



## Understanding A Ministry To Prison Officers

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### **This is not a holiday camp.....**

“This is not a holiday camp!” was the response from the duty officer at the prison when I had asked for six inmates to be released to attend a Bible study with members of the local congregation. This meeting had previously been arranged and approved by the Governor of the prison. After working in the prison for six years I had developed a reasonably good working relationship with the prison staff but still there were those staff members who thought I was working against what *they* were trying to achieve. When the prison officer accused me of trying to turn the prison onto a *holiday camp* this was an accusation that struck at the heart of my ministry. What did he mean? What was *his* understanding of my work - if any?

It was during October 1995 that the Young Offenders’ Institution where I was part-time Chaplain became an adult prison. My observations in the months that followed led me to see that the prison officers were under considerable pressure to cope with appropriate new conditions for running an adult prison. Although some officers had already served in other adult prisons there was a sense that everything at the prison had to be rethought and that the practices in dealing with young offenders were no longer appropriate in dealing with adult male prisoners. In terms of the Chaplaincy, the Chaplaincy Team also discovered that the programmes that they had developed over the previous five years, in ministering with young offenders were no longer appropriate for an adult population. We had to rethink, from basic principles, what it meant to minister to an adult prison population.

At this time, we began to experience some obstruction and non-cooperation to our work coming from some of the prison officers. For the most part, these incidents had not taken place when the prison was

a Young Offenders' Institution. Several questions arose when trying to understand how the prison officer related to the chaplain's ministry. Was the attitude of non-co-operation the prevailing attitude among all the officers? Was their opposition to ministry because some officers disagreed with our beliefs, perhaps reflecting a change in society that has a tendency to marginalize religion? Or were they under pressure as a result of the change-over from dealing with young offenders to dealing now with adult inmates?



## The Relationship Between Prison Officers and Chaplain

It was at this point that the Doctor of Ministry Program enabled a review of my understanding of the relationship between prison officer and chaplain. Coming to this office of ministry from a Reformed Presbyterian background, I had always assumed that I was chaplain not just to the inmates but to the whole institution. This assumed that the chaplain would be available to anyone, inmate or officer. As chaplain to the Young Offenders' Institution this had meant ministering to inmates and encountering chance meetings with officers on the wings of the prison. Most of the time this would involve no more than speaking about the current issues within the prison. On occasions there would be those members of staff who would ask specifically to see the chaplain and we would meet with them in an interview room. Before the change-over I had been invited to conduct services of marriage and funerals of officers and their families. And on one sad occasion I ministered to an officer and his wife through a miscarriage.

Since becoming an adult prison the situation had changed. I not only had little sense that I was being sought out as chaplain but that some prison officers did not regard the Chaplain as a colleague, but as an outsider interfering in *their* work. I began asking questions in terms of addressing a theology of ministry that could look at how to minister to the whole prison population whilst taking into account those who, for whatever reason, were being obstructive to that ministry.



The Doctor of Ministry project sought to explore the officer's understanding of chaplaincy and how the work of the prison chaplain related to their work as a prison officer. Given the then National Mission Statement<sup>1</sup> for chaplains working within the Scottish Prison Service, the project sought to explore that part of the statement that stated "*our obligations to staff should also be kept in mind*".

## **A Role for the Church in Prisons?**

The project recognized that there is a long Reformed Scottish tradition of the established Church of Scotland being involved in the work of prisons<sup>2</sup>. Concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation focus on a particular ministry that the then Mission Statement emphasized. But the prison system is also about justice and mercy. These are public dimensions of ministry that involve the Church too! The project aimed to view prison ministry within the wider context of a Reformed tradition representing both notions of pastoral & liturgical and law & gospel. Therefore the project was designed to explore the officer's own perception of their relationship to Chaplain; to explore their understanding of their own religious beliefs (if any) even to the point of seeing their work of being a vocation; and to explore their experience of working with the chaplain. It was also to explore their understanding of justice and mercy in the nature of prison work (with reference to chaplain/inmate relationships) and how they have experienced the chaplain at work with inmates.

