

'A lot of prison life is within a yard of hell, but I love trying to help'

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Prisons Week, which starts on Sunday (13 October), encourages people to pray for all those impacted by crime and the criminal justice system. To mark the week, former cabinet minister JONATHAN AITKEN reveals why he became a prison chaplain at HMP Pentonville after reading the words of a legendary cricketer

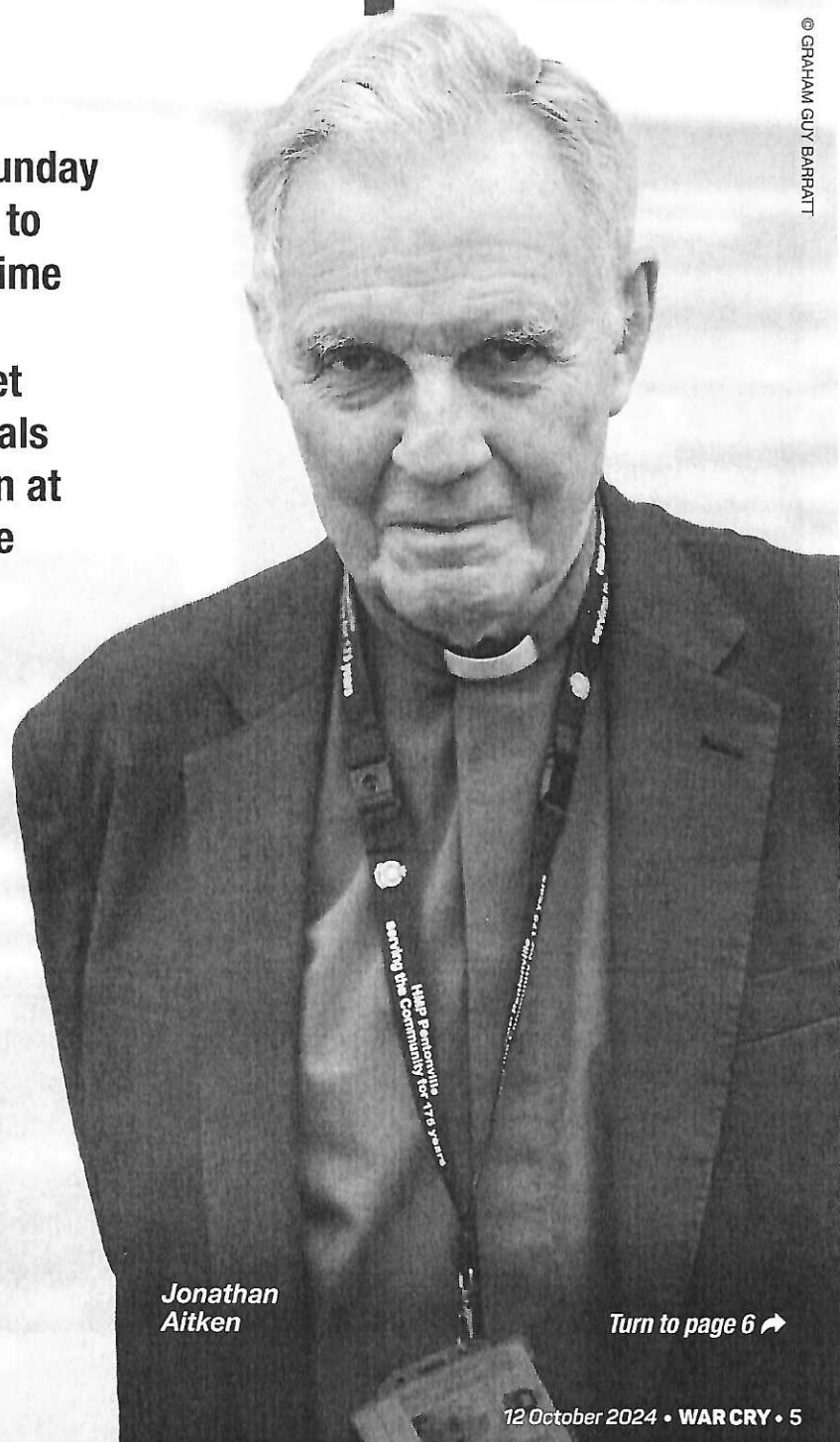
Interview by Emily Bright

Walking into the men's prison HMP Pentonville, with its towering off-white walls and barbed wire, is a daunting experience. The door to the prison compound clangs shut behind the group of assorted journalists I'm with.

Thankfully, my crimes are limited to spelling and grammar errors. We're here to cover the official opening of an XO bikes workshop, which aims to train up to 60 prisoners a year for future employment as bike mechanics. The workshop was partially funded by Friends of Pentonville, a charity co-founded by MP turned prisoner turned volunteer chaplain the Rev Jonathan Aitken.

