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Interview with Moosa Gora

Moosa Gora is Imam and Managing Chaplain at HMP Full Sutton, he is interviewed by Ray Taylor, Senior Regulation Manager of the Equality, Rights and Decency Group, NOMS.

Moosa Gora is Imam and Managing Chaplain at HMP Full Sutton. Graduating in 1990 from the Islamic Institute of Bury with an Islamic Scholar's degree, he started working in the Prison Service at HMP Wakefield in 1991. This was a temporary appointment to cover the holidays and absences of the Muslim Chaplain. He was then appointed Muslim Chaplain at Full Sutton in 1991, initially on a sessional basis, before being appointed full-time Chaplain and then Managing Chaplain. He was interviewed in November 2015.

RT: What do you enjoy most about your work and how does it compare with other work that you have done?

MG: I have been at the prison for over two decades, in which time I have built strong working relationships across the prison. In particular, the Multi-Faith department and all the colleagues that I work along gives me great strength in many of the things I do. I have not experienced anything on this scale in any other role and job I have been involved in. In particular, I cherish supporting my colleagues in fulfilling their faith and pastoral duties of prisoners and supporting staff in their work.

RT: Please compare your prison role with the community role of an Imam

MG: Although I am an Islamic scholar, I do not have time to hold the position of being an Imam in a local mosque. I actively support the activities that take place in the community, and have a particular interest in the after-school Islamic education of children in the community. There are vast differences between a community Imam and a prison Imam. Firstly, in prison there are all the security restrictions and prison rules which have to be followed. This in itself, presents a huge challenge.

Another challenge is the expectations from all different interested parties. For example, am I a chaplain to the staff, to the establishment, or to the prisoners? To try and find a balance between these roles is the key to success in this field. Even within the prison Muslim congregation there are Muslims from different denominations and in the community they would be able to go to the specific mosque from their denominational background, whereas here they have

only me, and I have to cater for all — something which community Imams don't have to do.

Working in a High Security prison means that I always have to be 'on top of my game.' Inevitably there will be some prisoners who are extremists, and will seek to challenge my knowledge as well as my authority.

Lastly, the prison environment can be stressful, as prisoners' issues and problems are often complex. Although there are many rewarding aspects to the role, it's not common that a Chaplain breaks 'good news' to a prisoner. Sadly, it is the bad news which often the Chaplain brings and follows up with assisting prisoners through those bad times. One needs good support mechanisms within Chaplaincy teams and externally to properly 'let go' of 'prison' issues.

RT: Can you tell me something about your background before joining the Prison Service and how you came to be a prison chaplain?

MG: I was born and bred in Yorkshire. Whilst I was still doing my secondary education, I took a keen interest in Islamic education, partly due to being from a religious family. I joined the Islamic Institute which is an Islamic sciences seminary based in Lancashire. The course lasted six years and I graduated in 1990. After completing my degree, I was looking for an opportunity in the area of Islamic teaching, and subsequently started teaching Theological studies in the local Islamic institute. During this time, an opportunity arose for an Imam's position in the Prison Service, where I had the prospect of contributing both pastorally and also teaching.

RT: Please describe the process of becoming an Imam.

MG: Although I did not, some start their career by memorising the Qur'an, which can take between one and four years, depending on the individual. The traditional route to become an Imam who also teaches the religion is a six-year course which initially involves an in-depth understanding of the classical Arabic language, phonetics, grammar and eloquence as well the disciplines of logic and philosophical analysis. These auxiliary sciences lead to the study of Islamic jurisprudence with applied sacred law, followed by the science of prophetic traditions (both the texts and authentication process of text). The final year is spent studying the primary classical books of prophetic

traditions (hadith) and also the study of Qur'anic interpretation of the classical commentators. Thus before one studies the Noble Qur'an he or she must have become an accomplished scholar or certainly highly proficient in the preparatory sciences.

After the generic Islamic sciences degree (bearing in mind the following is no order of importance or hierarchy) most return to society to become Imams offering legal advice on sacred law and spiritual counsel. Some continue with post graduate study in advanced legal studies before serving as a Mufti, who is considered to be an expert in offering legal advice and counsel.

