

North East Inter Faith Forum

on

The Resettlement of Offenders



'Faith Communities Can Change Lives'

Forum Report

Castlegate; Newcastle

4th March 2010

North East Inter Faith Forum on the Resettlement of Offenders "Faith Communities Can Change Lives"

at Castlegate, Newcastle upon Tyne, 4th March 2010, 9.30am - 3pm

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The first Inter Faith Forum on the Resettlement of Offenders was commissioned by the North East Regional Faiths Network (NERFN) and the National Offender Management Service North East Region (NOMS) with support and input from the Churches' Regional Commission (CRC), the "Faith to Engage" project, and the Ministry of Justice. The 86 participants were roughly evenly divided between officers of the various Criminal Justice Agencies and members of different Faith communities.

AIM OF THE EVENT

The aim was to develop a 'forum' as a place of engagement between the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) and faith communities which would be a vehicle of communication between NOMS and the North East faith communities to which offenders belonged. The event itself was designed to be interactive and participative with a mix of presentations, case studies, Q&As and discussions.

THE KEYNOTE SPEECH

Phil Copple (Director of Offender Management for the North East) outlined the role and priorities of NOMS and his own role within that.

Stressing the importance of working in partnership, he saw Faith communities playing a vital role with NOMS in respect of helping to build safer communities and to resettle offenders returning from prison to their local communities, bringing about a reduction in crime and therefore fewer victims. He highlighted the important role of prison chaplains and encouraged them to engage in more partnerships with local Faith communities in taking forward the resettlement agenda.



RESUME AND FINDINGS FROM THE WORKSHOPS

Morning workshops strove to identify the barriers and opportunities to faith community engagement. In the afternoon they endeavoured to chart key messages, challenges and next steps.

Barriers and Opportunities

Delegates felt that faith communities are here for the long term but the criminal justice system does not always understand what they have to offer. There are specific points in the offender journey at which faith communities could assist - in prevention, intervention, sentencing and post-release care. A plea was made to give Chaplains the time they needed to engage with communities, inform them and recruit volunteers. Successful engagement sometimes had to negotiate a number of barriers. These include lacking the initial motivation, know-how or resources to get involved, nervousness about offenders, and no clear idea of the 'big picture', such as what is already happening in the community or how the system works. Faith-based organisations can find difficulty in adapting to the impenetrable terminology and the cultural mindset of prisons and the wider Criminal Justice system. Delegates also acknowledged that Muslim chaplains are best recruited from the local North East community.

What would help?

There needs to be consolidation, networking, time, and funding to find commonality of purpose and build successful micro models which can then be replicated at regional and national levels. Some resourcing from NOMS to local groups, rather than simply the larger providers, could usefully be given on the basis of local contracts. If people are travelling some distance, for example, there needs to be some consideration given to payment to maintain motivation for involvement. A "base" for faith based organisations in Prisons, linked to the Chaplaincy, could help both in terms of physicality and accountability.



Community engagement needs to be encouraged, and specifically inter faith engagement. Communities must be met 'where they are' and so NOMS needs to open dialogue with them, explaining in easily understood terms how faith communities could be involved. There are community organisations willing to work in Prisons, and there is a need to advertise in the right places. The role of volunteers needs to be worked out clearly by the Prison service. It was the vision of one individual who saw a need, for example, that produced the Open Gate Chaplaincy Project at Low Newton. This requires more team-working or workshops with community organisations. Moreover, volunteer clearances in Prisons take a long time to come through and thought should be given to speeding up the process.

There is a need to 'join up' offenders and ex-offenders with their communities. The provision for chaplaincy within prisons should be modelled into the community. The Community Chaplaincy/Mentoring model can utilise people from faith communities who are very effective in providing social support. NOMS North East could explore the potential for a 'Faith' resettlement pathway and commission research on the effect of faith on returning offenders and their reintegration into their community.

What are the challenges?

Delegates identified many challenges in this engagement process, both to faith communities and to NOMS who need to be receptive to innovation and think creatively. Faith communities are involved in creative art projects, accommodation schemes, mentoring, etc - how do we plug in to the whole range of what is on offer?

How do we help faith communities have confidence in the skills and resources they already have to get involved? What, for example, are the expectations of faith groups? This led to the wider question of the nature of the Criminal Justice System and the role of Prison chaplaincy within all of this. What is the best way of educating people as to how to become involved, or to recognise the needs of those caught up in the judicial system in order to gain a purposeful sense of direction to best meet those needs? How do we identify leaders and potential leaders? How could both sectors, at organisational level, explore together their respective roles and encourage partnership-working to link offenders and ex-offenders with organisations that work in offenders' home areas, work towards the restoration of the offender's social status, and help to support offenders' families? The real challenge lies when prisoners are released. How does NOMS engage better with individual churches, mosques, synagogues, etc? Delegates suggested that a diocese, church, mosque, temple, synagogue or gurdwara be encouraged to have a criminal justice/ex-offender 'champion'.