The event also features presentations on the charity's other initiatives to encourage rehabilitation, and we're taken into the chaplaincy unit to hear more.

On the front wall is a giant cross lit up in white. Christian literature lines the bookshelves. But the bars on the windows are a sobering reminder of



Jonathan Aitken

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where we are. It's here that I introduce myself to Jonathan. He tells me how the chaplaincy is home to both secular events and Sunday services – which he, as an ordained Church of England minister, leads.

The presentations highlight the work of a neurodiverse wing at the prison, the Time4Change programme – which offers Pentonville inmates education courses, counselling and life skills training – and testimonies of former prisoners who have turned their lives around. We then venture over to the XO bikes workshop. While there, we have the opportunity to tour the room and chat to staff and beneficiaries.

Two weeks later, I find myself interviewing Jonathan in a completely different setting: from the comfort of his home in southwest London. The contrasting locations are a reminder of how Jonathan's life has been one of highs and lows.

Once a cabinet minister in John Major's government, in Jonathan he was given an 18-month sentence after he pleaded guilty to perjury and perverting the course of justice. While in prison, he became a Christian. After serving seven months of his sentence, he was released

and began studying theology at Oxford University, setting him on a completely different trajectory towards church ministry.

Chaplains work under crushing burdens

He seems, therefore, the perfect person to speak with to mark Prisons Week, the annual campaign run by churches in England and Wales. Starting on Sunday (13 October), it aims to encourage prayer for and raise awareness of the needs of crime victims, prison staff, prisoners and their families.

'I have the rather unique viewpoint of being both a prisoner and now a chaplain,' Jonathan remarks. 'I thought very well of the chaplains while I was in prison. In Belmarsh, the chaplain was a good man. I used to go to morning prayers every day.'

'Both those days and now, chaplains work under crushing burdens. They are hard-working, dedicated people.'

Jonathan tells me that a chaplain has many different duties.

'The law says a chaplain has to make

visits every day to the new arrivals, to those in prison healthcare and to the segregation unit for those who've started fights or set fire to their cells.

'Chaplains also make pastoral visits to any prisoner who wants one – and quite a few prisoners do. And respond to things such as self-harming or suicide attempts or actual suicides. We haven't had a suicide in Pentonville – praise the Lord – for some time.'

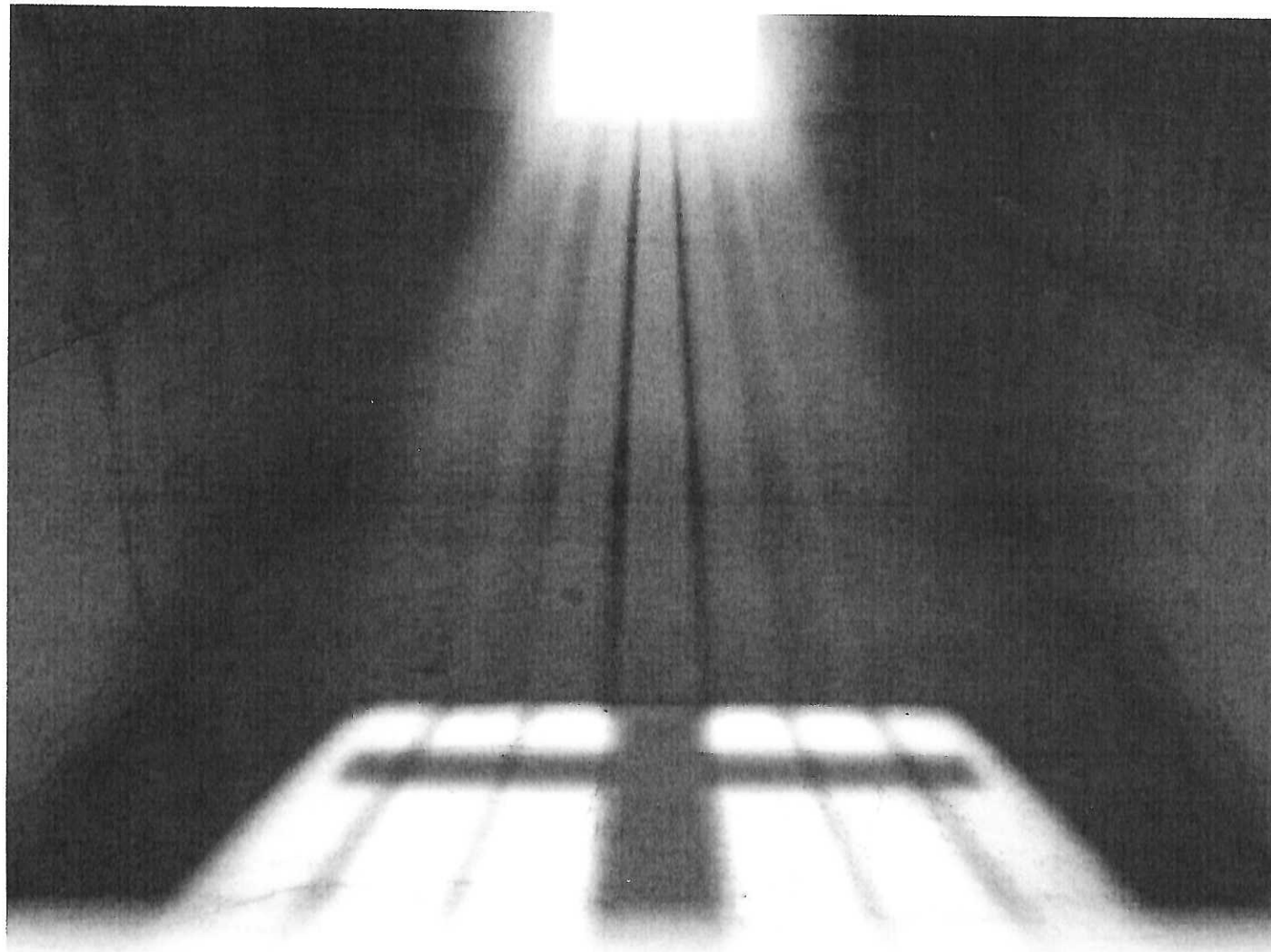
'We're also a bridge between prisoners and their families. Often you find an anguished prisoner who – for one reason or another – can't telephone his family, but he has a number, so I call and tell them: "Your son John is all right, and he wants you to know how much he loves you and that he's no longer in danger."