## **The Research**

The present reality is that the legal framework<sup>3</sup> in which the chaplain works focuses the work of the chaplain towards the inmate. But to operate as chaplain within a prison requires the co-operation of prison officers. The project sought to listen to the story of the officers as to how they saw meaning in what they do with particular reference to their relationship with the chaplain and with the inmate through a series of structured interviews.

It was recognised that the prison system operates within a complex set of relationships. Evidence was found, both behavioural and theological, that there was a range of views among the officer population as to how they perceived, understood and experienced the role of the chaplain.

A unique situation arose during the research period, in that an inmate appeared who was a former officer several years before! I invited him together with the officer who had helped in conducting the interviews to review the conclusions that I had arrived at from the evidence collected from the first round of interviews conducted with the prison officers.

The officer, now inmate, had only been in the prison service for six months. His reason for leaving was the attitude of some colleagues that he described as causing tension within the prison by their mistreatment of inmates. He agreed that there was a division of mindsets among the officers. He described a scenario of a near riot situation that developed when he was a trainee officer. He was clear in his mind that the situation had arisen out of the denial of a telephone call to an inmate. He blamed an officer for causing this whole scenario and even went on to say that once the troubles had been calmed, and several days passed, the officer responsible came back to work and provoked the whole situation again. He described this officer as having an '*attitude of the older generation*' of prison officers. This attitude had been described in the earlier interviews as the '*old ways*'. When asked about how officers would deal with personal problems he thought that the older generation of officers would be more likely to have a church connection and therefore be more likely to approach the Chaplain for help. This has not been my experience. However, there is a valid point in thinking that the older generation, if rejecting the pastoral aspect of the Chaplaincy, perhaps are more favourably disposed towards formal acts of worship coming from a generation that most probably would have had some experience of church attendance.

He spoke of there being a body of officers who are of the older generation of officers, but who have '*gone with the younger generation*'. He made the comment that they prove to be the best of all officers. In other words there are some of the older experienced generation who have moved with the times and have responded to new initiatives within the system.

He suggested a reason for some officers in taking such a hard line, saying that it was the older generation of officer that had come through the national prison riots of some 25 years ago. He suggested that there is an issue of unresolved forgiveness. He also spoke of new initiatives having an emphasis on rehabilitation and less on the aspect of punishment. This helped to understand why some officers had rejected the idea of prison as a form of *real* punishment. Several officers said that they considered punishment to be something administered in the courts. An emphasis on rehabilitation would be in contrast to the expectation of the consequentialists<sup>44</sup>

The second review of findings was carried out with the officer who had helped set up the initial interviews. He had been an officer within the Scottish Prison Service for fifteen years. He had served during the riots several years ago that happened in many prisons across the country. He too confirmed the division of views among the officer describing one group as '*the old school*'. He described this group as having failed to move with the times, accusing them of trying to run '*Victorian jails*'. He described many of the characteristics already detected in the analysis including the desire for the officers to '*feel that they have always got to be in charge*'. He described his experience of leaving the army and entering the Scottish Prison Service feeling that he had something to contribute to society but that his expectations were soon dashed. His experience echoed that of several other officers. For him, the ministry of the chaplaincy was seen mainly in terms of a pastoral ministry and not in terms of a ministry of Word and Sacrament.





## Findings

After conducting a series of interviews with the prison officers it became clear that there were basically two main strands in their thinking and this caused a divide that had been confirmed in the review of the findings. Evidence had been found for two main strands of theological thinking among the officers interviewed. Anthony Duff's<sup>5</sup> definitions identified this theological issue as something worthy of discussion in the familiar conflict between purely retributive<sup>6</sup> and purely consequentialist accounts of punishment. The project sought to understand the officers' view of the chaplain's office and from that sought to determine an implied theological understanding of the chaplain's ministry. It emerged that the officers' views did not neatly fit into categories and one officer even tried to embrace conflicting views. However, a general pattern has emerged that I have sought to describe as those who hold a more traditional approach to being a prison officer in contrast to those who have been prepared to change.