RT: I understand that you worked at Head Office in London for a while. Can you tell me about your role, please? Were you able to contribute as much in this role as you do in your work in prison?

MG: Whilst the Muslim Advisor at the time was seconded to the Home Office, I was temporarily seconded for a year in his role whilst still maintaining my role as Imam at the prison. My role was to ensure that the Prison Service Instruction on Islam was being adopted, give advice to establishments around faith, recruitment, Halal food, responding to requests and complaints and providing support to prisoners, staff and establishments.

I also was seconded to High Security Area Office to help Chaplaincy Departments and in particular Muslim Chaplains with issues around how faith is practised in prisons and trying to standardise this across the estate.

I was part of the national committee that developed the Tarbiyah Course for Muslim prisoners — a feat that took us almost five years. In addition I was part of the Ibaana (Arabic for 'Clarification') Development Committee which devised a detailed theological intervention to challenge the Muslim extremist narratives. This was really interesting and exciting as we looked at how extremists twisted verses of the Qur'an and Hadiths and provided detailed rebuttals against them.

RT: Has your role as Managing Chaplain taken you away from some of your duties as an Imam?

MG: The role of Managing Chaplain is to ensure that the Chaplaincy Department fulfils its function in meeting the religious and pastoral needs of prisoners. My role is to enable the staff to fulfil this role and ensure facilities and opportunities are available for prisoners to practise their faith according to the instructions in the PSI. It also demands working across

departments and building links with volunteer and the community sector.

Alongside this, a Managing Chaplain also has as part of their role to be a chaplain to their own faith, and hence I still carry out a lot of the functions that a Muslim Chaplain would do including leading prayers, running classes, organising festivals and addressing requests and complaints. Although all the managerial duties have taken me away from some of the day-to-day Chaplain duties, I feel my knowledge, skills and experience now have the potential of being passed on to members of my team and they can also benefit and, in turn, it brings greater benefit to the establishment.

RT: As a prison chaplain, how would you say that the role is divided between religious and pastoral duties?

MG: My role as Managing Chaplain is different, and entails in the main ensuring that the department fulfils its function of delivering faith and pastoral services to prisoners of all faiths and no faith. But the role of a faith chaplain is split between carrying out faith services and pastoral services; faith services would include conducting weekly corporate services (daily at Full Sutton for the Muslim faith), running faith specific courses and attending to feasts, festivals and special days of celebrations, whilst pastoral services would include listening

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to and providing support for all prisoners who want it, whether or not they are going through difficulties with illnesses, marriage, death, coping with prison life, bullying, etc. It also means writing reports and attending numerous meetings and engaging in their sentence planning process. Often, the pastoral provision of our work is carried out in a multi-faith manner and it would be normal for a Chaplain dealing with a prisoner's crisis to be of a different religion/faith.

RT: Do you see your work in prison as a 'mission' or 'calling'?

MG: Religious leaders of all faiths feel that they have a duty to serve people and will busy themselves with various activities in trying to achieve that; this duty is translated within different faiths with the use of different words. For a Muslim Scholar the duty to serve can be captured in the saying of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), *'Each of you is a shepherd, and each one will be questioned about their flock.'* It is the duty of the Scholar to busy themselves in whatever capacity and industry/profession in ensuring that they are serving the religious and pastoral needs of the community.

RT: How do you accommodate the different faith strands at Full Sutton ?

MG: All faiths have various strands within their communities. For Muslims the main strands are Sunni and Shia; although coming from a specific strand, the role of the Muslim Chaplain is to serve all the Muslims without differentiation. They will try to ensure that their sermons and classes are generic as far as possible to serve all, and allow different practices for example facilitating the different special days for the different denominations from their flock.

RT: Do gang affiliations affect relations within the Muslim community in Full Sutton?

