

ADDRESS BY

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To

Christian Prison Chaplains

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The title of my talk today, as arranged by my old friend Paul Cowley, is "*Encouraging Prison Chaplains*".

I begin it with just two words "Thank you".

I say this thank you to you from the heart.

Because like many thousands of prisoners and ex-prisoners who pass through your pastoral hands I feel a great sense of gratitude for:

- The kindnesses
- The sensitive welcomes
- The prayers
- The chapel services
- And the spiritual guidance you offer to those who come through your chaplaincies.

When I was serving my 18 month sentence for perjury in 1999-2000 I was able to build faith-deepening friendships with individual chaplains in three different prisons.

Since being back in the world of freedom I have met many more chaplains through:

- Charity work in prisons
- Through giving talks in your chapels
- And through being a voluntary worker on chaplaincy teams

So I understand your world to some extent and I know from many different angles that you deserve a big thank you.

But I am also conscious that you chaplains don't get thanked nearly enough, especially by those who have benefitted most from your care.

All I can say by way of encouragement is that Jesus had the same problem!

You will know the story in St Luke's Gospel of the ten men suffering from Leprosy who were healed by Our Lord – but only one came back to thank him. "Where are the other nine?" asked Jesus.

If those men had been 21st century prisoners Our Lord would have received an even lower percentage of thanks!

For technicalities, rules and pressures of post release life make it even harder for today's ex-prisoners to come back, to call you, and to let you know how they are getting on.

But the lack of feedback is not the same as a lack of gratitude.

So please let my opening words of thanks today speak for a multitude of unheard ex-offenders who I know are truly thankful for the help they receive from their prison chaplains.

Now, as it so happens, we are approaching Prisons' Week, when the Christian community traditionally prays for prisoners, prisons and all who work in them.

So what I thought I would do today is to open up for discussion one or two areas of prayer which might be of encouragement to prison chaplains.

But before I go there I want to begin with a true story which started with a prison chaplain.

Part of this story may amuse you, but the serious reason I want to share it with you is that it leads into what I think may be the most important part of our agenda today.

This story started when I was still a prisoner about coming to the end of my sentence, two weeks or so before my release date.

Out of the blue, the chaplain who I had got to know well, asked me an unexpected question:

How would you like to preach at the evening service in the chapel on your last Sunday here?

Unaccustomed as I had become to public speaking the old trooper in me said 'yes'.

Then I asked the chaplain "what should I preach about?"

Knowing me well, he replied "How about preaching about that psalm you are always banging on about".

So I agreed, and a day or two later our noticeboards all around the prison the announcement went up:

'Sunday 6.30pm at the Chapel, Jonathan Aitken will preach on Psalm 130'.

Now this advertising had the effect of enlarging Sunday evening congregation far beyond the usual Christian suspects.

BIG FACE STORY - told orally

Well I did go to the Big Face's cell on B-Wing two nights later (perhaps partly because when the Big Face asks you a favour you can't refuse it!)

And of course I could not produce St Augustine, Martin Luther and John Bunyan for the discussion I had with the Big Face and two of his best mates.

But I will always remember that evening because so much stuff poured out. And as we talked about, and prayed over, some of the key verses in Psalm 130:

- About 'crying out of the depths for mercy'
- About 'with the Lord there is forgiveness'
- About 'my soul waits for the Lord, more than watchman waits for the morning'
- And about 'plenteous redemption'

I saw, perhaps for the first time, so clearly that prayer is the heart-beat of prison ministry.

You know this far better than I do.

- One on one prayers with prisoners, even if you don't get thanked for them.
- Even if you never know how those prayers are answered.
- Nevertheless are a kind of prayer with a power and a passion that puts it in a special category of service to God.

So prison ministry is certainly different to many other forms of Christian Service. It is tough, specialised, pioneering work at the cutting edge of Ministry.

My old mentor, Charles W Colson, the founder of Prison Fellowship, once said to me when we were praying on Death Row in Texas that prison pastors are the special forces of God's work, fighting the good fight daily on one of the most challenging battlefields of good versus evil.