In describing the behavioural characteristics of these two views I have established that those views that align themselves with the traditional characteristics tended towards a retributive theology where as those who were open to change tended towards a consequentialist theology. It was the retributivist view that emphasised the law and its demands; whereas the consequentialist sought to emphasise grace in the form of rehabilitation.



## Towards a Theology of Ministry

In my ministry I was aware of a way that reflected my Reformed tradition and embraced the concepts of both law and grace. It was the prophet Micah who calls to people of God "*to do justice and to love mercy*" (Micah 6:8) proclaiming that this is what the Lord wants from his people. Unexpectedly, I discovered this view was also to be found among the officers who were interviewed. One officer spoke of his Christian beliefs having a bearing upon his role as a prison officer. He was the only officer who did not polarise the biblical concepts of justice, punishment, mercy and forgiveness into the domain of either the

chaplain or the officer. Instead he saw these issues relating equally to both chaplain and officer. He was the only one who managed to hold the law and grace aspects of the Gospel together.

If any prison ministry is to be relevant it needs to address the context within which it lies. Part of that context is what the Church of Scotland's expectation is of the relationship between officer/chaplain and inmate/chaplain. Apart from Acts of Parliament<sup>7</sup>, there are two documents that the Joint Prison Chaplaincies Board has produced which are acknowledged by the Church relating to these relationships. These are the Chaplains' Mission Statement and the job description for the prison chaplain. Both of these documents spell out in detail the nature of the expected relationship that the chaplain has with inmates. There is no evidence in the interviews with officers that they would deny the Church's expectation of the relationship between inmate and chaplain. However, I believe that this is only part of the story. Theologically I have argued that the Mission Statement tends towards a theological bias of seeing prison ministry in terms of presenting a gospel without the demands of the law, whilst the job description for part-time chaplains is more balanced in its statement. I found evidence to suggest that many of the officers interviewed could only view their work in terms of the law, with concepts of mercy and forgiveness alien to their story of their work within the prison. From the evidence in the interviews the officers who held these views, in the main, are the same officers who deliberately cut themselves off from the work of chaplaincy. They denied a knowledge of what the chaplain does with inmates (at least in front of their fellow officers) and distance themselves from the notion that they could be ministered to by the chaplain. In this sizeable section of the officer population, their relationship with the chaplain is largely influenced by their understanding of the inmate/chaplain relationship. They find themselves alienated in their work from God, whom they view only as represented in an unbalanced view, exemplified by the chaplains' Mission Statement. This can only be addressed when the officer begins to have an appreciation of a gospel that widens its theological base to include the demands of the law, which is exactly the position of the Church's reformed tradition.

When we look at the Church's expectation of what the officer/chaplain relationship should be we find very little is specified. All that is contained within the Mission Statement is, "*the statement specifies 'prisoner', but our obligation to staff should also be kept in mind*"<sup>8</sup> and in the job description, "*He (the chaplain) is available pastorally to inmates and staff*"<sup>9</sup>. This project tried to discover what those *obligations to staff* could be, by seeking to ask the officers themselves. It was the 1990 version of the Mission Statement that had accompanying notes that encouraged the chaplain to think in terms of a mission to be conducted by the chaplain specifically to the staff. Again this having a particular theological thrust that limits or narrows the reformed understanding that ministry should encapsulate both law and grace.

