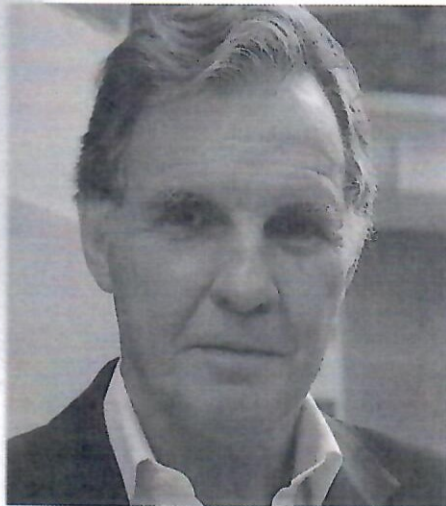


A personal view from a prison chaplain



Former MP Jonathan Aitken is now a member of the chaplaincy team at HM Prison, Pentonville. He reflects upon his personal journey and the everyday realities of life as a prison chaplain

I love my life as a prison chaplain. It is a huge surprise to me and perhaps many others that I have been called to this vocation at the ripe old age of 75. But the work I regularly do on the wings of Pentonville, and sometimes in other prisons, is challenging, fulfilling and deeply satisfying as a new chapter in my life of spiritual and practical public service.

The chaplaincy departments in most of our prisons tend to “hide their light under a bushel”. So much so that even experienced IMB members are often disappointingly under-informed about the work that prison chaplains do. This needs to change, which is one reason why this invitation to write for the Independent Monitor has been gratefully accepted.

Who are prison chaplains? They are a mixed and diverse bunch who cross all manner of interfaith, denominational and interdisciplinary boundaries in their calling to serve prisoners and prison staff. A vital ingredient in this mix is a strong team spirit within the chaplaincy. There is no room for prima donnas or tall poppies. HMP Pentonville sets something of a gold standard for interfaith cooperation.

Thanks to the exceptional leadership gifts of our managing chaplain, Imam Suhel Mulla, we chaplains at The Ville are a committed and collegiate team. For example, I enjoy warm friendships with both our senior Muslim chaplain Imam Tayib Ali, an outstanding Islamic scholar from the Sudan and with our senior Anglican chaplain Revd Jo Davies who has been training me for the past year.

It has proved easy to like and cooperate with every member of the chaplaincy team I have encountered including Sikhs, Catholics, Hindus, Buddhists, Pagans, Evangelicals, Orthodox, Humanists, Rastafarians and “No Faith” chaplains. Our differences can be real, but our common call to serve is stronger. “In my father’s house are many dwellings places” said Jesus. He would surely feel at home in a prison chaplaincy.

What do prison chaplains do? Depending on the ebb and flow of life on the wings, we can be an emergency service, a listening service, a counselling service, organisers of prayer and worship services in chapel, mosque and multi faith room, and the servants of all faiths or none in the quest to transform lives and bring peace to the noisy, stressful and occasionally dangerous environment of our prison. So there is never a dull moment for a chaplain.

There is a framework to chaplaincy life, called “The Statutory Duties”. Every day chaplains are required to make contact with

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every new arrival (at Pentonville between 20 and 30 each day); to visit all prisoners on the Health Care wing (25 inpatients) and to visit each prisoner on the Segregation Unit (usually 6 or 7). These can be challenging calls.

I have been doing regular statutory duty on the Health Care wing, two corridors of cells which are occupied by men

who are physically or mentally ill. The nursing and medical care they receive is first class. Pentonville has just won the National Care UK Special Recognition Award 2019 for its outstanding care of its inpatients and outpatients. Pastoral care has its part to play too on the Health Care wing. Approaching a prisoner here can occasionally produce a noisy insult or a taciturn snub. But more often than not, a chaplain’s visit results in a conversation that can help to calm a troubled mind, or solve a problem, or lead to a shared prayer.

