

Bridges to freedom - citizens visit the (youth) prison

Under the auspices of the Crossroads Prison and Rehabilitation Ministry Scheideweg about 300 citizens at present regularly visit fifteen prisons. For the most part it is young people who converse with inmates of their own age. This work of the contact groups nowadays stretches from the youth remand prisons in Remscheid and Solingen to the approved schools Siegburg and Neustrelitz, to the general prisons in Berlin, Bochum, Geldern, Hagen, Cologne, Remscheid, Rheinbach, Rostock, Schwerte, Stralsund and Wuppertal. Men and women, young and old, those on remand and those convicted are reached in this way.

Those active here consciously chose this particular type of group work but other forms of involvement are conceivable too: correspondence, individual visits, the sending of packets or literature, accommodation during weekend breaks from jail, assistance in the preparation for release: the search for flats, for work, and visits to various authorities. Many of those matters are also seen to by the Rehabilitation Ministry. But the core of the work is that they seek the opportunity to build relationships with prisoners, and in doing so they want to be involved in a team. But relationships can also get stuck or be too demanding. And when that happens, it is helpful to be able to share one's experiences with others. In the groups prisoners and volunteers can choose between different conversation partners; depending on the situation they can converse in threes or fours. And if volunteers are prevented from attending, or end their involvement, the inmate can find another respondent in the circle.

What does such a contact group look like? Three of such groups regularly visit Cologne Prison, a large penal institution mostly for remand prisoners. Dialogues also take place there with the mostly young ladies in the "drug-free" prison area. A report:

Tuesday evening in the women's prison.

"Are we all here?" Every Tuesday evening shortly before 7 p.m. the members of the contact group team meet up in the parking lot outside the prison in Cologne. Some of them have made the journey from Hückeswagen about 40 kilometres away, others are from Cologne and the surrounding area. After a hearty greeting they pass through the gates. At this point their I.D. cards are handed over. In an anteroom the team wait for the padre who will take them into the church; through a swing door, along a corridor, through an outer door into a bare prison yard, always accompanied by the jangle of the keys which turn metal within locks. A weighty iron portal, then a small one, a corridor. At the end of this another closed door, behind which lies a lengthy hall. It is decorated with pictures and sculptures which the prisoners themselves created. Diagonally to the left, the entry to the chapel is to be located. A very lofty, brick room with dull light. Chairs are positioned in a circle a relaxed atmosphere is generated. There aren't enough chairs; about 40 prisoners are taking part. Many quickly discover their conversation partner from the previous contact group evening, lively babble of voices fills up the room. Songbooks are distributed, the women have long since found their favourite songs, which they propose every week. Some of them are there for the first time. Bernd invites three team members to step forward so that they can introduce themselves to the group. Maria relates how it is that she came to look after people in jail, Joachim describes what the life together in a household community is like. When Ludmilla, mother of three children, explains that her husband was a drug addict for some years, and how during those dark days she found fortitude through her relationship with Jesus Christ, a breathless stillness reigns. Only here and there interrupted by a soft whisper: colleagues who speak English, Romanian, Russian translate for Africans, Sinti and Roma, and Germans of Russian origin. A short Bible text and

some thoughts about it, a prayer. Now it is time for conversation in twos or in small groups. I glance into the faces; a fifteen-year-old, an older businesswoman, a mother-to-be, females from different countries with different biographies and prospects for the future. I am deeply moved, and wish within myself that these encounters are a help for many to make a fresh and meaningful start.

The members of the contact group

The spectrum of the members of the contact group ranges from 18 to 80 years. Among them are young folk attending school and students, trainees, manual workers, artisans, business people, people in social work and health-care professions, and senior citizens. In response to a survey that was carried out amongst the team members as to their motives for taking part, above all “social mission duty,” “personal agenda to aid inmates,” and “practical neighbourly love,” were named.

As a preparation for their activity in prison, most of them have absolved at the Crossroads Prison and Rehabilitation Ministry a 100 hour seminar module entitled “Course: pastoral work with marginal groups”. Because it is in the interests of the prisoners to give them qualified help and not just “anyhow”. The training consists of theoretical and practical knowledge on topics such as criminality, addiction, psychological crises, pastoral work, guiding conversations and law.

With their voluntary work in prison, the volunteers dive into an area of conflict between the goals of resocialisation and the maintenance of security and order. And they are not the only ones whom the prisoners come face to face with: there are also the directors of the institutions, the general prison staff, the padres and deacons, the social workers and psychologists, and other volunteers. In order to be able to offer real help and support, they have to be very clear about the ideal and reality of prisons, and about their own task: how and with what is the volunteer able to aid prisoners? What are the opportunities and boundaries? What is it that motivates citizens and prisoners to a dialogue with each other?

