go along. Paul Cowley is philosophical that people go to Alpha for a range of different reasons - from being genuinely interested to finding an opportunity to be out of their cell. The challenge for Alpha is whether there is the scope for providing support for those people who wish to develop their faith and be linked with a church on the outside. Alpha and Prison Fellowship continue a long tradition of Christian involvement in prisons. Clearly prisons are now multi-faith communities - a fact which all religious groups have to be sensitive to, and clearly prisoners are a group that could be seen as 'ripe' for evangelical conversion. But developing spirituality is an important part of developing the whole person, and as such it is appropriate that those in custody are able to discover faith if that is what they choose.

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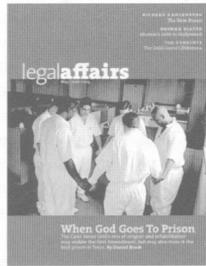
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