An English prison chaplain of the early 20th century who put this same vocational thought more gently and more poetically was C.T. Studd who wrote these lines:

*Some wish to live within the sound
Of Church or Chapel Bell.
I want to run a rescue shop
within a yard of Hell.*

So coming now to an agenda of Prisons' Week prayer requests to encourage prison chaplains I feel the highest priority is to ask for chaplains to be blessed:

- With the fire and the passion and the heart for praying for prisoners
- In ways which will reach prisoners' hearts
- And start them on the road to redemption

This is the work of a 'rescue shop within a yard of Hell' and those who do it under enormously difficult pressures and workloads need, and deserve, our prayers.

This mention of the overwhelming workload of prison chaplains reminds me of an appointment I had while a prisoner, going to see the chaplain one evening.

He looked and sounded completely drained.

And he explain it, saying 'I am exhausted. I've spent the last three hours monitoring international telephone calls'.

It's hard to think of a workload duty further removed from the care of souls than monitoring international telephone calls.

But chaplaincies do tend to become the prison service's dumping ground for all sorts of administrative, welfare and socio-cultural duties, which are neither spiritual nor vocational.

This is not an easy problem to resolve. Administration has to be done. Health and Safety Audits have to be completed.

Some Managing Chaplains are bolder than others at protecting their core ministry from bureaucracy.

On the other hand we see from the chronic prison officer shortages in most jails that chaplains are not the only prison staff under heavy workload pressure. The chaplains do have to bear some high voltage emotional burdens when they have to handle sad or tragic events such as prison suicides, self-harm incidents, and mental health breakdowns.

So bearing in mind the high incidence of sickness, and stress related breakdowns among chaplains, I do think that spiritually we need to pray for your workloads to become more bearable.

Also in practical terms there is a need for chaplains to have more of a collective voice in expressing their concerns on issues like workloads to the senior levels of HMPPS.

Thinking about collective voices, brings me to another subject which perhaps should be on our agenda today as both a prayer and practical need.

I will call this the need for better association or perhaps even for a formal Association of Christian Prison Chaplains.

Now this word 'Association' has a special meaning in prison.

I always remember on my first morning at HMP Belmarsh the moment when the officers came down the line of cells with the cry of:

'Unlock!

Everybody out.

All go to Association'.

I had no idea what this meant. But I soon discovered that Association was a big plus in the lives of prisoners:

- an opportunity to take a break
- meet your fellow inmates on the wing
- share conversations and strike up friendships

Now if you stop to think about it, there is a strange paradox here.

Prisoners are encouraged to go to Association.

Chaplains seem to be discouraged from Association.

I am surprised to discover that today's event is the first ever gathering of what might be called an Association of Christian Prison Chaplains. And that even now there is some hesitancy in high places about forming such an Association.

Ho, hum!

I would say to the hesitants, or those who belong to the 'not

invented here' brigade, that Christian Chaplains should not be afraid to follow in the footsteps of the Muslim Chaplains Association or MCA.

There are good spiritual reasons for this, not least because of Our Lord's words, which I repeated in our opening prayer:

'Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name then am I in the midst of them'.

But there are also practical reasons such as the usefulness of peer support and good networking.

Also, I understand that the MCA has engaged in some practical encouragement, such as interview coaching to improve the chances of success for their Assistant Chaplains who wish to apply for the posts of Managing Chaplains.

My first comment would be 'Well done, the Muslim Chaplains Association'.

Like all of you, I've come across some superb interfaith chaplains in prison.

Interfaith dialogues are often preached about from lofty pulpits.

But I know that one of the places, where interfaith understanding and cooperation works best is at the coalface of prison ministry.

So all credit to those of you have made it work so well.

But, of course, our Christian faith is a distinctive faith. Cooperating with other faiths should not mean yielding ground to different values and belief systems.

If that is happening in the world of prison chaplaincies, for heaven's sake don't let's criticise Muslim Imams or the central mosques that support the MCA. They are doing their best for their faith.

And don't criticise either the authorities at the Ministry of Justice.

By way of preparation for this talk – which turned into something of a penance – I actually read all 104 pages of the official Prison Service Instruction Document issued by NOMS last year with the title '*Faith and Pastoral Care for Prisoners*'.

