

A CHAPLAINCY PERSPECTIVE

Roger Stokes

Chaplain, H.M. Prison, Full Sutton.

Inevitably the main thrust of Fresh Start has been directed at the unified grades. Uniformed and governor grades formed the vast majority of prison staff and were responsible for all that went on in establishments. The problem came in trying to pin down which individual was responsible for what. An organisation that was devised decades ago was not sophisticated enough to cope with the increasing demands made of it. Changes and clarification were needed to form a coherent management structure, and it could only be brought about by going back to first principles. That was the analysis and solution that seemed to have been reached by those responsible for the Prison Service — but what about the view from the man in the field?

No matter how excellent a system may seem in theory, it is the practical application that is all important. It can only be a good system if it works and meets the demands made of it. More than that, it must also take account of the demands it makes of the people involved with it. If those are unacceptable, for whatever reason, then changes need to be made. No system should be regarded as more important than those who work it. Either it will break down or they will. In the Prison Service we also have

another group of people to consider — those in custody. They may have come into conflict with the law, but if imprisonment damages them further, the conflict will be sharper next time round. An even more pressing reason is that if men are pushed too far they are liable to turn against those directing them.

Four Groups

Within the prison system there are four large groups which can be readily identified. Clearly there is the management which is responsible for national and regional policy as well as the running of each establishment. Policy may be directed centrally but its implementation relies on local management. The effectiveness of that implementation depends on the ability and the cooperation of the second group of people — the officers on the wing or unit. It is the uniformed grades who have to make the theory work in practice. Basic human nature means that their cooperation with this can only be obtained if they accept and have confidence in the plan they are asked to operate. The third group may be described as the clients. I have chosen that word as it reminds us of their legitimate claims for respect and

recognition. Any establishment can only function if it has at least the tacit cooperation of those incarcerated in it. Inmate resistance on a large scale will quickly lead to chaos as there are not enough staff to control more than a minority of malcontents. Even if disruption can be contained, there is the definite risk of releasing men who have become embittered and so, more dangerous than they were before.

That leads naturally to the fourth and largest group of people — the customers. Strictly speaking they are not part of the system, but it exists to serve them — the community outside. They too have legitimate expectations of the prison system for which they pay. Are they getting value for money? Is the present system providing the best for them? Rule 1 could be said to be an expression of their requirement that the law-breaker should become an asset to society rather than the liability he has been. As they foot the bill and the management is ultimately responsible to them, their demands need to be considered seriously. They provide the essential counter-balance that prevents the system going into uncontrolled free-fall. It can only work properly and progress if there is mutual co-operation and trust between each interest group. Just as with walk-

ing, a dynamic balance needs to be maintained.

Speed of Implementation

One of the most notable features of Fresh Start has been the speed of its implementation. Green paper in January 1983, Bulletin 1 August 1986 and full implementation April 1988. That is extremely rapid for such a large and complex review as this needed to be. Against that background it is hardly surprising if the proper balance has not always been maintained. It has been rather like a child learning to walk and much of the time there is a tendency to wonder whether all the effort and falls are really worth it. After all crawling was quite an effective way of moving on the flat, and stairs could be scrambled up. The challenge was faced, however, and the new structures are in place even if they still seem unfamiliar and unreliable.

Perhaps that is where part of the problems of implementation lie. Change is threatening as it disturbs the familiar and reliable. It challenges accustomed practices and demands innovation and new methods of working. One consoling fact though is that every old habit was once an innovation. By what standard should the morality or correctness of a new system or procedure be measured? Provided that it does not actually hurt or damage people directly there is no reason why it should not be tried. In time it could itself become familiar through long usage. The question is whether it has neglected the proper claim of any group or individual.

Other Values Neglected

I said at the beginning of this article that the main thrust of Fresh Start had concentrated on the unified grades. That was inevitable but many would say that the desire for efficient management has neglected other values. One argument adduced in support of this is the way that the Chaplaincy has been included in the Inmate Activities functional block. That highlights two specific points. First, there is a tendency to want to apply a common pattern of organisation so that everything is neat and tidy. The reality is that establishments differ in their nature and management structures will have to be adapted to meet specific requirements. Practical operation will show up the problem areas where attention and alteration is needed. Secondly, the majority of a Chaplain's working week is usually spent doing other things than

organising group activities. If they have a parallel in any functional block it is probably in the Residential area.

At a recent conference for Chaplains and Heads of Inmate Activity a lot of time was spent discussing the Chaplaincy's relationship with the management structure. The nature of that relationship and the effect of Fresh Start manning levels on chaplaincy activities clearly varied from establishment to establishment. What was felt more commonly was a feeling of being boxed in by the structures. Is it coincidence that even in the management structure diagrams the lines of responsibility have been transformed into closed boxes? There is an urgent need to open lines of communication from one area to another if the system is not to break down in chaos.

The Chaplain's Role

Traditionally, the Chaplain's role has stretched out into every part of the establishment and this could be even more important in the future. He has so many responsibilities that it can be notoriously difficult to locate him, his pattern varies so much. As he goes round he speaks to representatives of all groups within the prison and this gives him a unique insight into the establishment's spiritual state of health. That does not mean simple religious matters but includes the general morale of the various groups. Such an insight is invaluable as it can be used to identify problem areas affecting groups of people as well as individuals. More than that, the Chaplain can provide some of the treatment, as well as the diagnosis, for at least some of these problems.

Since he does not fit obviously into any group, the Chaplain is never really one of 'them'. He can listen to the grouses and complaints no matter who they come from without having to go on the defensive. That can provide a valuable safety valve for what could otherwise become an explosive situation. He can also ease the channels of communication where this is necessary, for nothing breeds fear more rapidly than the unknown. Clearly there are matters which need to be kept confidential to an individual group, but good communications help to keep an organisation functioning properly. I am not saying that the Chaplain should be a glorified messenger, but because of his wide ranging contacts, he can help to keep the channels of communication open by

spotting blockages as they occur.

The Religious Dimension

So far in this article I have not mentioned the religious contribution the Chaplain makes to an establishment. That is not because I think it is unimportant but because it is too easily compartmentalised. Religious affiliation is one of the labels stuck on a man when he comes into prison — but what does it really mean? Generally speaking there is no real religious faith behind the label especially early in the sentence. I say that because a sincere believer of nearly any religion does not tend to break the law. It is only a short step from acknowledging that to having a derisive attitude towards any religious observations. Certainly the need to provide the facilities for religious observances is another complication in running the regime but it is important.

Much of the prison regime is retrospective at least in origin and it needs to be balanced by something prospective. By that I mean that it looks back to the reason why the man is in prison in the first place — his crime. The facts do have to be faced — but they are in the past and cannot be changed. What is needed now is help and hope for the future and the search for faith is an expression of that hope. It is also a statement of individuality that he is more than a name, number, crime and sentence. Recently, the burgeoning of education in prison (and particularly in training prisons) has helped, but that tends to remain the imparting of skills. An earnest seeking after faith can help a man find his real self and so grow into a more balanced person.

After all the upheaval of Fresh Start the Prison Service now needs to find its real self. It must be more than a steadily growing dustbin for society because otherwise it will become cancerous in its growth. I believe that if the Chaplaincy is used wisely it can be of great value both nationally and in individual establishments in furthering this process. Fresh Start has given the Service a new structure — the question that remains is whether it is going to become a bureaucratic monster or fulfil a useful purpose. The changes have been demanding and what is needed now is a recognition of human values so that there is the trust and co-operation to make it work. I hope and pray that the Chaplaincy's potential contribution to this will be appreciated and used. ■