

Multi-faith Chaplaincy: Spirituality and Shared Values in Prison

Peter Tarleton, Khalil Kazi and Kate Jenkins describe how they work collaboratively within a multi-faith setting at HMP Leeds.

Formal religion has held a statutory place in the life of prisons for decades. There are varying views of the nature of that influence upon the prisoners, staff, and the community itself. Chaplains have done their best to provide support and encouragement for prisoners and staff, and much of their work has been valued. They have been expected to respond flexibly to the emerging needs of the prison community. From the mid-1970s, this meant trying to accommodate the requirements of people from every faith on earth!

Discovering that we belong together

Clearly there is a new mood around. The need to meet the human rights expectations around religious diversity has created a demand for a different sort of chaplaincy. We are required to develop mutual respect among people of all religious traditions — to become genuinely inclusive and accepting ; not just tolerant. There is now the challenge to co-operate across religious divisions, and to work to meet the needs of the organisation, rather than exclusively religious goals.

What is recognised today is that the religious communities do not have a monopoly over spirituality. Every person who lives or works in a prison has a right for their views and their value system to be respected. All people, regardless of whether or not they belong to a faith, have some values upon which they base their life and work. There is not unanimity about these values, but across the breadth of religious traditions there is an identifiable core to which all subscribe. In the past it was presumed that a faith's identity was best served by spelling out differences; to-day there is an evolving trend to highlight those things we have in common. Differences are important, and commonality is also important.

It is then a privilege to work alongside people of different cultural and religious traditions — often of different races, speaking different languages. It could be that outside of the prison community there would be no need at all to consider this sort of collaborative approach, but inside it is both possible and desirable. An integrated chaplaincy team which recognises the spirit of the community in which it works uses its influence to encourage good decision-making. The inculcation of good and appropriate values adds to the integrity of the prison. People who come from faith minorities whose numbers are in single figures need feel no less valued by the

prison than those of a much larger group. There is no individual or group who are 'extra'; each is indispensable to the whole.

Shared Working

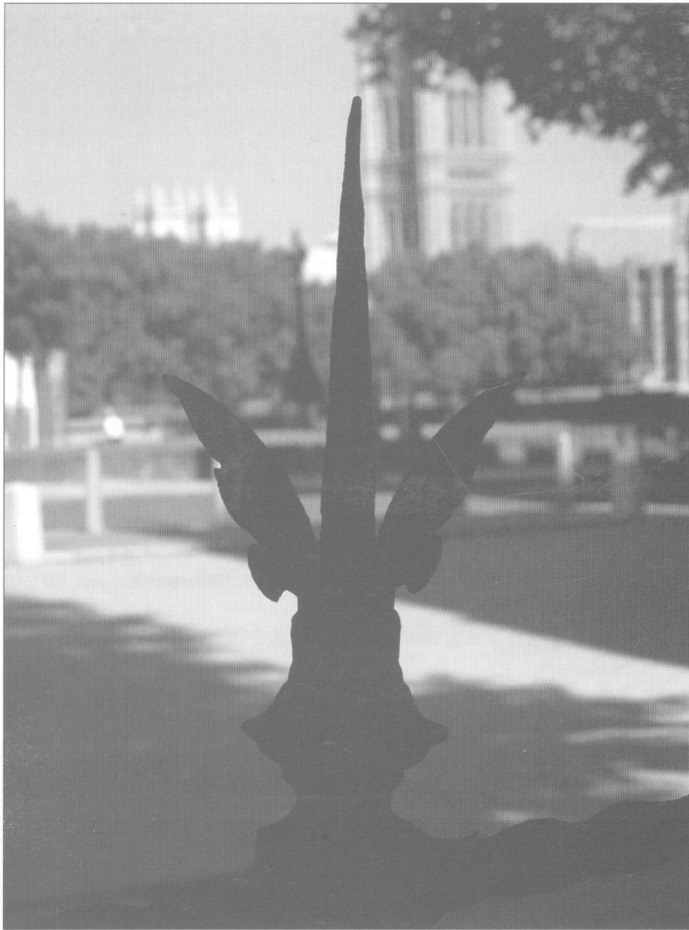
These perhaps high-flown ideas take root in the day-to-day functioning of the chaplaincy at HMP Leeds. Here, a duty chaplain may be of any faith or Christian denomination. All new arrivals in the prison are seen by the duty chaplain, and only if there are faith specific needs will the inmate be referred to a representative of his faith. All inmates in the Segregation Unit and on Health Care will be seen daily by whoever is detailed to cover those tasks, and, similarly, men making applications to see a chaplain will see whichever member of the team is on duty. A Christian inmate may be collected by the Muslim chaplain to attend a Bible study group; a Christian chaplain may deliver a Koran in response to a request from a Muslim inmate! Over the three years of this collaborative working there has not been any negative response from prisoners.

From the beginning of July this year we are implementing a faith-based support programme for inmates wishing to address their drug misuse. This has been put together collaboratively by Muslims and Christians, and is in response to a needs assessment completed last year by the drug strategy team in the prison. The course has been designed to cater for men of any faith tradition or of no faith, who seek to give up the addictive patterns in their lives.

Shared Space

The other significant development has been the shared use of the former Chapel as a Multi-Faith Centre. This was used for Muslim Friday prayers (*Jumma*) for a two-year period from January 2000, as guests of the Christians. It became clear that unless the prison found the space and the finances to build a mosque, a more permanent arrangement would have to be found. During 2002 the Chaplaincy Team wrestled with how best to provide a shared space which met the requirements of each faith group which would use it for worship. By the end of 2002 we had achieved an agreement that the building would be shared equally by ALL faith traditions in a formal partnership. In January 2003, Minister for Prisons Hilary Benn came to launch our Multi-Faith Centre, a place where each faith group can feel completely at home.

Of course we have occasional times when there is a conflict of interest – for example on Good Friday,



when the Christian worship occurs at approximately the same time as the Muslim prayers. On one occasion a Muslim *Eid* festival occurred on a Sunday! We have met these challenges, and, with the co-operation of prison managers, have been able to find ways of accommodating the needs of both groups.

Shared Plans

Having discovered that we can work together in ways that meet our specific faith needs, and collectively deliver an enhanced service for the prison community, we have recently embarked upon a community chaplaincy project to provide support for ex-prisoners and other offenders. This project is being sponsored by faith communities across West Yorkshire. It is based initially on a recognition that the support role of the Probation Service is no longer available, since their priority is clearly risk assessment and reduction. Issues of crime reduction and public safety cannot be addressed only by risk assessment; we believe that relationships are a crucial part of this process.

This initiative is being led by the Muslim Chaplain at HM Prison Leeds, co-author of this article, and has found wide acceptance in the cities of Leeds and Bradford, and in Kirklees. So we feel that some of our necessary harmonisation within the prison may be transferable into the wider community. One of our team, Kate Jenkins, has been developing a group of volunteer mentors to work alongside an offending behaviour course, to help meet the inmates' 'action plans' on release. This group will probably form the nucleus of a volunteer base within the emerging community chaplaincy.

Clearly each faith community has strong values about the dignity and value of human life; the responsibility of the strong for the weak; a desire for peace among the nations; a belief that however dark death may be, there is something more; a willingness to empower people to take increasing responsibility for their own lives. These values are not exclusive to people 'of faith', yet where they find expression in faith communities they can have a disproportionately positive effect on the wider society. Our experience of working in this way convinces us that 'the whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts'!

Kate Jenkins, Khalil Kazi and Peter Tarleton are chaplains at HMP Leeds.