



PRISONS WEEK 2009 RESOURCES

STORIES OF HOPE 1

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A Story of Hope from a Chaplain at HMP Dartmoor

Ten years ago I had a Chapel Orderly, "Jim", who was twenty two years old. He was doing six years for stabbing a man he was trying to rob. He had already done several sentences starting from the age of thirteen in a Secure Unit. He started to come to Chapel and as he was a keen guitar player he started to play and sing at the Chapel Alpha groups. His faith began to grow and with it a very troubled conscience. He had committed a crime, another violent street robbery but he had not been caught. He felt so guilty about this that he contacted the police in the North Devon town where he came from and asked them to visit him in prison. They did so and he confessed to this crime. The police were amazed and asked him why he was risking a further sentence. He explained his reasons -"because I'm a Christian now and I want to wipe the slate clean". Jim said he reckoned the police thought he had "lost it" but he didn't care. He knew it was the right thing to do. In the event no further action was taken as he was already doing a six year sentence. Recently he contacted me and asked me if I would give him a reference as he believed he is called to Ordination in the Anglican Church and he has the full support of his Vicar. Jim said he knows from experience that no one is beyond the reach of God's love.

A Letter to a Volunteer Group who visited a Prison for Women

I would like to take this opportunity to express my-thanks to you for the ministry you provide. I have not taken the time to edit this letter so that it sounds 'right' but am happy to send it to you 'as is'. Seventeen years ago, I sat in my cell and listened to some strange people 'with seemingly nothing better to do than sing Xmas carols' and considered how sad my life was. Somehow, I was a young mum in prison, having been led astray by someone 10 years older than myself and didn't know which way to turn. I was desperately sad. The next morning was Christmas morning and I ate the orange that you had all left. Some people might think that an orange is a rubbish and out of date thing to leave but I can assure you it was probably the only fresh thing I ate in a year and a half and it tasted wonderful. What I was also amazed by was why people would care enough to give up their time to stand in the cold and sing songs to a load of scum.

A few years later, I became a refugee in another part of London and became a 'born again' Christian. I went on to plant and lead a church, organise community events and have led many people to Christ. I left prison with no qualifications, having been brought up in care with no real education, and am now filling in forms to be a Deputy Head of a school having been a teacher for 6 years. God called me to be a Headteacher pretty much as soon as I became a Christian.

I cannot express enough thanks and appreciation of the time you give, year after year, to sing to prisoners and to pray for them. Your songs may be old, as all carols are, and it may not have any relevance to the people you wish to reach but God does use you. God answers your prayers. God opens the ears of those you sing to and opens hearts. Thank you. I wouldn't mind if you could think of a way I could be involved, although just sitting here writing this letter at 4am has reduced me to tears and it all seems like yesterday. Perhaps I could make things for you to leave at the prison. Regards, Name & Address supplied

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A Story of Love in Action in a Prison for Women

When I was one of the Chaplains in a prison for women, one woman had self harmed and caused some facial injuries. She told me that she had been evicted from her home and that all her belongings had been placed in a friend's house. She said that her friend had also now been evicted and that all of her property had been placed in a skip and lost. Her partner was also in prison; she had little contact with her children, and she had been addicted to Heroin and was taking Methadone.

As the end of her sentence was approaching I asked if she would like some help from a Community Chaplain and she agreed to a meeting. The meeting took place and she told her story and it was agreed to meet again two weeks later. At the second meeting she told the same story as I do not think she believed that the Community Chaplain would have done anything for that had been her experience with other agencies in the past. However the Community Chaplain asked whether she would like to be picked up on the day of her release, to which she agreed, The Community Chaplain then told her that he would like to take her to a small terraced house that had been obtained for her if she wanted it. She was surprised by this, and even more surprise came when the Community Chaplain offered to take her to buy some basic household equipment and furnishings, and then take her to the supermarket for some food for a few days, and then show her the Medical Centre where she could get her prescription.

In response to all this she broke down and cried, and when she had calmed down, the Community Chaplain asked her whether she knew why this was being done for her, to which she replied that she had no idea. When the Community Chaplain said that it was being done because she was worth it, she broke down again. However the Community Chaplain then challenged the woman about her drug abuse and said that in the previous week he had officiated at the funeral of another person recently released from prison, and that he did not want to officiate at her funeral. She was therefore affirmed but also challenged.

After the meeting the woman rang down the corridor crying, and some staff ran after her concerned that she was in danger of self-harm, but she turned round and told them that her tears were tears of joy. She returned to her home city, and has managed to settle down, and all because someone showed care, and told her that she had value. That is a story of Hope.

Finding a new direction in a Young Offender Institution

Dan was twenty years old and had been in institutions since the age of thirteen. While he was in prison Dan started to attend Mass and after being released he decided to continue to take instruction to become a Catholic. He is now a full member of the church and he has also managed to obtain a full-time job and this is the first time he has been employed. It is a real joy that he has completely turned his life around. Every week he now helps run a club for Senior Citizens. Thanks be to God

Hope in action on leaving Prison through simple care

A tired looking man in well worn clothes stood outside the prison gates. He had just been released after serving a prison sentence. There was nobody there to greet him and he looked forlorn. Then a car appeared. The driver of the car and his companion got out of the car and greeted the former offender warmly. He recognised them for they had often visited him while in prison. They invited him into the car. They drove him to a local supermarket and together they shopped for food. Then they drove him to his accommodation and shared a coffee. Before leaving, they made sure he had a contact telephone number and made arrangements to meet up the following day. The man's face had a peaceful look when they left. He felt lifted by their kindness and a new hope was growing in him. He hugged the groceries. His radiant smile said it all. The smile, I imagined, was still on his face when we wrote to me a week after his release, to tell me that things were going well.