There is evidence that the Church's expectation of the relationship that the chaplain has with those encountered within the prison (as defined by the two statements coming from the Joint Prison Chaplaincies Board) are at odds with the expectations of a whole section of thinking within the officer population. I would further suggest that by pursuing a ministry of one particular aspect that asserts a distinction between the public and the private, and thus between criminal law and individual morality where repentance becomes a matter for the offender and forgiveness a matter for the victim, but only in the privacy of their own souls, only increases the officer's sense of isolation. Therefore, we are alienating a whole section of the officer population by not taking into account the broader base prison ministry could be addressing.



### **"There but for the Grace of God go I"**

The differences of opinion found among officers had caused an internal division of thinking among the staff. This rift is not being addressed by the Church nor the chaplaincy and hence the officers think that God has nothing to say on the matter, which is basically a theological one! This has led to some officers feeling frustrated by their colleagues who have what is described as "old ways". This brought forth





comments such as the custody manager stating that “*the saying ‘there but for the grace of God go I’ needs to be thumped into them*”, when describing his fellow officers in relation to inmates’ welfare.

The Centre for Theology and Public Issues has created an ongoing debate about what is going on within Scottish prisons. Almost 25 years ago Hawkins wrote,

“It is in fact remarkable how little serious attention has been paid to prison officers in the quite extensive literature on prisons and imprisonment. It is almost as though they were, like the postman in G K Chesterton’s celebrated detective story, so commonplace and routine a feature of the scene as to be invisible. Yet their role is clearly of critical importance.”<sup>10</sup>

The situation today has not changed a great deal in Scotland. It is Wood<sup>11</sup> who offers the greatest insight suggesting that theology offer alternative values and ideas. In his examination of the criminal justice system he describes negative values found currently operating with the Scottish prison system. He also suggests an alternative approach in the form of 10 ‘affirmations’:

- i) We can affirm *love and goodness* as basic values for humanity, and reject any response to people who offend which seeks to repay evil with evil.
- ii) We can affirm an understanding of *justice as rooted in mercy*, and reject vengeance as an unacceptable response to offending.
- iii) We can affirm *forgiveness as the preferred response* to broken relationships, and reject punitiveness as corrosive of a human society.
- iv) We can reaffirm *reconciliation as the ultimate aim in responding to offending*, and therefore ostracism and rejection of offenders are to be avoided.



- v) We can affirm the *value of mutual responsibility* between members of society, and reject any denial of that responsibility by way of scapegoating.
- vi) We affirm the basic human dignity and worth of every individual, and therefore reject any degrading treatment of people who offend;
- vii) We affirm that every human being has the potential for growth, and therefore reject any denial of opportunity, and imposition of humiliation.
- viii) We affirm the need of every human being both to give and to receive, and reject any exclusion of offenders through suppression and silencing.
- ix) We affirm the creation of relationships as an essential part of being human, and reject any exclusion of offenders from this process.
- x) We affirm the community dimension of all human life, and therefore reject any neglect or dehumanization of people who offend by the larger community.”

These are the goals that Wood suggests to which the whole church could strive and against which actual achievements could be measured. This is a debate that should interest the whole church. Unfortunately in Scotland it does not. It is Smith<sup>12</sup> who concluded her study of looking at the relationship between prison and church in Scotland by stating, “yet the church only pays lip service.”



## Conclusion

The task ahead seems enormous, and yet there are encouraging signs. This project has enabled me to see that there is a broader base of opinion in the officer population than I initially realised. I have also found

some officers who share what I have called a *reformed approach*, that of seeing a need to view law and grace as different aspects of the same situation. There is possible follow-up work to be done to explore further these views in a way that could help to shape future ministry within the prison. The chaplaincy could for example exercise a ministry of Word and Sacrament that could present both the *grace of the Gospel* and at the same time present the *demands of the Law*. This would enable a balance in chaplaincy ministry that did not emphasise only the pastoral nature of that ministry. There is the potential of conducting a baptism of an inmate within the prison to which we invite officers and inmates! Or encouraging those officers who have expressed a Christian commitment (one discovered only through this project) to share worship with Christian inmates. There is potential here for something new and exciting in terms of a ministry of Word and Sacrament.

