

Bishop to Prisons

Scene
from here

The job of Bishop to Prisons came into existence in 1974 when the Prison Chaplaincy became part of the Home Office establishment, and the need for an informal link between the Home Office and the Church of England came to be acknowledged. (There are equivalent posts in the Roman Catholic and Methodist Churches). The task was undertaken by a succession of suffragan bishops, and it was duly handed on to me in 1985 when I was Suffragan Bishop of Maidstone.

Like a number of responsibilities in the Church of England, there was no job description and no induction course. I was given a Licence to move freely within prison establishments of England and Wales, on behalf of the three Archbishops, and in due course I acquired a Home Office pass. However, there was comparatively little experience to go on, no particular brief and very little in the way of expenses. Almost immediately I walked into an uneasy situation in that for the first time a Chaplain-General (Keith Pound) had been appointed from outside the ranks of the Chaplaincy. As far as I was concerned this was an advantage, for it gave me the opportunity to develop the work with someone who had come to it fresh, and with a wealth of previous experience, but it certainly overshadowed my activities for the first few years, and there were suspicions (wrongly) that I had had a hand in this change.

I began to develop my work along three particular lines. My first responsibility was to support the Chaplain-General and the Headquarters team by being available to them for help and advice, and by acting as a sounding board for some of their ideas and concerns. The job of Bishop to Prisons came into

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I began to develop my work along three particular lines. My first responsibility was to support the Chaplain-General and the Headquarters team by being available to them for help and advice, and by acting as a sounding board for some of their ideas and concerns. In practice this meant fairly regular contact with the Chaplain-General

Under this title the Journal invites someone who is not a member of the Service but who knows us well to contribute a reflection on some aspect of our work. Bob Hardy, the Bishop of Lincoln is also Bishop to Prisons. Here he writes about that role.

and the chairmanship of the Prison Chaplains Advisory Group (PCAG). The PCAG has no formal basis or membership, but has evolved into a group of people with a wide variety of experience in penal affairs who provide an informal forum for the airing of concerns regarding the Chaplaincy. Its membership includes three Chaplains, nominated by the Chaplaincy Conference, a Magistrate, someone from a Diocesan Penal Affairs Group, a representative of Prison Fellowship, a Prison Governor and someone from the Board of Social Responsibility in Church House, Westminster. The group meets three times a year and gives the Chaplain-General an opportunity to air his concerns and get some reaction from others working in the area of penal affairs. It also, of course, gives him an opportunity to listen to the views of the Chaplains working in the field. So we have talked about the mission statement of the Chaplaincy, the training of chaplains, worship in prison, and general moral issues, as well as many of the practical details of running the chaplaincy during a time of great change.

The second area of concern I developed was in the formal representation of the Chaplaincy to the Church of England, and vice-versa. I continued to be part of the interviewing process when Church of England clergy joined the Chaplaincy. Four years ago this changed dramatically when we decided to conduct the interviews on a residential basis, using a variety of initial exercises, and the expertise of a psychologist as well as a Governor, alongside the resources of the Chaplaincy. All of this has led to an improvement in the professionalism of Chaplains, and has helped us make better appointments overall.

We have also developed two other groups to keep the drawbridge down between those who are working in prison, and those outside. One is a Penal Affairs Group amongst members of General Synod. This group meets regularly during the sessions of Synod and is an attempt to inform Synod members about current issues facing the Chaplaincy. In January 1991 the Group was able to mount the first debate on penal affairs in General Synod for over ten years, and this, together with continuing contacts has enabled us to keep some of our concerns before the wider church. Our other initiative has been to develop Diocesan Order and Law Groups around the country. The aim of

these groups is to provide a means by which parishes and deaneries can be informed and briefed about the situation in prisons and alerted to general issues of order and law. We also hoped that these groups would be a forum for Prison Chaplains to share their concerns and to be a means by which ministry in prisons is integrated more fully into the life of the church. The effectiveness of these groups has been variable, and I am very conscious that they have not worked as well as I had hoped.

