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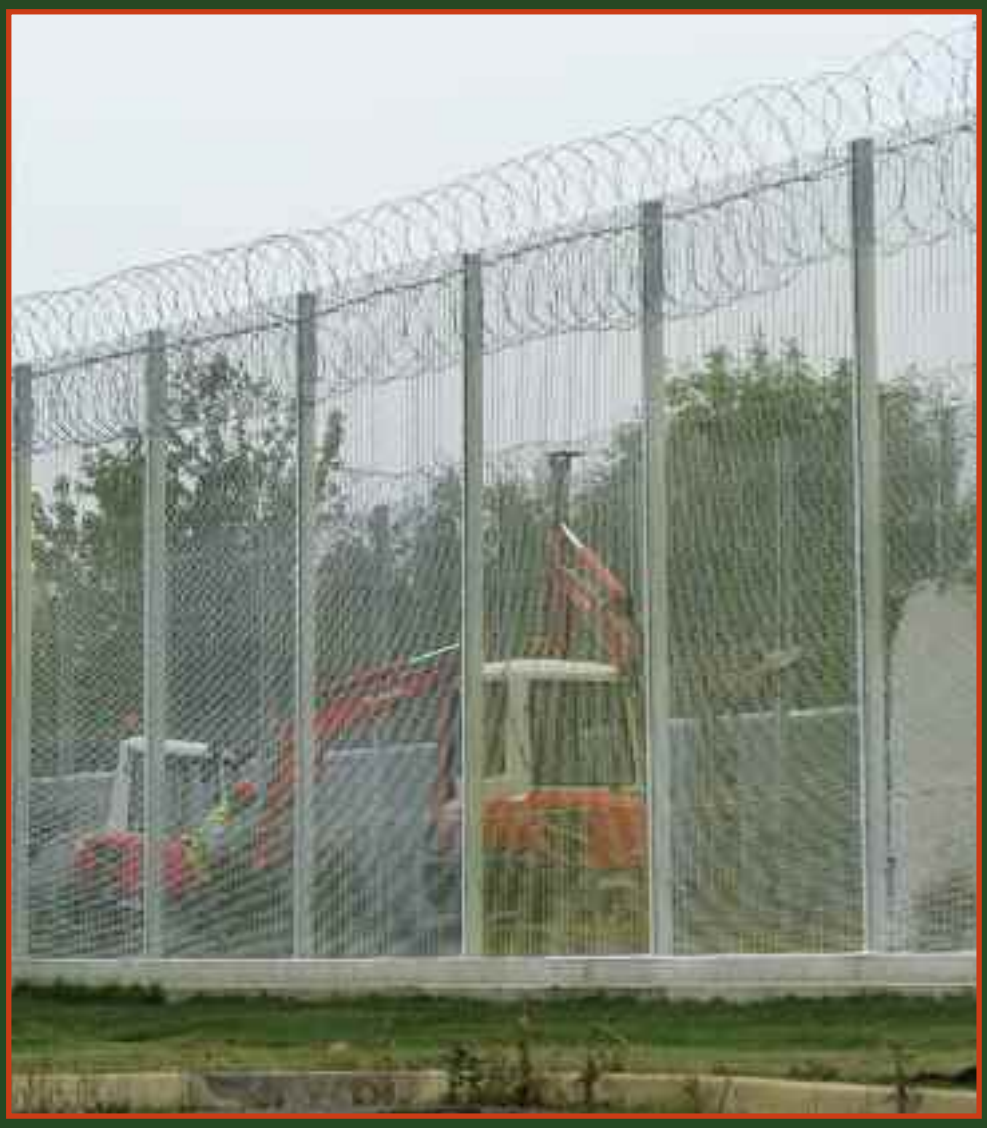

*Perrie Lectures 2013*

# Contraction in an age of expansion

# Interview with The Venerable William Noblett CBE

***The Venerable William Noblett CBE*** *was Chaplain General of HM Prison Service between 2001 and 2011. He is interviewed by* ***Martin Kettle*** *who is a former prison manager currently Home Affairs Policy Advisor to the Church of England.*

**The Venerable William Noblett CBE was Chaplain General of HM Prison Service between 2001 and 2011. He was ordained in 1978 and held a number of posts in the community before becoming Chaplain of HMP Wakefield in 1987. He continued to work in prisons for the next decade and a half, holding Chaplain posts at HMP Norwich and HMP Full Sutton. He has written and published on prison faith matters, including two books: *Prayers for People in Prison* published in 1998 and *Inside Faith: Praying for People in Prison*, published in 2009.**

He has been widely recognized for his faith work and was appointed as one the Chaplains to HM The Queen in 2005, and subsequently awarded a CBE in 2012.