Chaplains are issued with keys so we move freely along all wings of the prison. I was originally trained for lay prison ministry in the USA by the legendary Chuck Colson who founded the worldwide charity Prison Fellowship. Chuck taught me the importance of reaching out to prisoners, often at a low point in their lives, with a smile, a conversation of supportive encouragement and an offer of one on one prayer. Not everyone likes this. Occasionally I am greeted with a shout of “F*** off Pie!” (Pie and Liquor = Vicar in prison lingo). But I then play what often turns out to be my trump card by saying “I used to be a prisoner too. I have been where you now are”. After a chat about serving my time at HMPs Belmarsh, Standford Hill and Elmley the hostility evaporates and we get on friendly terms.

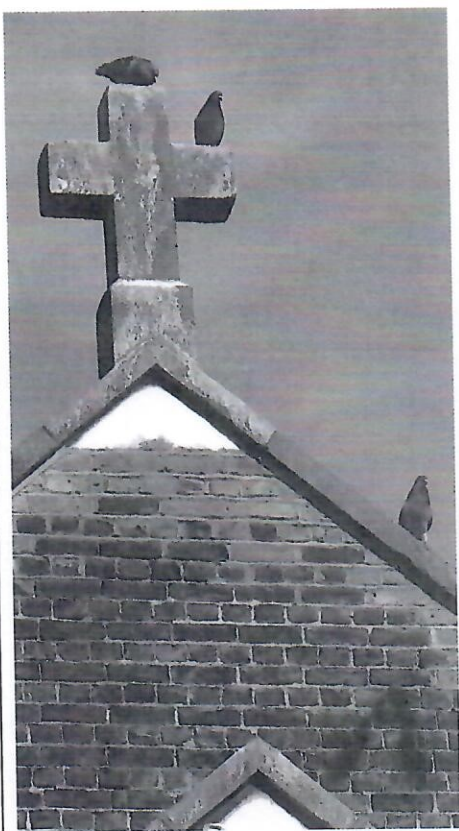
On a good chaplain’s day, you always manage to help someone. On a bad day this may involve coping with crises like attempted suicides, self-harming episodes, or dealing with tragic personal issues like family bereavements back home. Chaplains are part of the compassion team, which is also filled with caring prison officers, staff members and managers. The milk of human kindness flows along a prison wing far more generously than outsiders realise. Chaplains play their part in ensuring that a good prison has a human heart and soul.

The character and tone of a prison comes from both the top and the bottom. Our No. 1 Governor at Pentonville is Darren Hughes, a reformer of personal faith who talks to his team about his ideals of “servant leadership”. He is a staunch supporter of the work of the chaplaincy, as are all the senior managers. Insiders will understand the huge contribution a strong, united and dedicated chaplaincy can make to both the holistic spirit and the detailed working of a busy London prison.

We are well blessed at Pentonville by an excellent group of 100 chaplaincy volunteers. One of them, Mick B, often mentored me during my early days on the wings. Mick is a retired CID Detective from the Metropolitan Police, a pillar of

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CHAPLAINCY



Continued from previous page

his local Methodist church, and a rock of good sense and good humour when the going gets bumpy. He is just the sort of experienced volunteer keyholder that our chaplaincy attracts to its team of outside helpers. Almost all of them give their time on a free or pro bono basis.

Pentonville is on the recovery trail as a prison. Its infrastructure is out of a 19th century Dickens novel but many of its staff are outstanding in the caring helpfulness of their 21st century spirit. We chaplains are useful players in that team. Sometimes we display an independence of mind that can be outspoken yet helpful in problematic issues such as Seg reviews under the GOAD rules which include participation by the IMB.

Because IMB members, chaplaincy volunteers and chaplains are natural allies in their willingness to bring outside experience into the introspective prison system we should work together and communicate more often than we do. So I respectfully suggest that IMB members should do their best to take an interest in and encourage the chaplaincy department in their prison. At Pentonville our IMB Chair, Camilla Poulton, does this well and is much appreciated.

Finally, a chaplaincy team will only be a good team if it is part of the wider prison team. That wider team certainly includes the IMB. The more we know and understand each other the better we will serve.