

Marriage Guidance in a Local Prison

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WE SIT ROUND a table in a corner of the visiting room: in the evening the prison is a hive of educational activity and this is the only place available for the pre-release group.

There are eight men, varying in age from the early twenties to late forties, in the navy blue battle dress which is the usual wear in H.M. Prisons. After a brief introduction, outlining the purpose of the meetings and emphasising that the aim is discussion and not a "lecture," I suggest that we should talk about some of the things that are essential to a happy marriage, and invite suggestions.

Prolonged reflection produces the opinion that "the wife should be a good cook." This is discussed with feeling. There also seems to be a consensus of opinion that washing up is definitely not the husband's job.

From this somewhat mundane starting point we pursue more fundamental requirements. Someone speaks of trust. This introduces the question of joint control of the family income. Not all are prepared to agree that a wife should know

exactly what her husband earns, and fewer still that a wife should have some share for her personal use, with no questions asked. "Well, I take her out sometimes, don't I?": the idea that she might prefer a perm or a new hat seems absurd.

Talk of money leads almost inevitably to Hire Purchase. As entanglement in H.P. commitments, unwisely entered into, may be a factor in the sequence of events leading to crime, it is worth following up this issue.

Returning to the main theme, it is suggested that willingness to forgive has a place in marriage. This is accepted, with the implied proviso that infidelity is excluded. I suspect that the forgiveness envisaged is that of an erring wife by her husband.

A notable omission from the discussion is any mention of love as essential for happy marriage; nor can it be elicited by well-nigh "leading questions," but when the point is put it is accepted. Perhaps it is already taken for granted? The ending of the session cuts short

the attempt to define what we mean by love. Or would that be beyond our powers?

On the next evening we go on to the question of children and their up-bringing. In all groups it is noticeable that the men are more ready to talk about their children than about their wives, perhaps they are more acutely aware of their failures as fathers than as husbands, and are anxious to establish good relationships with their children. Anxious, too, that their children should not "make the mistakes I've made." Those with older children are concerned with the child's attitude to them on their return home. One man raised the question whether his 15-year-old daughter should be told why he had been in prison.

The effect of imprisonment on the father-child relationship was highlighted by two incidents in a recent group, when discipline and the "spoiling" of children was under discussion. One man declared emphatically that, when he returned home, he was going to give his small son, whom he had hardly seen since babyhood "everything he wants"—clearly an expression of his longing to win the child's affection and to compensate for his failure as a father hitherto. Another man described the reaction of his 18-month-old daughter, born while he was serving a previous sentence, and the failure of his attempts to establish a relationship with her on his return home.

These impressions serve to

preface an account of work done with pre-release groups in a local prison over the past four years.

These are held twice a year and are open to all men, on a voluntary basis, who are serving sentences of a year or more: a proportion have served previous sentences. There are usually 12 to 16 men in a group, with an age range from early twenties to late forties. The majority are married, but single men sometimes come, and have plenty to say. Those attending these groups are probably rather above the average intelligence of the prison population as a whole, and most of them contribute to the discussion.

Three or four evenings are allocated to this part of the programme and it is linked with a series of talks on religion in personal and family life given by a local doctor. The remainder of the course consists of talks given by representatives of the statutory social services, National Insurance, National Assistance, Ministry of Labour and so on.

The groups owe much to the Tutor Organiser. He is responsible for all the educational work in the prison, to which he devotes much of his spare time, and from the outset he has taken a special interest in these groups. His presence is of value, as representing the man's point of view, and the fact that he is a schoolmaster of many years experience makes his contribution to questions relating to children, including education, especially valuable. He has a happy knack of

producing relevant illustrations to the topic under discussion.

As in my previous experience in a Corrective Training Prison, I found that a satisfactory relationship with the group was readily established and easy to maintain. This even survived on one occasion a direct challenge: "I believe you're one of those magistrates!"

There is a notable absence of attempts to use the discussion to air grievances. The whole thing is kept on as informal a basis as possible, even to the extent of sacrificing a certain amount of continuity and cohesion. Discussion once started is free and apparently uninhibited.

Contrasting these groups with those in the Corrective Training Prisons there seems to be much less bitterness against wives, perhaps because these men have, so far, suffered less disruption in their family life. As is often the case, there is a good deal of feeling against "in-laws" and their disrupting influence. But, even so, there is a willingness to accept the idea that parents are likely to react strongly—and justifiably so—when their daughter's husband lets her down. A hopeful feature is the amount of affection for, and interest in, their children, which could be directed and strengthened.

The impression remains that a proportion, at least, are people of inadequate personality, unlikely to form or maintain satisfactory family relationships and that co-operation in so doing is perhaps

not to be expected from the type of woman they are likely to marry.

In every group opportunity is taken to say something about the help that marriage guidance has to offer, and to invite those needing it to contact their local council after they return home. The Tutor Organiser keeps a list of Marriage Guidance Councils and any man can obtain from him the address of the one nearest his home. So far about 15 per cent of the men have asked for addresses.

Any evaluation of the work done in these groups, and indeed of most educational work of this kind, is well nigh impossible. It is done in the hope that some understanding may be given of the values and satisfactions of good family life, and of the effort needed to secure and maintain them.

When the scope of prison after-care is extended to include care for the family of a prisoner from the outset of his sentence, as envisaged by the report of the Advisory Council on the Treatment of Offenders, the possibility of rebuilding family life will be considerably increased. This will give to educational work on family life in pre-release groups a considerable stimulus and a fresh sense of reality.

This is, perhaps, a vision of the future, and one greatly to be desired, for there is no factor which would contribute more to the rehabilitation of the ex-prisoner than secure and happy family life.