

An Invitation to the Parishes of the Hindley Catholic Area

As we are aware, within our local area we have a prison – Hindley Young Offenders Institute - a youth offenders' detention centre, holding boys and young men between the ages of 15 and 18. There is a very active chaplaincy within the prison, which works alongside the employed staff, to provide emotional and spiritual support to prisoners, their families and staff members. They work with people of all faiths in an attempt to guide them through a particularly troubled time in their lives.

Due to recent changes in sentencing guidelines, prison is now seen as a last resort to punish offenders. Therefore the inmates have either committed quite serious crimes or a significant number of minor offences. That said they are still children, often from very troubled and chaotic backgrounds, and there is a chance for us as Christians to reach out and help those in need.

The staffs at the prison, in conjunction with the chaplaincy team, are currently working very hard to both rehabilitate and educate offenders. Their work is to help guide offenders in decision making, on knowing right from wrong, on choosing which path their life will lead.

The chaplaincy is looking for volunteers who can help with their work, in a number of different roles.

Have you ever thought about visiting somebody in prison? Over 60% of inmates at Hindley have come from local authority care, and a significant number of the remainder have come from highly fractured families. Prisoners come from an area stretching from Lancaster in the North to Birmingham in the South. These factors mean a large number of inmates never receive a visit during their time inside.

Regardless of what they have done in the past, they are just boys, and very frightened and vulnerable boys at that. Could you spare a couple of hours twice a month to visit one boy throughout their sentence? There are a couple of regular prison visitors at present, but they can only visit in the evenings. Visiting times are during the afternoon midweek and at the weekends. It becomes very obvious to other inmates why somebody has a visit in the evening, and this stigma of having nobody on the outside to visit you causes problems and a low take up rate of volunteer visits.

The average time served at Hindley is between 3 and 6 months. Could you commit to visiting one prisoner throughout his sentence, twice a month for two hours? Training, support and advice is offered, and out of pocket expenses can be met. These boys need somebody to listen to them, not to judge them, to listen to their plans, their hopes for the future and their fears; somebody who believes in them as a person, who can offer advice, encouragement and hope, to let them know that somebody cares about them.

If you can't commit to visiting, could you perhaps write to a prisoner? The idea is that you would 'adopt' one prisoner throughout their stay, exchanging letters with somebody who doesn't receive any post from the outside. All mail is handled through a third party, so that your address and surname is never revealed to the offender.

Mass is celebrated at the prison every Saturday morning for Catholic inmates, followed by an informal coffee morning to chat with prisoners, offering them support with their faith. Could you help? In particular do you play a musical instrument – the Anglican service has a musician on the Sunday which is well received by inmates, but there is none at the Catholic service. This service runs from 8.30am to 10.30am every Saturday morning.

The Chaplaincy runs a course called SUMO (Shut Up and Move On). This is based upon Christian principles but isn't faith-based. Its aim is to stop talking about past misdemeanours, leave them in the past and move forward with positive ideas. What is done has happened and it can't be erased. Future events haven't happened yet, and the course aims to help the boys in their decision making, stopping past mistakes from repeating themselves. Volunteers are needed to help at meetings.

One of the most important aspects that the chaplaincy undertake is a programme that seeks to allow the offender to own up to their crimes, acknowledge their victims, apologising for their actions and asking for forgiveness. This most important of Christian principles is carried out at the prison either through letter writing or face to face conference meetings between offenders and victims. Volunteers are needed who are victims of crime willing to tell their story or willing to work in small discussion groups.

A highly effective scheme being run is the Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL). HMYOI Hindley endeavour to reintegrate the young people back into communities by providing work experience opportunities within the Wigan area. Specific projects are wanted whereby they can release young people from the prison in order to get involved in local community projects. Only highly trusted prisoners are eligible for the scheme, and are supervised at all times by prison staff. It offers real opportunities for prisoners to make a positive difference to the community.

A final area that we could all get involved with is the Prison Fellowship – Prayer Groups are essential for covering the prison, its residents and its staff in prayer support. There is no longer a Prison Fellowship Prayer Group in the Wigan Area. They would be very grateful to anyone with a heart for prayer and a concern for prisoners to start up or join a Prison Fellowship Prayer Group. Prayer works. And at Hindley they need as much prayer as they can get.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. If you would like more information, a speaker will be coming from the prison chaplaincy to the coffee morning at Holy Family Church after Mass on Sunday the 14th of October at 12.00pm to answer any questions and explain in detail the role a volunteer can entail. If you can't help at the moment, please remember in your prayers all the staff and inmates at Hindley, their friends and family, and all the victims of crime.