

Chaplaincy Work at Her Majesty's Young Offenders Institute (HMYOI) Aylesbury

Hi Everyone!

My name is Marion Payne and I have been a member of St. Joseph's and St. Clare's parish since I arrived in Aylesbury 38 years ago. During that time I have been involved with supporting the parish in a number of different ways. However, it was approximately 5 years ago when my eyes were opened to a need within our community to which I had not given any consideration – the young men incarcerated in our local prison.

Deacon John Hamilton was working within the prison Chaplaincy and desperately needed some help. Surprisingly, he approached me for that help. My first instinct was to run, but I felt, once more, our Lord was challenging me and after much soul searching, discussions with family and prayer I took the first steps to learn and embrace this ministry. HMYOI Aylesbury holds young adult males aged between 18 and 21 years. Sentences range from 2 years to life imprisonment. It accommodates 400 prisoners arranged on 6 wings. One wing is reserved for inmates that need to be segregated due to the nature of their crime. There is a medical centre, kitchen, laundry, greenhouses, gym, bicycle shop, education centre, library and laser workshop. It works like a small community, staffed by inmates under prison officer supervision. Prison life can be hard. Counting the days, longing for release, trying to keep their heads above water, life becomes a daily struggle for survival. The past is hauntingly present and leaving it behind seems almost impossible.

Chaplaincy have a shared office and two rooms, World Faith 1 and World Faith 2. Religious studies and services for faiths other than Christian (Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist etc.) are held in World Faith 1 and the same for Christian faiths in World Faith 2. The Chaplaincy department is committed, without judgement, prejudice or bias to serving the needs of all prisoners and staff.

I work at the prison every Friday and occasionally on other days of the week. A typical day for me at HMYOI Aylesbury starts around 8:00 a.m. On entering the main gate, finger print identity allows me to obtain a set of keys to provide access to the main prison. Arriving at the Chaplaincy, I am required to sign in. It is necessary to know where all staff and volunteers are at all times. My first task is to read the Governor's Daily Report and the Chaplaincy Daily Logbook to familiarise myself with events over the past week. The Logbook records notes on all conversations that have taken place between Chaplaincy members and prisoners. Reading these documents also gives me a good insight into the general "feel" within the prison and ensures that I am better equipped to handle what might come my way.

Chaplaincy have certain obligations that need to be carried out on a daily basis. As a volunteer, I am not allowed to carry out all the tasks, but I am available to offer assistance where required. My duties include having meaningful conversations, making notes as I go, with 6 to 8 inmates during the morning. These inmates, located in various wings, are usually those who are struggling with day to day life in the prison and need extra support. Visits to every wing require the unlocking and locking of several doors and signing in and out. Cell doors can only be unlocked by a prison officer who ensures that the door cannot be re-locked by the prisoner. Conversations in the cell are more relaxed and private. When I get back to the Chaplaincy I record my notes from each conversation in the Logbook. After lunch, I prepare for mass, held every Friday by Father John Beirne. The inmates attending the mass are welcomed at the Chaplaincy at 3:00 p.m. Mass is quiet and

reflective. Father John encourages the attendees to appreciate the need for peace and stillness. This helps them to discover more about who they are and with God's help what they are capable of achieving. After mass there is an opportunity to chat to the attendees over a soft drink, helping to build relationships, share experiences or solve a few problems. The attendees generally show great respect towards Chaplaincy members and I feel a great sense of satisfaction in doing God's work. The attendees are returned to their cells around 4:20 p.m. After ensuring World Faith 2 is tidy, I complete a safety check of the office and equipment before signing out and making my way home around 5:30 p.m.

Recently I had the privilege to go to Lambeth Palace to attend the launch of a book "Prison Hope". Most prisoners see prison as a place of hopelessness. "Prison Hope" consists of 40 short stories written by men who once spent time behind bars and have turned their lives round. I chatted to one of the authors who revealed that there was not one day when he does not think of his time in prison. When asked what he most feared at the time, he said it was the violence that erupted between inmates without warning. I was surprised at his response because I always imagined it would be the closing of his cell door every day. The book is being distributed in all prisons and the general public also have an opportunity to purchase a copy. They are available from Father John at £3.99 each. Reading the book is sure to help a better understanding what life is like behind bars and life after release. I commend it to you.

Marion Payne

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