



# The Right Road

## A Catholic approach to prison reform

*It has been twelve years since the Catholic Bishops' Conference published 'A Place of Redemption'. This remains the Church's seminal contribution to discussions around criminal justice in England and Wales, and sets out our vision for a prison system that rehabilitates offenders, supports victims and works for society as a whole.*

*Building upon this 'The Right Road' draws expertise from Catholic chaplains, charities and experts working in the field of criminal justice, to make recommendations for reform in today's context. With more than 85,000 men, women and young people in prison, there has never been a more important time for the Church to have a strong voice and clear message to policy makers.*

*Prisons are not isolated institutions standing disconnected from the outside world. They are an integral part of communities, and how we treat prisoners is a reflection upon our society. Prison reform is therefore all of our responsibility and I am confident that the following will provide a solid basis for the Church's engagement in this most pressing challenge.*

**Rt Rev Richard Moth**, Lead Bishop for Prisons

During his historic address to prisoners in Philadelphia Pope Francis told them: *"this time in your life can only have one purpose - to give you a hand in getting back on the right road."* Emphasising the integral role of society in this he stated: *"all of us are part of that effort, all of us are invited to encourage, help and enable your rehabilitation...a rehabilitation which benefits and elevates the morale of the entire community."*

This document outlines the Church's call for political action to recognise that vision in England and Wales today. These are individually important steps towards a broader shift from focussing on 'offender management' to prioritising rehabilitation, social reintegration, and positive opportunities for prisoners to make a contribution.

We urge the government to be bold in making this a reality. It is clear that the biggest threat to reform is under-resourcing of the system, particularly the chronically low staffing levels that impact upon almost every aspect of prison life including safety, education, health, family contact, employment opportunities, and pastoral care. Properly investing in a rehabilitative prison system that turns lives around and reduces reoffending will ultimately be good for the public purse as well as bringing immeasurable benefits to our society.

The 85,000 people in our prisons are members of society with a tremendous amount to give. Only a few thousand will never be released. Every day, hundreds of men and women leave prison, but far too many re-offend and return. By creating humane environments and giving prisoners some agency over their own lives, we can make prison 'a place of redemption'<sup>1</sup> where their potential is realised.

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<sup>1</sup> A Place of Redemption: A Christian Approach to Punishment and Prisons (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales: 2004)

## Family and relationships



A loving and nurturing family is one of the foundations of a good society; positive family relationships can help people to turn their lives around and give them a strong incentive to change behaviour. Prisoners who receive family visits are 39% less likely to reoffend after their release,<sup>2</sup> but visits can be very difficult not least because of distance, cost, fear and anxiety. Women and young offenders in particular are often held far from their homes.

Families also need to be supported while a prisoner serves their sentence. Throughout 2016 almost 200,000 children will have a parent in prison, more than the number affected by divorce each year. They are too often the forgotten victims, facing higher risks of mental ill-health, homelessness, poverty

and offending behaviour. One study suggested that six out of ten boys with a father in prison will end up in prison themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes the nature of an offence may make relationships with families especially hard, particularly if the offence is against a family member. There are also a disproportionate number of people in prison who have been in care due to fractured families. Even in these circumstances, time in prison can be used to help develop relationship skills, empathy and healing.

**We encourage the government to better support the families of prisoners and treat them as partners in rehabilitation by:**

- **providing relationship and parenting education, family days, family-friendly areas and access to video communications such as Skype for contacting relatives**
- **ensuring that all prisons have family support services in place to minimise the risk of relationship breakdown and to involve families in planning for release and resettlement**
- **ensuring that prison estate planning and decisions regarding the placement or transfer of prisoners have a clear duty to prioritise maintaining regular family contact**

## Safety and the physical environment

The Chief Inspector of Prisons has vigorously criticised the level of rubbish, dirt, offensive graffiti, unhygienic facilities, and damp cells throughout the custodial estate. For many prisoners daily life involves eating in their cell next to an unscreened toilet, with only limited access to clean clothes or bedding. These are undignified and unacceptable conditions in which to keep people.

There has recently been a dramatic increase in violence between prisoners and against staff. 5,423 assaults on prison staff were recorded in the 12 months to the end of March 2016, a rise of 40% on the previous year. There is a clear correlation between this trend and the significant reductions in staffing which have left officers unable to spend time building good relationships with prisoners, and mean many prisoners are locked in their cells for up to 23 hours each day.