Another way in which I have tried to raise the profile of prison ministry has been through the Lincoln Conferences which began in 1989. In these I have been marvellously helped, by the Chaplain of Lincoln Prison (Alan Duce) and HM Inspector of Prisons, Judge Stephen Tumim. The conferences have been held every two years (another is planned for April 1995) and have attracted widespread support and interest. We have been able to attract a distinguished series of international speakers who have generously allowed us to publish their contributions to the Conferences. And we have been able to bring together a wide cross-section of those concerned with penal affairs, so that they could meet and listen and talk. All this has enabled us to break down the distinctiveness of our particular tasks and to share both vision and enthusiasm.

More recently, my entry into the House of Lords has enabled me to contribute to a number of debates on penal concerns.

My third area of endeavour has been much less formal. It has been simply my efforts to get to know the prison world from the inside, to talk regularly to those within it, and to support them in their endeavours and concerns. So I have tried to visit prisons regularly, to listen to Governors, prison staff and chaplains. I have tried to answer prisoners' letters when they have been sent to me. I have tried to stand up for justice in individual situations, to improve the system, and to set right things I know to be wrong. The work is always interesting. I find it compelling in the best sense of that word, and I often regret that I have so little time to devote to it.

What are my impressions? I have been associated with the Chaplaincy during a time of enormous change. My concern has been

above all to ensure that matters of faith remain integral to the total life of prisons, and are not marginalised or regarded as simply another activity. The Statement of Purpose for the Prison Service gave a new impetus to the work of the Chaplaincy as it approached the 1990s and our strategic plan for the Chaplaincy as part of 'activity Services' builds on this. But we need to do all we can to ensure that the work of the Chaplaincy continues to be at the heart of the Prison Service.

I say all this for three particular reasons. The first is my conviction that most of the issues faced by the Prison Service are at root theological. Redemption, Hope, Forgiveness and Justice are basically theological terms. The Christian Church has a long experience of exploring and developing them. It needs to be able to feed them into the current debates on vision and values.

The second is my belief that the outside community must become involved inside if real change in penal affairs is to occur. No one has put this better than Pierre Allard, the Director of Chaplaincy, Correctional Service of Canada:

'The myth that Chaplains can fulfil their ministry of reconciliation without the help of the larger faith community must be forever dispelled. However talented, however powerfully empowered by the Spirit, however strongly mandated by their churches, Chaplains must realise the communal dimension of the new covenant, and their own limitations in representing the outside community ... Those who have experienced forgiveness from God must also

experience forgiveness, acceptance, reconciliation from their brothers and sisters outside the walls. In the same vein, volunteers are not a nice addition or a passing fad. They are an integral part of the Chaplains' ministry.'

My third conviction is a more general one. It is what continues to intrigue me about the world of penal affairs. Again, I can best express it by another quotation from our Lincoln Conferences, this time by Professor Norval Morris of Chicago:

'The criminal law controls the largest powers that the State exercises over the citizen in times of peace. It defines the difficult balance between the autonomy of the subject and the authority of the State - a balance on which a democratic society ultimately depends. In my mind prison is a sort of barometer for that balance. If we get the balance right here and hold it steady, we won't be likely to go wrong elsewhere. Justice, not social protection, not crime reduction, is the over-riding purpose of the criminal law. We won't achieve that over-riding purpose until we have a more adequate armamentarium of responses to crime and make more parsimonious use of imprisonment.'

In his 1991-92 Annual Report HM Chief Inspector of Prisons summed up the work of the Chaplains in the Prison Service as 'a group of people constantly finding ways of making good things possible.' I would like to think that that description could in some way be applied to my own contribution as Bishop to Prisons. ■

READABLES

The following items have recently been acquired by the Prison Service College Library. They are only a small selection from our recent additions. More complete lists and our journals bulletin are sent to the training officer in each establishment every month.

The Prison Reform Trust has produced a wealth of interesting material in the past and continues to do so. One of its recent publications 'Prison Magazines: a survey and guide' (PRT 1994) gives a comprehensive view of the magazines produced in prisons throughout England and Wales, surely of

interest to all education departments throughout the country.

The field of forensic psychiatry is one which intrigues many. Hugh Miller, an expert on forensic medicine, who acts as an advisor to many TV programmes, has produced 'Unquiet Minds' (Headline, 1994) a readable account of many of the personality disorders which have at one time or another grabbed the headlines. Whilst by no means a textbook on the subject, it provides an insight for the layman.