

From England

REFLECTING ON RETIREMENT — BUT NOT ON RETIRING

by Alan Duce

On 31 March 2003 I retired after nearly 30 years' full-time work as a Church of England chaplain in the Prison Service. Hanging up keys for the last time releases me to review my long sentence in work which some dismiss as futile. I believe it has been an exceptionally rewarding ministry. I write in appreciation of many colleagues over the years. I focus on how I came to have such a long 'stretch inside', on what I feel I have received from the work, its privileges, changes and difficulties, and finally on its enriching of me for the future.

My path to prison lay in the pattern of my youth! For reasons that I cannot explain, I wanted to be a clergyman from about the age of five. At about the age of 15 I took out a book from the local public library entitled 'Prison Was My Parish' written by a retired prison chaplain, Herbert Baden-Ball. I am now a little critical of its detailed revelations about named prisoners, but at that time, it moved me with gripping stories of poignant engagements with people in crisis, engagements only available to him because of his official position in Dartmoor and Wandsworth Prisons. The book prompted a precocious letter from me to the Home Office for career advice. I received a formal but encouraging Civil Service reply, which I kept and found handy when asked at an interview 17 years later — 'How long have you been thinking about applying for this post?'

A chaplain is accredited by the church and then accepted into prison ministry for what he or she brings from outside vocational training. My prison ministry was influenced by preparatory years in the ministry before entering the Prison Service. Experiences in those years provided filters which shaped ideals and priorities upheld throughout my time in prison chaplaincy.

Three features stand out from those formative years. Reading theology at university helped me look at situations within a framework that puts burning issues of the moment into wide perspective. Secondly, travelling for a year in the Far East and working in a seafarers' mission left me with a strong sense that 'shepherding' people who are living away from home raises global questions about inter-cultural sensitivities and world-wide human rights. Thirdly, working for three years in a London Teaching Hospital as a chaplain brought home the powerful potential in helping people in institutions — and particularly in big group work situations. All these experiences have provided me with some liberating baggage for a long journey in prison work. I feel strongly that one should not work in the 'confined hothouse' of a prison without being clear about resources within oneself for surviving.

As I enter retirement I carry memories of association with hundreds of men who have shared times of crisis in coming to prison, times of sustaining themselves in isolation, times of coping with all that is happening back home and times of facing release when opportunities for most ex-offenders are limited. I have felt acute sadness caused by prison suicide — by its effects on families, on other prisoners and above all on concerned staff. It has been good to observe the positive effects of having more female officers in men's prisons. It has also been moving to see how the majority of staff have found resources to cope with exceptionally damaged and difficult people excluded from society in situations with limited prison resources and with ever-heightening public accountability. I have rejoiced to see many find faith and new paths in life. Everyday work has brought new intense opportunities for entries into peoples' lives and chances to see that behind so many stereotyped as villains lies a silver lining.

Contact with people in prison throughout my ministry has also brought home extremities of attitude. On the one hand, one sees the abysmal depths to which humanity is capable of descending in vilifying some offenders because of the nature of their crimes. On the other hand one sees care and resilience in human nature demonstrated in humour and mutual support from one prisoner to another.

Awareness of care and resilience among prisoners was sharpened for me when I saw a remarkable painting by a talented ex-prisoner, Bob

Farquhar, who depicted life in a prison cell as seen through the spy-hole in the prison door. It mirrored the incident before the Last Supper showing a prisoner washing the feet of a cellmate observed by eleven other prisoners. All the prisoners wore prison clothing. It was said that each face represented a figure known to the artist in prison. The painting projected a powerful sense of care for fellow humanity, a care often sensed by chaplains, hidden in the depths of apparent hopelessness in prison.

A prison chaplain has an important role as a mediator, a role which has two distinct aspects. First, and most obviously a chaplain acts as a mediator for the prisoner in creating relationships with spiritual truths and in creating better consequences for human relationships. Secondly, the prison chaplain is someone who can be a focal point in mediating to the outside community underlying problems posed by crime.

In respect of the first aspect of this role, there have been limitless possibilities for helping prisoners in spiritual mediation. Ministerial colleagues and volunteers, especially from Prison Fellowship, loom large in my memories as a prison chaplain. My ministry has also presented exceptional opportunities for wide ecumenical and inter-faith contacts. Two highlights include my meeting the Pope in a private audience at Castel Gondolfo in 1992 as a result of ecumenical networking among chaplains, and my attending a national meeting of prison chaplains in 2003 where as much Arabic could be heard in private conversation as English. Mediating spirituality in prison ministry in the contemporary world raises issues far removed from a sheltered curacy nearly forty years ago in a conventional parish. The Prison Service Chaplaincy is now endorsing multi-faith inclusiveness.