**MK: A number of people have said that your great achievement as Chaplain General was to broaden prison chaplaincy so that it includes all faiths, at every level. Why did you want to do that?**

**WN:** At the time I was appointed as Chaplain General the only employed chaplains in the service were Christian, and prisoners from other than Christian traditions were not being enabled to properly practise their faith. The majority of faith representatives were termed 'visiting ministers', with many experiencing that as an excluding experience. At a time of great change within the service, chaplaincy needed to be much more inclusive, to give greater recognition to the contribution and validity of the ministry of those who were not Christian. Chaplaincy needed to serve staff, prisoners, and faith communities in a way that some described as a paradigm shift to inclusion — at the same time maintaining the integrity of each tradition (which has always been at the heart of all that we have sought to do) and also to be serving the common good. I believed there was an imperative for change, and that it was the right thing to do.

**MK: So you have been a bit of a revolutionary?**

**WN:** There's been a lot of change, but hardly a revolution. I believe in chaplaincy — in all that it can contribute to the lives of individuals in any institutional context. I experienced it in my time as a chaplain in the RAF, including some time in an RAF hospital, as a TA chaplain, and then as a prison chaplain. I have always been committed to collaborative ministry and team working, inter, and intra disciplinary. I have been enriched by the experience of sharing with people of different faith traditions, and have seen the contribution that chaplains from those traditions can make.

The late David Bosch, a South African theologian, in his magisterial work, *Transforming Mission*, sums up the real process of transformation for me when he wrote: 'a paradigm shift always means both continuity and change, both faithfulness to the past and boldness to engage the future, both constancy and contingency, both tradition and transformation … to be both evolutionary and revolutionary.' He said that the transition 'from one paradigm to another is not abrupt', and the agenda is 'always one of reform, not replacement', with 'creative tension between the new and the old'.

**MK: What has change meant in practice?**

**WN:** The changes in chaplaincy have been many, and initially were not always welcomed. To take forward this programme of work we needed to harness the contribution of many including Chaplains, Faith Advisers, Prospect, HR and legal colleagues too. One of the first changes we made, with the support of senior faith leaders on what became the Chaplaincy Council, was to agree that faith representatives going into prisons to minister should be known as chaplains, a term widely recognised in the institutional context and already used by some faith groups other than Christian. We also spelt out what that meant with a list of principles for collaborative team-working. We wanted, and have largely achieved, an inclusive chaplaincy that respects the integrity of each tradition, working for the common good of prisoners, staff and faith communities as an essential part of prison life.

**MK: What obstacles did you have to overcome?**

**WN:** The obstacles were as much attitudinal as practical, with some chaplains (though not all, as many shared the need for change) and staff saying 'we have done it this way for hundreds of years, we don't need to change!' Institutional power and privilege was strong, and understandably, not easy to change. Change usually requires people to be confident in their own position, and those chaplains most sure in their own faith, and the generosity of that faith, were amongst the first to embrace a new vision. We required some people to be much more professional in their approach to enabling

the ministry of others. Eleven years on, we rightly take for granted that the needs of all faiths must be met, and that, for instance, the Managing Chaplain role should be open to any employed chaplain. This is not to say we always get everything right, of course we don't, but as I said earlier, it is evolutionary, and the journey continues. That journey involves an openness to the ideas and theology of different faith traditions, and the theoria and praxis of prison ministry place it at the fore-front of inter-faith dialogue.

**MK: You were ordained as a Christian minister. Do you think it is harder to proclaim the Christian message now than when you joined the Prison Service?**

**WN:** I think the proclamation of a Christian, incarnational message is never easy, and the complexities of institutional life, with rapidly changing congregations, add to that difficulty. Congregations in prison have changed in my 25 years, with fewer people having any knowledge or experience of Christianity. That makes the message, and the way in which we convey it as we seek to connect it to the lives of those in prison, much more challenging. But the essence of that message remains unchanged, and I have tried to explore this, and other themes, in my book, *Inside Faith: Praying for People in Prison*.

My role in prisons tested my understanding of humanity, of theological and moral issues such as evil, redemption, forgiveness, etc.

**MK: What drew you to prison ministry?**

**WN:** As a young student at Salisbury Theological College I had visited Guy's Marsh, in the days it was a borstal, and had some direct experience of the conditions, hearing the stories of some of the young men held there. In those far-off days we used to take the lads round Salisbury, as well as leading groups in the prison. I also heard a talk from a prison chaplain on his ministry, and at that time was convinced the last thing I would ever want to be called to was prison ministry! Having been a curate in Southampton, I was then a Rector of six parishes in Ireland, and subsequently an RAF chaplain. Going from there to be a vicar in Middlesbrough, I was asked to visit a parishioner in Durham gaol. I went to visit, a little hesitantly, and the rest, as they say, is history. Prison ministry, and people in prison, have been part of my life ever since. I have huge respect for the work of prison staff, and have worked alongside some wonderful people in all disciplines. There is something very direct, intense, immediate and honest about ministry in prison, that is rare to experience in other situations.

