

CCJF Meeting – 21st April 2008

Nine years ago, CASC launched a seminal report on ‘Women in Prison’, still a much-respected resource for people working in this area. It led to the launch of the **Churches Criminal Justice Forum** which brings together people from a variety of voluntary groups, the prison service, prison visitors and many more. It has met mostly twice a year, and mostly in London. The meetings last usually about half a day and serve literally as a forum for exchange of ideas, questions and answers and input from a great range of speakers: prison chaplains, former prison staff, former prisoners, magistrates, volunteers with all kinds of voluntary group experience. We have heard from government officials, MPs, community chaplains, prison reformers, and above all from prisoners themselves. The meetings are mostly attended by Bishop Brain who oversees this area of criminal justice for the Bishops’ Conference.

At our most recent meeting, the main input was on mental health in the criminal justice system. We received the startling information that 70% prisoners are experiencing two or more mental health problems. The speaker looked at what might be done to improve treatment and conditions but observed that there is not much input from faith groups on these issues. With a prison population of 82,000 - an increase of more than 100% in the last 20 years – it is all the more necessary to find a better way of handling mental health problems of prisoners. Over-crowding, under-staffing and lengthy stays locked in cells obviously exacerbate the problems for everyone.

We were introduced to a short report from the Friends (Quakers) on women in prison all over the world and ended the day with a lively and compelling introduction to a new project designed to help women coming out of prison called Rise2Life which has been put together by a former prisoner whose understanding of the issues women are likely to face is superior to any amount of theory.

This was a very useful and stimulating meeting though it is sad to see that the numbers attending have dropped off considerably. Smaller numbers mean, of course, that the meeting has more of an atmosphere of a seminar and gives everyone a chance to contribute, but I regret that people who might benefit from such a gathering are missing out. I would recommend anyone who has an interest in the subject of criminal justice to look at the CCJF web-site and attend one of its meetings. We hear of things we never hear of otherwise (except from ‘Guardian Society’ occasionally) such as schemes of all kinds set up to help returning prisoners. As people of faith, we need to be concerned and if possible involved in the restoration of normal life for former offenders.

Nan Saeki