As a multifaith chaplaincy, the team are able to reach out to inmates of all faiths and none and offer to pray for the prisoners, with mixed results.

Jonathan explains: 'I almost always say to prisoners: "Would you like me to pray for you?" And they say: "Oh no, I don't need prayer."

'I'll say: "Would you like me to pray for you and your family?" They reply: "Oh well, I wouldn't mind a prayer for





my aunt, who's in hospital." There's a lot of praying on the wings. Then, most excitingly of all, every so often someone comes to Christ in prison.'

As I chat to Jonathan, it's clear that he believes his chaplaincy role is a vocation.

'I keep in mind the parable in the Bible of the sheep and the goats, when Jesus questions why people didn't feed the hungry, give a drink to thirsty people or visit people in prison. I feel it's God's work,' he says.

He remembers how his ministry first came about.

'When I was wondering if God was calling me to be a prison chaplain, I initially said no, for all kinds of reasons – I'm not worthy, I'm too old,' he says.

'Then a priest said to me: "Have you seen what an English cricket captain has said about this?" He remembered a 19th-century high-class cricketer, called CT Studd, who decided that he wanted to be ordained. The Church of England was thrilled. They said: "Oh, you'll be a bishop in no time." He said: "No, I don't want to do that. I want to be a prison chaplain."'

After growing weary of opposition to

his chosen field, CT Studd wrote a verse of poetry. On reading it, Jonathan felt a clear calling to become a prison chaplain too.

'It had a great impact on me,' he enthuses, 'and I think of it almost every day.'

'It goes as follows: "Some like to live within the sound of church and chapel bell; I want to run a rescue shop, within a yard of hell." As soon as I heard that, I said: "That's what I would like to do."

'A lot of prison life is within a yard of hell. There are all kinds of dramas, miseries, family relationships getting broken, drugs – you name it, we've got it. Being a chaplain is anguishing and testing in all sorts of ways. But I love trying to help people cope with their problems.'

It's wonderful to see lives changed

It strikes me that Jonathan's story has come full circle. Having found life-transforming faith in prison through

chaplaincy support, he is now the one imparting the good news of Jesus to prisoners. As an author, broadcaster and campaigner for prison reform, he symbolises hope of a new life beyond the prison gates.

He says: 'I, like many prisoners, was down, broken and miserable, told my life was over but I demonstrate that there can be a happy life after prison.'

'A lot of lives don't change in prison – the rate of repeat offending rates is really high – but a lot of lives do, and a chaplain's life has lots of encouragement as well as discouragement.'

And telling prisoners about Jesus, whether through preaching, Bible studies or one-to-one conversations is 'the biggest prize of all' for Jonathan.

He believes that the example of Jesus can powerfully resonate with prisoners.

'Jesus was a revolutionary figure. He spent his time, often not with the rich and the powerful, but with those at the bottom of the heap. Prisoners who get this message are so surprised but also pleased. I think that's why getting the gospel across to them is exciting. It's wonderful to see lives changed by it.'