Far too often drugs including new psychoactive substances are readily available with serious consequences for safety, bullying, violence, mental health, and debt. These problems too are exacerbated by the critical problem of understaffing affecting almost all prison regimes.

Providing a safe, decent and humane environment is fundamental to support desistance. The best physical environments are those that have been informed by prisoners, who have an understanding of what works and feels safe.

**We encourage the government to improve the safety and physical environment of prisons by:**

- **adopting a zero-tolerance approach towards squalor and ensuring that early signs of deteriorating conditions are always immediately addressed**
- **tackling the supply of drugs including new psycho-active substances by speeding up investment in proven systems and technology, and tackling corruption**
- **involving prisoners in future decisions around safety and design**
- **increasing prison budgets for staffing in order to improve the quality of regimes and to guarantee prisoners more time out of their cells**

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<sup>2</sup>Economic study of Integrated Family Support Programme (Pact: 2012)

<sup>3</sup>Pact: [www.prisonadvice.org.uk](http://www.prisonadvice.org.uk)

## Purposeful Regimes



Prison sentences can be well spent in supporting people to rehabilitate and gain the skills or qualifications they might need upon release. Providing learning and employment opportunities is also important for giving a sense of hope and purpose for those serving longer sentences.

Dames Sally Coates' recommendations for a broad based education system will give prisoners the opportunity to access the type of learning that best suits their individual needs, while ensuring that learning difficulties are promptly identified. Prisoners should also be provided with employment opportunities that are suitable to their abilities and increase employability.

Release on temporary licence (ROTL) is a pivotal part of the resettlement and rehabilitation process. For many people in prison, particularly those who are approaching the end of longer sentences, the chance to experience ROTL is a vital stage in preparation for their safe release. Less than 1% of releases on temporary licence fail and of these only 6% involve an arrestable offence, yet access to ROTL has been on a steep decline.<sup>4</sup>

**We encourage the government to make prison regimes purposeful by:**

- **implementing the recommendations of Dame Sally Coates' review at the earliest opportunity**
- **extending opportunities for suitable dignified work paying at least the Living Wage, with savings accounts that can be accessed on release or used to support family**
- **improving access to ROTL so people can get training and education, arrange jobs and housing, and establish contact with their families—all factors which help to reduce their risk of reoffending**
- **introducing graduation and community re-entry ceremonies to recognise achievements, personal growth and qualifications secured during custody<sup>5</sup>**

## Restorative regimes

For many people their time in prison could mark the beginning of a journey to more active citizenship and the opportunities afforded by imprisonment must not be overlooked. As well as access to education, training and employment, it is essential that prisoners are able to volunteer and become actively engaged in the day to day life of the prison as the community in which they now live.

Restorative Justice programmes have well-established benefits for both desistance and victim support. However access to these is hindered by barriers such as understaffing, distance, and transfers. Consequently meetings are often postponed until after somebody has been released from prison, undermining the opportunities to make productive use of their sentence.

Although ex-offenders are best placed to understand the challenges that people face during their sentences and upon release, regulations often prevent them from using that experience to help current prisoners, even when this could be done in a safe and effective manner.<sup>6</sup> A potential volunteer and staff base for prisons to utilise is therefore being left untapped.

**We encourage the government to make prison regimes restorative by:**

- **creating opportunities for prisoners to train and where appropriate achieve qualifications as advocates, peer mentors, peer tutors and buddies, and to take part in prisoner councils**
- **removing the obstacles that prevent or delay prisoners and victims from accessing restorative justice programmes**
- **reviewing the barriers that prevent people who have already served prison sentences from using their expertise as volunteers or staff to help prisoners rehabilitate**

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<sup>4</sup>Inside Out: The role of the voluntary and private sector in providing opportunities for rehabilitation for people on temporary release (Clinks and Prison Reform Trust: 2016)

<sup>5</sup>Re-entry as a Rite of Passage (Shadd Maruna:2015)

<sup>6</sup>Valuing volunteers in prison (Clinks: 2016)

## Health



The worsening crisis in our prisons saw more than 34,000 incidents of self-harm and 105 self-inflicted deaths last year, a considerable and catastrophic increase on previous years. Effective assessment of a person's state of mind and wellbeing at all stages of their sentence is essential if imprisonment is to be used as a time for healing and restoring, or at the very least not to inflict further harm.