MG: Affiliation to gangs remains a serious concern for the service; various strategies are employed to keep this in check. More recently the term 'Muslim Gang' has appeared in the vocabulary of the Prison Service, I consider this to be for one of a number of reasons namely:

- I. More and more people are identifying themselves as Muslim and sometimes them coming together in a communal sense is seen as 'gang'
- II. Prisoners converting to Islamic faith for a number of reasons some of which are certainly dubious and thus more so for associations
- III. Different gang members putting their differences aside as they now belong to the 'Muslim community'
- IV. Prisoners carrying out wrong activities under the banner of Islam and thus for a number of staff it is convenient to identify these individuals as belonging to a 'Muslim gang' so that they can deal with them appropriately.

The Muslim faith (like all faiths) plays a role in the rehabilitation of offenders and there are hundreds of examples of those in prison who have found faith and bettered their lives as a direct result of this.

The use of the words 'Muslim' and 'gang' are two opposites. In every faith community, there are those who commit to their faith and better themselves and others who use the faith as a smoke screen or to have access to certain materials/people to further a criminal cause. I have found both positive and negative cases within the Muslim Community at Full Sutton. Having said this, it remains my goal, to continue to steer people away from criminal activity and assist them in leading righteous lives.

RT: How well do Muslims and non-Muslims integrate within the prison as a whole in Full Sutton?

MG: We have a strong multi-faith ethos in the Chaplaincy Department, this flows down to the prisoner group as well as the staffing group. As a community, living together in a confined area, prisoners generally get on well in the prison bearing in mind that Full Sutton is a long-term prison. That is not to say that issues do not happen but, when they arise, I feel they are managed well. There are a number of challenges that face our prisoners and staff on a daily basis and as a team I feel it is important to work out solutions and create a culture whereby everyone who works, lives or visits Full Sutton is safe and secure.

RT: Can you tell me anything about how you see your role in relation to prison discipline?

MG: All staff and volunteers that enter the prison walls have to abide by prison rules and this is no different for chaplains. We all contribute to the safety of the establishment. All staff must carry out their respective roles within certain boundaries and guidelines. Our job, as Chaplains, is to serve the pastoral and religious needs of prisoners and staff whilst respecting the same guidelines and within the same boundaries as any member of staff. Discussions that a prisoner has with a chaplain are

confidential and will not be shared unless there is a threat to the security and safety of the individual, others, the establishment or, indeed, the public generally.

RT: Can you tell me anything about how you see your role in relation to prison security and dealing with criminality in prison?

MG: Within any prison establishment, there are various different types of roles and it is the diversity within roles and the link between them all that maintain a healthy prison environment. Sometimes the use of force can limit or bring a stop to an incident and sometimes contact with Chaplaincy, healthcare, or a teacher can prevent an incident altogether. The correct balance assists in achieving positive results for all prisoners in our care.

RT: Please describe how your relationship with prisoners works. Is it the same kind of relationship that you would have as an Imam in the outside community?

The Muslim faith (like all faiths) plays a role in the rehabilitation of offenders and there are hundreds of examples of those in prison who have found faith and bettered their lives as a direct result of this.

MG: Most prisoners show great respect for the Imam as they do to all Chaplains. They see him as an example, and a person of integrity and honour. Prisoners regularly seek advice, guidance and religious instructions. They make requests for prayers for themselves, friends and families. They see the Chaplains as people they can speak to and confide in. Unlike the outside community, a prison community operates very differently and prisoners often have to rely, as it is outside their control or influence, on the chaplains for all kinds of help and support.

That said, a minority of prisoners may not see eye to eye with an imam, for a number of reasons. Sometimes it is a personality clash or sometimes because the imam is seen as 'part of the establishment.' I continue to remain professional and carry out my role and offer my services to all prisoners whilst continuing to show good character to all those who I meet and speak to.

RT: Do you spend much of your time supporting prisoners who are not Muslim? How do you find that these prisoners relate to you?

MG: As I said earlier, my role as Managing chaplain is to facilitate faith practice for all the faiths; this will include Muslim and non-Muslims. I support all the various chaplains across the board. As a team, much of our pastoral work is 'multi-faith'. I have found that prisoners (and people in general) treat you how you treat them regardless of faith, creed or other such factors.

RT: In your current role, do you support Muslim staff?

