

Meeting of the Churches Criminal Justice Forum – 22nd April, 2010

After several meetings which were very sparsely attended, the CCJF seems to have received a new lease of life. We have a new Chair person and meeting in the surroundings of the Friends' Meeting House (the Chair is a Quaker) was definitely more cheerful!

The subject was “Young People in the Criminal Justice System” and the initial input came from Natalie Cronin, Director of the Prison Fellowship, Paul Foster, up till now Chaplain at Feltham YOI. The main topic was their new programme of **The Sycamore Tree** which is being developed for young offenders from April this year. This programme has been in existence for some time to be followed with adults but the new initiative is to include the young. It is based on the story of Zachaeus and his promise to make restitution to the people he had wronged. (It seems that this story of restitution after wrongdoing can be found in the scriptures of other faiths as well as Christian which means it is particularly suitable.)

The course is run over six weeks and the participants are invited to ‘step into the shoes’ of each person in the story. In the third week, a victim of crime is invited to come in and talk to them. After the pilot was run, all participants wanted to write a letter of apology to their victims and some even changed their plea from ‘not guilty’ to ‘guilty’. At the end, families are invited and the participants say what they did, why they are sorry and what they will do about it.

After the lunch break, John Plummer of, Project Director of the East London Young Offenders Academy talked of the damage custody does to young people and what alternatives there might be. There were also contributions from attendees on their own particular work and concerns. We heard of the work of Community Chaplains who work with offenders before and after release, and the ‘Angel Tree’, a scheme whereby presents are provided and prepared by volunteers for the children of serving prisoners at Christmas time.

John Plummer gave a picture of the ‘typical’ young offender which we have heard before but never fails to shock. Offenders are 13 times more likely to have been brought up in care; they are 3 times more likely to have mental health issues than the ordinary population of the same age; 75% have speech or communication problems; 45% have been excluded from school; 40% have a literacy level below the age of 11; 30% of girls and 5% of boys have experienced sex abuse....and the list goes on. The Criminal Justice Act of 1991 states that there is no obligation to follow up offenders who have served less than a year in prison. Is it any surprise that 80% return to prison before long?

As ever, this meeting of CCJF revealed the flaws in our system of dealing with young offenders and reminded us of the importance of looking long and hard at alternatives to what is clearly not working at present. For any member of J & P who see these issues as an important and neglected area of concern in the church, I recommend that they consider finding out more and even volunteering to take part in one of the many schemes and voluntary groups which are trying to change things for the better.