People in prison are more likely to have poor health and worse health outcomes than the general population. Prisons often house people with a range of pre-existing conditions especially related to mental ill health and substance misuse. Many in this group engage in high risk behaviour, do not access primary care services, and do not manage their conditions effectively.

Health and offending are also inter-related. Issues such as substance misuse or mental health problems can lead to contact with the criminal justice system. Addressing the health needs of these groups can reduce re-offending, and have a positive impact on the health of their communities.

A small number of women will also be pregnant or new mothers during imprisonment. Services for pregnant women and new mothers in prison are often inconsistent and inequitable, at a time when they are more vulnerable and face greater risks of ill health.

**We encourage the government to improve health in prisons by:**

- **prioritising its response to the crisis of self-harm and suicide, especially through better mental health support and diverting people with severe mental health needs into noncustodial settings**
- **ensuring parity of healthcare between every prison and its local community, and continuity of care for people entering prison or being released**
- **ensuring parity of prenatal, antenatal and postnatal care between every prison and its local community**

## Belief and belonging



Religion plays an important role in the lives of many prisoners. It is important that people's faith, and the right to practise it, is always recognised and respected.<sup>7</sup>

Prisoners often draw on faith to cope during their sentence. Religious services, prayer and religious objects can all bring comfort and help people to feel more positive. Furthermore shared beliefs foster a sense of belonging which can be a valuable source of strength.

Faith plays a positive role in rehabilitation by helping prisoners to address the causes and impact of their offending, come to terms with the past, and give them motivation to reform. Prisoners who are confident in their own faith are also less

vulnerable to radicalisation, as they are better placed to challenge distorted beliefs that promote hatred or violence.

Chaplaincy is central to ensuring prisoners can practise their faith. Beyond providing spiritual support chaplains have an important pastoral role including listening to problems, giving practical advice, and helping people to stay in touch with their families. However a significant number of prisoners experience practical or logistical problems engaging with chaplaincy including not being let out of cells, clashes with other activities, and hostility from other prisoners or staff.

**We encourage the government to facilitate the positive role that religion plays in the lives of many prisoners by:**

- **engaging with chaplains and faith groups about any reforms that could impact prisoners' right to practise their faith**
- **addressing barriers to accessing chaplaincy as matter of urgency**

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<sup>7</sup> Belief and Belonging (Catholic Bishops' Conference: 2016)

## Pastoral care

Good pastoral care is a fundamental aspect of any civilised prison regime. Prisoners face profound disruption to every aspect of their lives and have a right to be properly supported. Listening and advice services where people can share their problems in confidence and safety can have an extremely positive impact but are not always readily accessible.

Difficult times of life such as family breakdown and bereavement can be particularly hard. For example prisoners are not always able to attend family funerals and at the same time are physically cut off from personal support networks. In these circumstances it is particularly important that people are able to receive appropriate pastoral care.

One barrier to providing this is a shortage of volunteers, exacerbated by delays in vetting processes. While it is essential that everyone volunteering in a prison is properly screened, this should be done in a timely manner so that enough people are available to provide prisoners with the support they need.<sup>8</sup>

**We encourage the government to improve pastoral care in prisons by:**

- **extending the availability of good quality support including for prisoners facing especially difficult times in their lives**
- **expediting the process of vetting volunteers so that more people are available to provide these services**

## Closing thoughts

**From Cardinal Vincent Nichols to the National Catholic Prison Chaplains Conference – September 2016**

*Our society is failing prisoners and prisons are failing our society. Even more than before a bold and serious program of prison reform is needed.*

*My message to the government is that the Catholic Church will be your partner in this. We are ready to work alongside and support you in transforming prisons from places of despair to places of redemption. But I also urge you to be brave and go further than any government before: make this the turning point where prison policy is built upon giving people the support they need to make amends and play a positive role in our society.*

*Prison reform is often misconstrued and rarely popular. But this is not about being soft on prisoners or crime. It is about being civilised. It is about recognising just punishment, reducing reoffending, genuinely helping victims, and getting people's lives back on track so that they are a benefit not a burden on our communities. It is about creating a criminal justice system that delivers real justice. As Pope Francis reminds us: "where there is mercy, justice is more just, and it fulfils its true essence. This does not mean that we should throw open the doors of the prisons and let those who have committed serious crimes loose. It means that we have to help those who have fallen to get back up."*

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<sup>8</sup> Valuing volunteers in prison (Clinks: 2016)

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