It's a worthy, if turgid, Yes Minister doorstopper. And if any of it is changing the contours of spiritual care for prisoners, don't shoot the secular messengers of NOMS or now HMPPS – they're doing their best!

The question we should address and pray about is:

- Are we Christians doing our best in this arena?

Of course, I know you prison chaplains are doing your best.

But is the wider Christian Church, the Christian Community in its broadest sense doing its best to support its Christian Chaplaincies?

At present the trumpet is giving an uncertain sound.

I say this, because when preparing for this talk I spoke to a number of prison chaplains, some of you who are here today, and others I knew from my visits to prisons in other parts of the country.

And I began these conversations by saying 'I'm giving a talk with the title 'Encouraging prison chaplains''.

Do you need any encouragement? If so why?'

And the broad consensus of answers that emerged can be summarised in this way:

- Yes, we do need encouragement, because in recent years a gap seems to have opened up between God's Church and God's prison chaplaincies
- Too many prison chaplains feel isolated and lonely

- We don't have a lot of contact with churches in the wider community

- It's almost as though we are offshore islands separated from the mainland church

- This separation has not happened by anyone's plan or policy. We seem to have sleep walked into it. But the gap is widening.

If those paraphrased sentiments are even half true then we need to talk and pray about how to bridge this gap.

So how might the bridging of the gap begin? Here are one or two thoughts:

1. We could start by encouraging one or two churches, in all denominations, to reach out to, to adopt or even to be twinned with prison chaplaincies.

Why should it be more interesting for a London church (as my own parish church has done) to adopt a church in Ghana rather than to adopt, and regularly pray for, a chaplaincy from a nearby prison?

Why don't more churches invite prison chaplains to preach on a Sunday? This seems to be almost as rare an event as a sighting of the Loch Ness Monster!

The gap we are talking about needs to be bridged at local church level, however important national leadership may be.

2. Prison chaplaincies need to recruit more Christian volunteers from outside churches to come to their prison chapel services.

There are one or two great successes and good numbers in this field, but also some low field failures.

There may be a particular Anglican problem here.

Sister Susie will not, I hope, mind me highlighting the fact that in her prison chapel at HMP Isis she has 80 Pentecostal volunteers and only 3 Anglican volunteers. Why such a low take up among Anglicans? Is it a wider problem? Perhaps we can discuss this in the Q and A period.

3. There needs to be stronger links between Christian inspired charities working in the field of offender rehabilitation and prison chaplaincies.

I applaud the good work being done through this kind of cooperation with Christian inspired charities like Caring for Ex-Offenders, PACT and others. But it needs to be given a higher priority.

4. There is scope for increasing the number of Christian mentors willing to be trained to start their mentoring in prison and to continue it after release.

Two years ago Paul Cowley and his team at Caring for Ex-Offenders put on, as an experiment, an evening at St Augustine's, Queen's Gate called *Mentoring – Call to Action*.

It was a marvellous evening at which many ex-offenders, mentors and prison chaplains spoke. Over 150 people turned up and 39 of them signed on at the evening to become prisoners' mentors and to attend CFEOs training days.

I believe most of those mentors ended up via the community chaplaincy at HMYOI Feltham.

But I think the real encouragement of the evening was that if churches and prison chaplains can handle it, there is, in fact, a larger than expected pool of potential Christian mentors willing to serve.

5. There is a need for better links between prison chaplaincies and Christian theological colleges.

We have come to a good place to talk about this.

St Mellitus has a strong claim to be this country's most successful theological college.

Although only ten years old, it now has some 256 ordinands in training for the Church of England and another 500 students of Anglican and other denominations studying theology on various courses.

Here is a question:

How many talks or lectures have been given at St. Mellitus in its 10 year history by prison chaplains addressing the college's ordinands about the vocation of prison ministry?

I believe the answer is 'none'.

I also believe the same answer and the same zero score would be given by most other theological colleges in the UK

When I was a resident student at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, for 2 ½ years reading theology along with some 60 ordinands, no prison chaplain ever came to address us.

So also we need to pray about the gap between prison ministry and ordination training.

Closing that gap might well produce more good candidates waiting to enter prison chaplaincy.

