

## Summary of talk by Andy Keen-Down's at NJPN Meeting on 22 November 2008

**Andy Keen-Downs, Director, Prison Advice and Care Trust (pact): First Night, Families and a Future After Prison** Andy began by showing a DVD presentation of some of *pact's* work with families using the Visitors' Centre at Wormwood Scrubs. This made the point that more children are affected by the imprisonment of a parent than by divorce. *pact* seeks to alleviate the trauma of those suffering the imprisonment of a relative, and to help families to keep in touch, thereby reducing the risk of re-offending. They do this by running Visitors' Centres just outside the prison gates; and by providing children's play services inside prisons where special children's visits can be arranged, allowing an imprisoned parent to spend whole days with their children, "giving me a chance just to be his Mum again" as one of them put it. Volunteers in the Centres welcome families and undertake activities with the children, giving them a space where they can be supported.

*pact* works at 11 prisons, mostly across London and in the South West, with one centre at Parc Prison in Bridgend, near Cardiff. The organisation was originally founded for Catholic prisoners as the Catholic Prisoners' Aid Society in 1898, later renamed as the Bourne Trust. In 2001 it merged with another charity, Prisoners' Wives and Families Service to form *pact*. Although its staff and volunteers are from many backgrounds, and services are accessible to all, the organisation still works according to the constitution of the Bourne Trust, respecting the innate dignity and worth of every human being in the image of God. Included in the prisons at which they work are high security prisons; Andy pointed out that not every prisoner in them is a high security prisoner; many are put there because of the shortage of prison places, and they are very affected by the regime in place. There are 3 women's prisons. Most of are "Category B" or "Category C" which are "local" prisons – but "local" can mean anything up to 100 miles from where their families live.

*pact* are now doing work at the Courts, as families are given no information when a prisoner is sent down as to where they are going. Because of prison overcrowding in London, the Midlands and North West, people could be sent to prisons 200 miles away; the practice of "ghosting" means they can be moved around prisons without any notice or information being given to families. Andy felt very passionate about the current situation in which there is no statutory support or safety net for children who have a parent sent to prison – this affects around 170,000 children each year, 7% of those of school age. *pact* recently joined with other organisations (Prison Reform Trust, CLINKS, Action for Prisoners' Families) in campaigning on this issue and presented a Parliamentary Briefing in the Lords. He pointed out that while there is a mountain of documentation on the effect of separation on children through divorce, there is virtually no research into the effect of separation due to the imprisonment of a parent; the Government had commissioned a paper on children of offenders, but it was never published because the results were too embarrassing. As a society, if we imprison a child's parent, we have duty of care to that child. Many will end up with mental health problems, or as the next generation of prisoners. Conversely, research has shown that maintaining links with families significantly reduces re-offending.

As well as the work with families described above, *pact* works with other groups to provide group work and couple work with families, providing counselling, helping to bring honesty in relationships, and helping prisoners, many of whom have had poor family backgrounds themselves, to relate to their children.

First Night in Custody: In 2007 there were 92 self-inflicted deaths in prisons: 41 were on remand, 8 were women (women were more likely to self-harm), and 23 were of foreign nationals, including many Irish prisoners. Self-inflicted deaths often occur on the prisoner's first night – separation from families being a significant factor in triggering suicide. *pact* now has a project whereby volunteers meet prisoners when they come in and ask if they have any family concerns or anyone they need to phone. The aim is to reduce anxiety and keep them safe, as well as reducing the anxiety of their families (only *pact* and prison chaplains are allowed to contact families). The volunteers provide a human face in a situation where prisoners are being "processed" in an often very impersonal way. They also do training work with prison officers and with prisoners who are trained and identified to other prisoners as someone they can talk to. They also liaise with Social Services teams to ensure that children with care needs are identified. About 9000 prisoners a year are seen on their first night. They are in the process of producing a "Toolkit" mainly for the use of prison officers working in other prisons.

Basic Caring Communities (BACC): This is a new project being trialled at Wandsworth Prison, to offer some experience of community to ex-offenders who leave prison without any family support network. A group is set up consisting of 6 volunteers and 1 ex-offender; they meet once a week and all share about their week; then each volunteer has a day to make contact with the ex-offender. The aim is to be alongside, promote a sense of belonging and fellowship, but also to set boundaries and require accountability. Volunteers are being sought from a range of ages and ethnicities who: are motivated by their Christian faith, have a degree of maturity and can be available 4 hours a week. The SVP have adopted this scheme as their special mission, and with this network's involvement it is possible to look at setting up schemes at other prisons.

*pact* also had Christmas cards to send to prisoners who would not get visits at Christmas.

Points from discussion:

- The need to campaign on social justice issues.
- Campaign for a statutory responsibility for a welfare assessment and care plan for children when parents are sentenced. **Write to your MP and urge them to sign the Early Day Motion – Agenda for Action for Prisoners Families.**
- Developing alternatives to prison, restorative justice programmes – these need to “creep into” the system.
- Political rhetoric moving back towards punishment.
- Short sentences causing homelessness.
- The disproportionate representation of black people, foreign nationals and those from poor backgrounds in prison; the fact that they often had had no representation in court.
- Work with schools: with other organisations, **pact** is developing a module for Teacher Training.
- People with family members in prison are hidden in parishes – they often don't tell the priest.
- Volunteer opportunities with **pact**: For people in London or Bristol: There are various roles for volunteers in the Visitors' Centres; some first night volunteers, but this is a difficult role; really want people for the BACC project. (To find out about volunteering in other parts of the country go to [www.whatcanido.org](http://www.whatcanido.org), or contact the chaplain at your local prison, details can be found on the Prison Service website, [www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk](http://www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk))
- The fact that parishes are so unwelcoming generally means they fail to support even ex-offenders who are religious and want to stay out of prison.

Catholic Social Teaching resource: [A Place of Redemption](#), published by CBCEW and includes a study pack; available on the **pact** website (Faith Zone) or from Catholic bookshops.