On the second point about mediating underlying problems, the relevance of Emile Durkheim's dictum that 'a crime is an opportunity' came true for me when the Chaplain General asked me in 1978 to edit the annual chaplaincy review *New Life*. This 100-page publication for prison chaplains appeared under my editorship for 23 years incorporating a wide range of theological ideas on people in custody. Editing this review was an opportunity to put to the world issues posed by prisoners as seen from the angle of prison chaplaincy

work. A further opportunity to draw similar issues to public attention came in four successful Lincoln Conferences promoted for Bishop Robert Hardy between 1989 and 1995. As Bishop of Lincoln and Bishop to Prisons and with the help of hundreds of people who attended from all walks of life he harnessed the potential of the Church to energize national thinking about criminal justice.

Interest in international ideas has consistently enhanced my work as a prison chaplain. The United Nations has a division based in Vienna for the prevention of crime and treatment of offenders. I was stimulated by attending two of its world congresses in Caracas and Milan. Many of the ideals promoted by the UN have now been taken up by the Council of Europe and are evident in such documents as The Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. Over my 30 years in prison work it has been gratifying to see the incorporation of these ideals in the recent passing of the Human Rights Act in the UK.

These international interests led to the birth of the International Prison Chaplains' Association (IPCA) in Geneva in 1985. I have felt specially privileged to have been one of its founders and to have served on its World Steering Committee for fifteen years. The objects of the association have been to create a sense of closer ecumenical fellowship among chaplains around the world and to support colleagues often working in exceptionally dangerous and devastating circumstances. Anticipating my retirement IPCA encouraged me to launch a termly review *Justice Reflections* — essays on theological insights into ethical, moral, pastoral and restorative aspects of justice, hoping that it might prove an encouragement for colleagues who receive limited stimulation in some parts of the world. In its first year of circulation this publication, with the help of generous benefactors, has attracted over 1,000 subscribers in 50 countries. There is potential for enormous global development of this independent charity-based project. It will replace the review *New Life*.

Deciding to retire from the Prison Service coincided with an invitation to accept an appointment in the National Health Service as co-chair of UK Transplant Patients' Forum. The job involves promotion and discussion of ethical issues associated with transplantation. With help from the medical profession and the Prison

Service, which has been a very supportive employer, I have been enabled to live with awareness of renal failure for over 40 years. During ten of those years I had a successful kidney transplant and now live on haemodialysis awaiting another transplant. Similarities between renal ethics and penal ethics coupled with a wish to give back a little for all I have had from medicine prompt me to accept this new opportunity. As I move from one public service to another I can commend UK Transplant's courage in creating a national forum for the patient's voice. Such courage does not yet exist in the Prison Service!

People have asked me what is my most precious memory of working in the Prison Service. It lies in diverse opportunities for group work. There are, of course, special moments of contact for a chaplain in being one-to-one with prisoners. That is the traditionally understood function of a prison chaplain. But groups have a life and shared intensity of their own; they can be exceptionally memorable for affirming dignity and worth in all who participate in their communal give and take. Groups for me have varied from ALPS Groups, series of groups for men anticipating long-term prison survival, to numerous day conferences in Lincoln Prison where for seven hours 30 insiders and 30 outsiders stayed together in one long programme.

The supreme moments in prison group work were in preaching in chapel services. It was in speaking before men who have voluntarily come to worship in a place like a prison where they do not want to be and where machismo, sneer and cynicism are common that I have felt exceptionally moved by my position as a chaplain, as a mediator. On the one side men have given me the gift of their attention: on the other side I have felt given a gift from God to convey to them. I have been very affected by the poignant relevance of the Gospel to people so obviously troubled.

The significance of preaching in prison was recognized by Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian. He served in the German trenches in the First World War and later witnessed the destructive individualism and secularism that have affected Western society since the Second World War. At the end of his long life he showed interest in the work of prison chaplains. Preaching his last twenty-eight sermons in Basel Prison, he demonstrated his belief, and my belief, that a prison is one

of the most moving places left in today's world to proclaim the Gospel. Almost all his sermons were based upon unusual texts reflecting the mercy of God. Karl Barth felt that the purpose of ministry in a prison was to convince prisoners that God loved them, believing that everything else important would follow. I have hung up my keys for the last time to retire from the Prison Service in the knowledge that the mercy and love of God, which sustained me inside, will continue to bear fruit in my retirement.

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