THE KEY MESSAGES

Everyone recognised that NOMS does not have all the answers! The fact that the Forum had come from NOMS was seen as a positive start. NOMS must plan and develop more engagement with faith communities, recognising that Prisons work on role and organisations work on relationships. Chaplaincy meetings could be used to explore this relationship, but Prison Chaplaincies need time to engage with faith communities and greater resources and training. Others who could assist the process include Youth Offending Teams and a community development worker. There is a need to use grassroots people, not necessarily leaders.

Faith communities provide a unique link in identifying families affected by offending. They can act as the "glue in the middle" between prison, probation and other organisations. They can help to oversee a support network for an ex-offender, linking together job /housing /befriending /providing role models. They have no 'targets' and simply value the individual as someone of inherent worth. This needs to be valued as a strength.

THE KEY MESSAGES

Society cannot ignore offenders and there needs to be an education programme within faith communities which could be NOMS-led. There must be willingness on all sides for partnership working. The role of other organisations like the Police, social services and Probation and what they are doing needs to be discovered. Faith communities and organisations need to be aware of the 'pathways' so they have a better idea of where their services might fit. Set up a database of organisations / projects / geographical areas where different things are being done and replicate 'good practice' where appropriate. We also need to have effective means of communication with prisoners about the role and work of faith communities.

SO WHAT NOW?

Delegates felt that it is best to take small steps which are more effective and manageable for faith communities. The bigger picture can be daunting and NOMS needs to build a support, information and developmental structure for those within faith communities who respond. We recognised that the Regional Chaplain is a vital point of reference in this development.

Statutory bodies need to find ways in which a simple conversation could be started with faith communities and an engagement strategy based on communication, education, and motivation. Ex-offenders should be empowered to take part in this by telling their stories. NOMS would be central to facilitating this partnership and engagement.

Delegates expressed the need to communicate the range of work and good practice that is already being done by individuals and groups within faith communities throughout the country. A record of this resettlement work for offenders should be compiled and profiled in and by faith communities and other faith organisations. All delegates should take away what has been learnt today and share it with their groups and organisations.

During Prisons Week in November 2010, the first of 3 workshops (one for each Prison cluster) will bring together prison chaplains and members of the Faith communities. These would aim to

- encourage and support local faith communities to become involved in this process of rehabilitation in partnership with the Chaplaincies
- seek ways of achieving this
- raise awareness of the role that faith communities can play and the support that can be offered in the process of rehabilitation

Workshop One would set the scene by explaining the role of the Criminal Justice System with specific reference to prisons and probation; where the Chaplaincy fits in the system; the issues faced by many prisoners (such as family breakdown, unemployment, educational attainment, debt, addiction); the kind of support needed by returning offenders with examples of how this can be offered.

SO WHAT NOW?

Workshop Two would consider the current volunteer arrangements and processes in prisons; why it is important for faith communities to be part of the rehabilitation process; how to engage, looking at practical issues; what Faith communities need; and how we can go forward from here.

CONCLUSION

The structure of the day worked well and the speakers were well received. The aims of the event were met and almost all the main faiths were represented. Feedback from the event was very positive, recognising the urgent need to move forward. The Forum identified a large body of potential work covering training and education, resources and engagement. It was realistic, too, in recognising that there were barriers to be addressed for this work to be carried out effectively. Nevertheless, there were living examples demonstrating the worth to NOMS North East of engaging with faith communities, opportunities to grasp, goodwill and enthusiasm to be directed, and ideas to tackle problems.

NOMS North East, which proposed the establishing of this Forum, is clearly keen to initiate a conversation with Faith communities and to explore ways of developing positive engagement with them. The Chaplaincies in the region, recognising that they are the key players in this partnership, have offered their active support in making this happen and offer this report as a baseline to take forward a productive relationship between NOMS North East and Faith communities with the assistance and encouragement of the North East Regional Faiths Network (NERFN). We appreciate that no-one has all the answers but feel that a promising and positive start has been made.

In practical terms a number of initiatives have already started including: communication between people who met at the Forum, including Reflex starting to work with young offenders in Deerbolt; the planned Workshops to be rolled out more locally, extra funding from NOMS for further engagement with the Muslim community.

Finally, our thanks to all who worked so hard to make this event a success, and to those who will work equally hard to ensure that the above report will lead to action.

Forum Steering Group: Rev Patrick Cope, Elizabeth McGurk, Muhammad Meah, Michael King, Paul Southgate.

Coordinating Chaplains:

Revd Eric Bossward, HMP Castington

Revd Matthew Tetley, HMP Acklington

Revd. Barrie Cooper, HMP Durham

Dr Beth Theobald, HMP & YOI Low Newton

Rev John Little, HMP Deerbolt

Rev Nigel Johnson, HMP Frankland

Rev Terry Mc Carthy, HMP Holme House

Rev Yvonne Yates, HMP Kirklevington Grange



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