MG: Although the role of the department is supporting prisoners, chaplains are also available for prison staff; it is not uncommon to be involved in births, marriages, divorces, and deaths for staff and their families. A Chaplain would make themselves available as and when staff need their support. Other than the chaplains, there are very few Muslim staff at HMP Full Sutton, partly due to its geographical location and a number of other prisons being close by, however I do believe we all need to continue to work towards achieving greater diversity within the work force.

RT: Would you see part of your role as educating non-Muslims prisoners or staff?

MG: Yes. The Chaplaincy carry out training for staff on faith awareness as well as training on Islam. In the course of my work, I am regularly asked about world affairs, politics and other such matters. I always encourage these types of questions as it breaks down barriers and brings people together. A lot of learning

takes the form of informal discussions and getting to know each other and their culture, and see beyond the stereotypes that people hold about each other.

RT: Do many staff ask for your help, for instance, with a prisoner who needs support or with a prisoner who is presenting a problem to order and discipline?

MG: Staff are acutely aware of the position and respect that the chaplains hold and regularly seek their assistance. This may be to do with hardships that the prisoner is facing or with control or discipline issues. As indicated earlier a chaplain should hold their moral conscience and support everyone where possible. They are not there as an extension of any other department or as a conduit for prisoner complaint, rather their role is to meet the faith and pastoral needs of prisoners, and if that means supporting them in their time of difficulty or stopping them from misbehaviour then, both are needed.

RT: How closely do you work with prison officers and other prison staff? How well do staff support you and Muslim prisoners, for instance, during Ramadan?

MG: As a Chaplain you have to work closely with all departments and people to ensure that you are fulfilling your role and duty as a team. For example rehabilitation of prisoners cannot be provided

solitarily in isolation of other key players and thus everyone has to play their part. As mentioned earlier, like prisoners, staff also hold varying beliefs and attitudes about chaplains; most very positive and supportive, whilst a minority not so. Staff are not immune from world politics, media, their upbringing and life experience; but it is the duty of the member of staff to act professionally and not let personal views affect how they carry out their role in prison.

With regards to meeting the needs of Muslim prisoners, the prison has come a long way, from when I initially started, in meeting their diverse needs. Without going into too much detail, Ramadhan is a 'well-oiled machine', we hardly have any complaints from prisoners and sometimes we can be the envy of my other Muslim chaplains elsewhere who may be struggling.

RT: Do you have any views on prisoners who convert to Islam while in prison? How easily do converts fit into the community? Is their presence welcomed or resented?

MG: The Human rights legislation allows a prisoner to practice whichever faith they want. This in practice means that a prisoner can change their religion as often

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as they want without any hindrance from prison authorities. This is not an ideal situation from a chaplain's perspective as genuine conversion from one faith to another takes a long time and deep considerations, it has both emotional upheavals and family distresses involved. Indeed although one must be willing to welcome a person who converts to your faith, this nonetheless can be steeped in concerns about the motives and circumstances surrounding the conversion.

Recently there was a piece of research done on forced conversions in the High Security Estate, and what transpired was that conversions are taking place across all faiths and is not specific to the Islamic faith. Also people are converting for a number of reasons namely;

- I. Culmination of a genuine spiritual journey
- II. Ulterior motives such as a perceived perk
- III. Fear and thus need of 'protection'
- IV. Peer pressure of gang associations
- V. Sometimes, but rarely, forced conversion

Recently I had a conversion from Muslim to Mormon and the reason given is that I do not want to be tarnished as being an extremist.

In prisons, on the surface of it, converts fit in well in the community and are welcomed, but they tend to struggle with readjustment of their lives to the new faith and the emotional upheaval that they tend to go through. Unfortunately there is also the pressure some converts feel in that they must completely transform their lives now having arrived whereas in reality, and to be fair, the transformation can take many years.

RT: In 2012 you were awarded the MBE for services to faith and diversity in the Prison Service. Can you tell me how you felt when you were told of the award and what it was like to receive it.

MG: It was a humbling experience but I suppose any type of recognition is always going to be appreciated although one does not do it for the recognition in the first place.



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