**MK: Are there any individual prisoners — no names — who stay in your mind because chaplaincy made a difference to them?**

**WN:** Yes, there are plenty — again, evidenced in my book — but also many staff, too. My understanding of chaplaincy, rooted in our Christian understanding, is that chaplains are there for all within the walls. Chaplaincy is in a hugely privileged position in England and Wales, and is very much part of the whole life of the prison. It can and does make a difference, which is why it has endured, and flourished, despite the constant changes over the years. Religion certainly has the potential to change people, but with all conversion experiences, especially in prison, you have to be cautious. What the New Testament talks about is *metanoia*, turning round, real transformation. So much of the language about desistance from crime nowadays has strong echoes of faith language — and we have done a great deal of work to find the common ground between faith perspectives and psychological perspectives on how people change. This has borne fruit in the 'Belief in Change' course.

**MK: Thinking back over the jobs you have done in the prison service, which was the one that tested you most, and how?**

**MK:** I served for over 14 years in three prisons, two high security (Wakefield and Full Sutton) and a local (Norwich), before going to HQ in 2001. Each of those roles was different, given the context, but the essentials remained the same. My role in prisons tested my understanding of humanity, of theological and moral issues such as evil, redemption, forgiveness, etc. At HQ I was challenged to ensure the contribution of chaplaincy, seen and appreciated at prison level, was also visible and relevant at the centre. And without line management over chaplains (all done at local level), we had to use our powers of influence and persuasion, to convince people of the rightness of what we were doing. The leadership skills needed in the prison were even more relevant at HQ.

**MK: Much has been said about the 'new managerialism' sweeping through the system in the last few years. We even have 'managing chaplains' now. Do you think all this business of targets, benchmarking and so on gets in the way of real chaplaincy work?**

**WN:** 'Managing chaplains' are not significantly different from co-ordinating chaplains, but for the first time the service has the option of a clearer management structure for chaplains. Chaplaincy changes as the institution changes, it has to, reacting positively, sometimes with enthusiasm, sometimes with resignation. It can be a challenging job to manage chaplaincy teams

— as many Governors have told me over the years! Chaplaincy teams also need to support others going through the change process, whilst also helping to ensure it is good for the people at the very centre of the system. The chaplaincy specification, which also reflects the Chief Inspector's *Expectations*, is a major step forward in setting this out, whilst also helping to improve the professionalism of chaplaincy.

**MK: Chaplaincy staffing is not escaping the current wave of cuts to front-line services. Are the best days of prison chaplaincy over?**

**WN:** The harsh reality is that every aspect of NOMS expenditure has to be scrutinized and justified at a time of significant financial constraint. Research that I commissioned a few years ago, drew out something of the distinctive contribution that chaplaincy can and does make and provided evidence of how chaplaincy is valued by prisoners and staff. It showed something of the essential nature of the ministry and work of chaplaincy teams. So, no, I don't think the best days are over — Chaplaincy has always adapted to changing circumstances whilst making its contribution to the lives of those in prison, and will continue to do so .

For example, I mentioned the Belief in Change programme currently running in two prisons. We developed it to bring together faith and psychology in a positive and dynamic way that could, potentially, help some offenders to change their thinking, and the way they lead their lives. It is a rare example of such an inter-disciplinary approach. It may soon be adapted for use with offenders in the community. The programme uses volunteers from the wider community, something that chaplaincy has always been able to offer, working in partnership with a number of organizations and groups concerned for prisoners and for their support on release.

Also too, the development of the Tarbiyyah course, led by the Muslim Adviser, to help increase the understanding of Islam by Muslim prisoners, and the faith awareness booklet and other materials designed to increase staff awareness of religious issues to enable them to deal with the faith needs of the prison population in an informed and professional way. This is in a huge number of prisons now. We have had to work these initiatives up from scratch — there is nothing quite like them elsewhere.

**MK: For all the multi-faith developments we notice that the new Chaplain-General is a Church of England priest. Do you think that's how it should be?**

**WN:** Chaplaincy has worked incredibly hard over the past ten years to ensure that chaplains from each faith are part of the team. As I have mentioned, this has led to the role of managing chaplain being open to any employed chaplain. Whilst I would have wished to have

seen that same opportunity reflected in the recent competition for the Head of Faith and Chaplaincy Services post, it was not to be, on this occasion.

**MK: What advice would you give your successor?**

**WN:** I don't think it would be appropriate for me to offer advice to someone who has already been appointed, but I am confident that Mike Kavanagh will continue to lead chaplaincy in a very positive way on its developing journey. I know he is leading a very good team of people at HQ, with the support of NOMS, as in turn the team seek to support chaplaincy teams, managers, Governors, and faith communities. It is an exciting time, and I wish him well, as I do the HQ team, and chaplaincy teams in prisons.

**MK: How retired are you planning to be? Are there any prison causes that you will be championing in the years to come?**

**WN:** Ever since my earliest encounter with suicide in prison, in my first few weeks at Wakefield, I have been concerned about the impact of such an action on staff, on other prisoners, and, of course, on the family and friends of the person who has died. I am just beginning some voluntary work with a very special charity, Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide, who provide just the sort of support needed by many who have been bereaved in that way. A training package will soon be available for people such as Prison Family Liaison Officers, which we hope to offer to the NOMS. I feel very privileged to be one of their Patrons, and intend to be very active within the charity.

Other than that, I have deliberately taken 'time out', but hope to make some appropriate contribution in the years to come.