One of the biggest revelations from the information I gathered was with the training staff at the College. I had no idea that there was no formal input as to the work of the chaplain (or any other non-officer staff) at the training stage. It was the training officers who emphasised the need for local training to continue after that initial four weeks training at the College. One possible way forward to share a theologically broader based ministry could be to develop a local Induction Program that could take on board the issues raised in this project. This would be aimed at new officers arriving at the prison as an ongoing program. There may also be scope to include those who are already serving officers.

In conclusion, the way ahead has several options that have their roots in this project with the overall aim to overcome present difficulties experienced in a prison ministry. Concepts of neighbourly love, repentance and reconciliation, forgiveness, etc. focus on a particular ministry which the mission statement emphasises. But the prison system is also about justice and mercy. The issues of justice and mercy are much bigger than the then Mission Statement will allow. These are public dimensions of ministry that involve the Church too! This is about the dimensions of a public ministry in which the Old Testament



speaks of justice. Some prison officers can not imagine the chaplain on their side - concomitant commitment - involved with their ministry also and at one with the courts and jail. Perhaps the Church needs to see what the prison officers already know, that prisons are there to protect society. If the chaplain is seen only investing in the Inmate, then this is perhaps not a correct estimate of God's work in the law. Defending society is doing God's work as well.

- <sup>1</sup> Mission Statement for Chaplains working within the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) is "to present the claims of Jesus Christ to every prisoner and prison in Scotland in a way that is relevant to the prisoner's situation, and enables him or her to make an intelligible response to Jesus Christ that issues in a change of lifestyle that will grow and develop within the life of the church, both in prison and upon release. Note: this statement specifies 'prisoners', but our obligations to staff should also be kept in mind".
- <sup>2</sup> Many prison reforms have been brought about directly because of the intervention of the Church. Gladstone's Report of 1895 brought about the introduction of Borstals and a reduction of prison numbers due to a series of articles printed in the *Daily Chronicle* by a Scots cleric, William Morrison of Kirriemuir, because of his experience of prison ministry. The introductions of parole and prison visiting have only been introduced as a direct result of input from theological sources.
- <sup>3</sup> The Prison (Scotland) Act 1989 Chapter 45. H.M.S.O., London
- <sup>4</sup> The *consequentialist* in this context being those Prison Officers who would take a traditional approach to punishment associated with the "old ways". I have equated this view to the Old Testament model of "an eye for an eye a tooth for a tooth" and with an emphasis on punishment rather than rehabilitation.
- <sup>5</sup> Duff, Anthony. "Punishment, Repentance and Forgiveness: Justice, Guilt and Forgiveness In the Penal System", in D. Garland, ed., Centre for Theology and Public Issues, *Occasional Paper No 18*, Edinburgh: 1990.

- <sup>6</sup> The *retributive* in this context being those Prison Officers who would see punishment rightly deserved but would be more sympathetic to enabling a Prisoner to get back into society by way of rehabilitation. I have equated this view to the New Testament model of “love thy neighbour” with an emphasis on forgiveness.
- <sup>7</sup> The main Act of Parliament relating to the employment of Prison Chaplains in Scotland being the *Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1980*, HMSO, London, Chapter 62.
- <sup>8</sup> This is the sentence from the Mission Statement for Chaplains working within the Scottish Prison Service.
- <sup>9</sup> Section 2.1 of the Job Description for Chaplains working within the Scottish Prison Service.
- <sup>10</sup> Hawkins, G. *The Prison: Policy and Practice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.
- <sup>11</sup> Wood, Chris. *The End of Punishment*. Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, 1991, p.95.
- <sup>12</sup> Smith, Hillary. “The Church and Prison: a Sense of Futility”, in Centre for Theology and Public Issues, *Occasional Paper no 38* Edinburgh:1997.