

Jails in desperate need of support, says Jonathan Aitken

by REBECCA PAVELEY
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THE Revd Jonathan Aitken, a former Cabinet minister, now a prison chaplain, has called on churches to do more to support prisons in their ministry of rehabilitation, in the wake of the Government takeover of HM Prison Birmingham this week.

Mr Aitken, who served seven months as a prisoner himself after admitting perjury in 1999, said that the failings at Birmingham were a “particularly bad example of a disease that had been incubating for some time in the prison service, the root cause of which is staff shortages and mismanagement”.

The number of prison officers has been falling over the past decade, from 25,000 full-time-equivalent posts in 2010 to 21,000 in 2017. The Ministry of Justice states that a net increase of 3111 has been achieved since 2016. Panel campaigners point to the loss of experienced officers: 8500 have left since 2010. There were 9003 assaults on staff in the year to March 2018, 26 per cent up on the previous year, and 166 per cent higher than in March 2016.

Spending on prisons is 22 per cent down on 2010, and several prisons, including Birmingham, were contracted out to G4S in 2013.

The Government stepped in on Monday to take back control of HM Prison Birmingham from G4S, after the Chief Inspector of Prisons, Peter Clarke, identified “appalling failings”, including squalor, vermin, and a smell of drugs so strong that he had to leave because of the effect it had on him.

The prison had the highest-recorded number of violent incidents in the previous year in any prison in the UK — 1147 assaults, including fights. There had been a dramatic deterioration in conditions at the prison since a riot in 2016, Mr Clarke wrote in a letter to the Justice Secretary, David Gauke.

“The inertia that seems to have gripped both those monitoring the contract and delivering it on the ground has led to one of Britain’s leading jails slipping into a state of crisis that is remarkable even by the low standards we have seen all too frequently in recent years.”

New staff and a new governor are now being brought in to run the prison, and prisoner numbers will be reduced to 900. The Prisons Minister, Rory Stewart, has promised to resign if conditions, including violence, at ten prisons do not improve, although HM Prison Birmingham is not one of the ten.

HM Prison Birmingham is a category B Prison, which has a constantly changing population, as prisoners come in from courts and are sent out to other prisons.

The Bishop to Prisons, the Rt Revd James Langstaff, said this week that those involved with prisons had been aware that there was a “powder keg lurking for some time in local prisons like Birmingham, which have a very volatile populations and often a less-experienced staff”.

He said: “A lot of what is being experienced now is the outworking of political decisions made in the past, particularly five years ago, to reduce prison staff. A lot of staff went who were the most experienced because they were the most expensive.

“The service is still struggling. All prisons are under pressure. There is a lot of good work going on, but the ones under the real pressure are local prisons where there is a high turnover, a moving population of people coming in from the courts.

“Prison chaplains are key in times of pressure. They are hugely valued by senior leaders in prisons, and they have a capacity to soak up some of the pressure, which is very valuable.”

Mr Aitken, who was ordained deacon last month by the Bishop of London, and now serves in the chaplaincy at Pentonville, said that, although Pentonville was a “tough nick”, it had none of the problems seen at Birmingham, and there were “good, compassionate, and sensitive prison officers and governors” who were doing a very good job.

“There is a lot of good that flows in prisons — a lot of people there are fundamentally good people who have made bad mistakes; but also a lot of evil that flows from prisons. Violence is unacceptably high, and is only contained by good prison officers.

Mr Aitken, who also serves as Assistant Curate of St Matthew’s, Westminster, continued: “I hope the Church will become more active in bridging the gap between God’s churches and

God's prison chaplaincies, and that there will be more work by churches and community groups in the ministry of rehabilitation. After all, prison without rehabilitation is like trying to clap hands together with only one hand.

“Prisoners need more hope for their lives outside, and chaplaincies and churches can play a big part in that. If this situation is the nadir for prisons in recent years, then it is a nadir from which hope and encouragement can change the future.

“But there won't be a wonderfully quick or single solution to the issue. It will be down to hard work in individual prisons.”

Paul Vallely