

NAVIGATING UNCHARTED WATERS

**Jonathan Aitken reflects on the challenges of leaving prison
and the impact of MU's gifts of kindness**

I have long admired the quiet (perhaps too quiet!) work that Mothers' Union does for prisoners and prisoners' families. I have seen this first hand as a prisoner, as a prison charity worker and, for the last six years, as a prison chaplain.

Life after prison

It is a strange irony of many prisoners' experiences that leaving prison can be more difficult than going into prison. Why? Because when you enter life behind bars at the start of a sentence, you are following the herd into a regimented system that requires little or no personal navigation.

By contrast, when you leave prison, you are setting off alone into largely uncharted waters. Will you be able to cope with the seas of freedom that lies ahead of you? Will your former friends shun you? Will you be able to get a job? Will your relatives forgive you and wholeheartedly welcome you back?

I remember how these questions troubled me as I awaited my release from HMP Elmley at 8am on 7 January 2000, after completing an 18-month sentence for perjury. On this morning, I was helped by a kindly, maternal soul from Mothers' Union who wished me good luck and gave me a black bag (as opposed to a standard issue transparent plastic bag ostentatiously stamped HMPPS) to carry out my possessions. Other prisoners being released that day were given toiletries and a rucksack containing 'civvies' (civilian clothes) to help their entry into the world of freedom. These are the gifts of kindness in which MU specialises on the mornings when prisoners are released. They mean a lot.

The power of mothering

As a prison chaplain, I often preach at Sunday services about what my congregation should do when they go back into the free world. At HMP Pentonville we work closely and happily with our fellow Muslim chaplains, so from

time to time I get invited to preach at Friday prayers in the prison mosque. On these occasions, I often quote one particular verse from the Koran which consists of this beautiful and profoundly true thought: 'Paradise lies at the feet of mothers.'

All prisoners have mothers. I remember how my mother was unable to hold back her tears when she came to visit her 'little boy' (aged 56 years). But with or without the tears, the maternal touch is a precious and invaluable touch in the largely masculine world of the prison estate. So the fact that it is a member of Mothers' Union helping the men with kind words and useful gifts on the day of their release is a big bonus.

I suggested in the opening sentence of this article that perhaps MU keeps 'too quiet' about its work in our prisons. 'Do not hide your light under a bushel,' said Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, later adding: 'Let your light so shine before men so they may see your good works.'