

Then I came to those in captivity ... and I sat where they sat
(Ezekiel 13.15)
Gina CSF



Prison chaplaincy was the last thing in my mind when, in 2000, I moved from Stepney to Brixton. I had had five years experience as a part-time hospital chaplain at the Royal London and hoped that I might continue in that field. However, there were no openings and I was driven to looking for other work.

Several possibilities opened up but none of them felt right, and I was in the process of applying for a job as an undertaker's receptionist when an ordinand came to our weekly house Eucharist positively bubbling over with enthusiasm about a placement she had just completed with the chaplaincy team at Brixton Prison. Perhaps I could do some voluntary work there until I find a job, I thought vaguely.

So it was that only a few days later I found myself being escorted through locked gates to meet Patrick the co-ordinating chaplain. To my amazement he immediately offered me an appointment two days a week covering his days off, as the elderly priest currently doing it needed to retire. Suddenly I found myself launched onto a fast-track learning process shadowing members of the team and getting to discover the challenges and joys of being a prison chaplain. Before I knew where I was I was covering the Anglican chaplaincy post on Fridays and Saturdays.

I loved the work immediately and found it brought together all of my previously acquired skills and training as a teacher, parish worker, hospital chaplain and counsellor. Further prison chaplaincy training followed and eventually, after two years I got a part-time salaried post at Wormwood Scrubs.

What does a prison chaplain actually do? There are certain statutory duties a chaplaincy team has to cover daily, so I will begin with those. Each day every newly admitted inmate has to be seen by a chaplain within twenty-four hours, as does anyone who has requested a chaplaincy visit. We are also required to visit the segregation and healthcare units, and most days we visit the 'detox' wing. These, theoretically, are the times and places where prisoners are most vulnerable, but vulnerability raises its head on every wing of the prison and in many different ways.

I have two particular roles within the chaplaincy team: the support of men who have been bereaved and those who are known to be at risk of suicide or self

harm. All prisoners are bereaved because bereavement is a cutting off, but the death of a significant other can sometimes be a factor that precipitates the downward spiral into crime and imprisonment. Whether the relationship with the deceased had been good or bad, if you have no-one to turn to, and especially if, as is often the case, you have mental health problems, drink and drugs can become an escape route from pain and a fast track to prison. Many of the men I visit in the detox unit have lost loved ones, sometimes through gun or knife crime or drugs overdoses, and are now struggling to deal with the emotions that are beginning to surface. Those of us on the chaplaincy team who have bereavement counselling training are able to offer support.

If someone is bereaved while he is in prison it is the role of the chaplain to check the veracity of the news and then to inform the prisoner. As prisoners can only attend the funeral of a spouse, parent or child, and then only when there are no contra-security implications, we offer those who cannot be present a short service of commendation. Then at least they can look back and think "I did what I could".

Self harm is a coping strategy: it is a way of dealing with intense inner pain. The act of inflicting pain on one's own body releases various chemicals in the brain which bring about a feeling of well being and calm. However, the effect is short-lived and the root causes of the stress remain unaddressed. I am not in a position to offer in-depth counselling, but a non-judgemental and empathetic listening ear together with a few practical suggestions as to how to deal more constructively with their urge to self harm can make a considerable difference. Often there are small practical things I can do such as getting a prisoner enrolled onto a yoga or relaxation class or expediting an application to get telephone numbers onto an inmate's PIN system so that he can be in touch with his family. In these and many other simple ways chaplains communicate God's love for them at a time when they are feeling overwhelmed by self-hate and fear of the future.

I am not allowed nor would I want to proselytise, but the very fact that I come wearing my habit communicates that I am something religious, ("What are you miss, are you a monk?") and gives the men permission to explore the spiritual dimensions of their lives if they wish to do so. It never ceases to amaze and humble me how readily prisoners confide in us as chaplains or how often they ask us to pray with them. Again and again I am stopped on the wing landings with such requests and unabashed we stand together before God in prayer as other inmates come and go. We have Gideon New Testaments and other religious articles to give those who ask. Rosaries are very popular, and though only a small proportion of those who wear them actually use them in prayer, I believe there is usually more to it than mere superstition. Even superstition is a starting point, however, and can develop into something deeper with appropriate input and encouragement.

I am very conscious that there are many aspects of prison chaplaincy I have not even touched on. This has been a very personal account of my particular role in a large inter-faith team in a London jail. We share the statutory duties

collaboratively but obviously have faith-specific responsibilities within the team. I am not generally involved in the regular round of worship services and education but they form vibrant threads in the fabric of chaplaincy that could warrant an article of their own. Let this suffice to share my enthusiasm for a job that never ceases to challenge and stretch me, but brings with it untold rewards and joy. *f*

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