Perhaps we can discuss this in our breakout sessions.

6. Finally, I think we all should consider responding to Bishop Graham Tomlin's initiatives with London prisons, and particularly by following his lead in highlighting some of the Biblical and theological teachings on Prisons.

Exactly a week ago Bishop Graham delivered an inspirational inaugural Prisons' Week lecture in the Central Hall at Westminster. I know that several of you today heard it and were uplifted by it as I was.

Perhaps the most important significant point made in the lecture is that there are 58 mentions of prisons and prisoners in the New Testament, most of them good guys like John the Baptist, Peter and Paul.

But far and away the most surprising prisoner in the New Testament is God himself.

For Jesus, on the night before his crucifixion was held in a prison in the house of the High Priest.

Early theologians like Irenaeus , said Bishop Graham, teach us that what Jesus as the Son of God experienced, all Christians may be called to initiate.

So while the secular culture may see Prisons as places of punishment, the Christian culture should see prisons as places of redemption. And to achieve that, through prayer, is the priority calling of prison chaplains.

I began this talk with a personal story about The Big Face and I will end it with another personal story about prisoners in the chapel of Wormwood Scrubs involving my wife Elizabeth.

Some three years ago the Pentecostal Chaplain at the Scrubs, Pastor Alethea Winston-Lamont invited me to talk at the chapel's Sunday Morning Service.

In the best Pentecostal Tradition it was a lively, audience participation affair with lots of encouraging contributions from the Afro-Caribbean contingent along the lines of "Yeah Man De Preacher's right about dat".

But the big success of the morning was not my sermon but the presence of my wife Elizabeth.

She got the men's attention partly because she's a glamorous, beautiful woman and partly because the guys knew that she'd been previously married to not one but two movie star husbands.

She'd been Mrs Rex Harrison and Mrs Richard Harris.

And over coffee after the service it turned out that two of the Wormwood Scrubs prisoners had actually been drinking companions of Richard Harris. They described some scenes in various pubs with him so there were many bursts of laughter and good memories shared in the chapel.

Now on that same Sunday some 12 hours later just before midnight when Elizabeth was back at home with me she suffered a major sub-arachnoid brain haemorrhage.

And that of course was a life threatening emergency involving 999 calls, an ambulance ride to the Charing Cross Hospital and in the ensuing days, three brain surgery operations.

Now by chance, during the first of those agonising neurosurgery procedures when Elizabeth was on the operating table Pastor Alethea Winston-Lamont called me up on my mobile and said one or two kind words about the service the previous day. So I asked her:

“Would you mind praying for Elizabeth?”

“Of course I will” said Pastor Alethea “And I’ll get some of the men to pray for her too.

Well five days later on Friday, when Elizabeth was still in the Intensive Care Unit, an envelope was delivered to her bedside. It was so large that it looked as if it might have contained a road sign.

In fact it contained one of those mega-jumbo ‘Get Well’ cards. It was signed by well over 50 Wormwood Scrub prisoners with lots of personal messages like “God loves you”, “We are praying for you”.

Now when Elizabeth saw this card she sat up, smiled and her spirits rose.

I swear that on that Friday she began to turn the corner. Nearly 4 years later she’s alive, got all her marbles and although she’s

frail she's mobile enough to come with me regularly to Sunday church services and prison chapels. Praise the Lord!

The reason I end with this story is that it illustrates the underlying message I hope you will take away from this talk.

Prison ministry at its best is a two way street.

It works well when in addition to the prisoners,

Outside visitors,

Volunteers,

Speakers,

Churches,

Prayer Groups,

All participating in your ministry.

All come in to do their bit to support prison chaplains.

So you should not feel isolated or lonely if the Christian community beyond the prison walls does its bit to support you.

And you should reach out too, perhaps through a Christian Chaplain's Association to new networks of church leaders, charities and the wider Christian community to bridge the gap that is troubling you between God's chaplain and God's churches.

Perhaps today's Conference will be a starting point for this.

As God said to Joshua "Have I not commanded you. Be strong and of good courage" (Joshua 1:9)

So be encouraged. And thank you again for the wonderful work you do in our prisons.