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A Story of Hope through a Prison Officer

A woman told me that she used to suffer from panic attacks. A terrible feeling of fear was not something she ever anticipated – it would suddenly just come over her. Some years ago, when she was serving a prison sentence, she found herself feeling terrified and unable to walk. A Prison Officer noticed her standing there in obvious distress and came over and asked "Are you alright?" "Oh I feel foolish," she said, "but I suffer from panic attacks." "Would it help," the officer enquired, "if I stayed with you for a little while?" The officer stayed with her until the sense of fear subsided. That happened twenty years ago, she told me, but I'll never forget the kindness of that Prison Officer and how it helped me to serve my sentence and feel hopeful about the future.

Two Stories of Hope from a Community Chaplain [From Methodist Church Website]

Paul's story

Paul had serious health problems because of years of addiction started when he was a teenager. He left prison with a package of care relating to training, drug support, hostel accommodation, finance and healthcare. His befriender who knew all the details of his support, met him at the gate on release. At this point she was the only person with whom he had contact – his hostel accommodation was lonely and hard going. Many of the fellow occupants were on drink or drugs. After a long period under the prison regime Paul was not able to organise himself for the meetings with the representatives of the organisations who were assisting him. His befriender whom he was meeting, rang all the members of his support network and arranged a meeting with them and Paul, which got his care back on course. The befriender supported Paul and his new girlfriend. He began to be able to take decisions and to build a life which was drug free. The befriender supported him for nine months, when he was still struggling for a job. Paul and his girlfriend are now married, sleeping on his sister in law's floor, looking for housing together. Paul feels he can now stand on his own.

Brian's story

Brian was a Persistent and Prolific Offender. He had been in the army but had not adjusted to civilian life and from the age of 23 ended up on drugs and alcohol which led him to 15 years of crime and repeated sentences. After five years inside Brian was lucky to get a hostel. However the befriender was the main friendship link who met him at the gate on release. Brian had an operation soon after, while the befriender was on holiday and the Community Chaplain who knew him in prison, visited him in hospital. The befriender met him for over six months, with meetings in diverse places from the cinema to a museum. They looked at job possibilities together. Brian obtained a job (working nights) and attempted an IT course to help him access further work. He still felt out of place, lonely and the befriender suggested a music group that was working with ex offenders to widen his social circle. In the background was Brian's relationship with his parents in Wales, his ex wife (now remarried) and daughter. At first he could not face a return and reconciliation with his father. However this move eventually took place and Brian still occasionally contacts his befriender over the phone.

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A Story of Hope from South Wales

Part One: The story of "R" by a Chaplaincy Volunteer

"R" was sentenced to 12 months in May 2007. By his own admission he was an angry, selfish 39 year old, easily offended and enjoyed dominating others with his aggression, unafraid to use his fists if necessary. Early in his sentence he was invited to one of the Services by the Chaplain. Initially surprised by this invitation as God was not part of his life, he nonetheless accepted. At that first Service something happened and for the rest of his sentence he embarked on a spiritual journey that began to change his life and give him a completely different understanding of what life was all about.

Gone was the anger and desire to dominate, it was replaced by an awareness and compassion for others and a desire to get alongside other prisoners to help and support. This change was radical. He began to experience the love and acceptance of God, forgiveness, and above all else a deep peace. R's demeanour was so changed that his partner, who he has been with for 25 years, was disturbed by what she saw, although at that stage assumed that on release he would revert to the R she knew. When this didn't happen she has acknowledged it was like living with a completely different man and initially this was not easy. All his friends and acquaintances have witnessed this same change.

To this day R has continued his spiritual journey, his faith seems secure but like us all he is facing the challenges both within and outside of himself. On Easter Sunday morning this year R was baptized which was a real joy to witness. He attends a Church that is really supportive, challenging and encourages him to run the race faithfully. Thanks be to God.

Part Two: A Message from "R" to those in prison

I would like to start by saying; I have been where you are now. That cell door closes and it gives you that sense of loneliness, Then something began to happen that was completely out of my Control, GOD entered my heart, my life was about to change.

When I say change I mean, hope, friendship, love, car attributes I had never possessed. I began regularly attending Church, Christian Evenings, also Christian visits which at Swansea were on a Wednesday. Prison Fellowship for myself was paramount after being saved.

The anger had gone, I had started to understand people for the first Time in my life, Realizing there was more to life than anger and violence. I have continued my Christian walk since leaving prison in November 2007.

I attend Christian Centre which I had the pleasure of being baptised on Easter Sunday with most of the people from Prison Fellowship attending An absolutely outstanding experience. This is just a small portion of my Testimony. I wish all who read this a blessing that I have been given.

GOD BLESS

Prisons week 15th-21st Nov 2009

www.prisonsworld.org

A week of prayer for all those involved with prisons