Voluntary staff have to undergo a security check and commit themselves to obey the rules of the penal institution, and not to work against the prison staff. Among those rules are included being able to identify themselves at the gate of the prisons, not to transport objects (letters etc.) into or out of the institution, and to communicate anything about the concrete planning of major crimes to the intermediary (called “guide”) between the contact group and the institution. The team members of the former do not possess any keys, do not reach any decisions e.g. about relaxation of prison restrictions, and do not have any authority to read files relating to the cases of inmates. Given all that the most significant prerequisites exist for a personal, pastoral relationship of one human being to another which is shaped by trust. They offer the prisoners friendship and continual company during the time of imprisonment, and work out a future containing prospects with them. In that they fall back on possibilities from their own domain and contacts (e.g. to their employer), as well as those of the Crossroads Prison and Rehabilitation Ministry Scheideweg, and refer if necessary to other charitable organisations.

The conversations in prison

In pastoral conversations behind bars the citizens from outside the walls perceive their counter parts in their entirety. It becomes familiar to them that criminality and addiction are not isolated problems but rather factors that destroy people in all spheres of their lives and personality. A fundamental modification in motivation, in thought and actions is necessary as

a result. Basic needs have to be satisfied, the question of life's meaning sorted out, goals formulated and worked towards. In the course of conversations, the causes and meaningful solutions of problems can be figured out jointly. In addition many everyday difficulties can be discussed e.g. with other inmates, prison staff, judges, or their dependents and acquaintances outside. In those the conversations are not only theoretical in nature but rather together they plan e.g. preparations for life after jail.

“A wayward sheep doesn't need accusations but rather a helping hand” (E. Wiechert), and this realisation possesses very great import for the relationships with prisoners. The encounter cannot take place patronisingly from above: citizens at liberty are not better people but have rather done better (and there are reasons for that). As Christians they have experienced the unconditional love and forgiveness of God in their own lives, live that and tell of it.

Due to previous disappointments, many prisoners find it very hard to have confidence in others. A distrustful-waiting, passive-sceptical attitude should therefore not come as a surprise. Through credibility, honesty and confidence which the volunteers offer without expecting any thanks, they can contribute to the construction of a relationship. And a part of that is that they encourage and help, but do not gloss over. Such conversations resemble neither police interrogations nor lectures, the outcome is not pre-determined and remains open. The guys from outside do not need to search in a forced way for a conversation about problems, but rather should be able to have the courage to stay quiet and listen. The prisoners should not say what they think the listener wants to hear: only a sincere confrontation with their own life and with the consequences of transformation can pave the way to workable decisions. Prejudices and generalisations do not achieve anything but instead repel. What is crucial is to get to know the individuals as people with their interests and their attitudes to life. What do they want to make out of their life?

And the prisoners?

Of course the thought is present in people's minds, simply to go down from their cells, to see others, to be distracted. But also the desire, to have the chance to speak with somebody, and that not only about the “prison topics” of criminality, drugs and the other gender. A foreigner who had already been imprisoned for a long period, said on one occasion: “You all visit year after year, and don't let yourselves be put off. That proves to me, that you see us as human beings despite our stupidity. Your behaviour towards us has given me something to think about.”

What does the voluntary involvement of citizens behind the prison walls mean for the penal system and society? Erich Czaschke, the assistant head of the Ministry of Justice in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, who experienced at first hand the coming into being of these initiatives, and who, with others designed the cooperation of the judiciary with involved citizens, wrote the following text:

Aspects of voluntary work within the penal system

That the assistance which is nowadays offered to prisoners cannot eliminate all of the socially damaging behaviour is confirmed by our experience and the statistics concerning recidivism; it is not enough that the convicted are kept safely in an institution, or are brought in to perform more or less productive work. In prison the sentence should indeed enable the prisoner to live a life without crime in the future: they should become conscious of their own social responsibility towards their surroundings. In order to achieve this goal of the penal system, the prisons are supposed to be directed towards assisting the inmates to integrate

themselves into a life at liberty. This is specifically formulated in Section 3 of the law relating to prisons which came into force on 1.1.1977. Since contemporary aid for prisoners is the result of a discussion lasting about 100 years which had preceded it, it is helpful to examine the requirements of the present-day from the perspective of historical development. With the authorisation and systematic setting-up of visitors' services on the part of the Quakers in the early 19th century in Pennsylvania, the foundation stone was laid for the elaboration of voluntary work at prisons. It bears witness to a high degree of responsibility and self-confidence, that a statutory authority at that time based solely on the insight into the necessity of social forces created space for cooperation in the fulfilment of a task which was allotted to themselves. The development of the authorisation and visiting activity of the "prison visitors" in the Anglo-Saxon lands which was at first very tightly regimented, and which influenced the uptake of these activities by private prison companies on the mainland of Europe, led over the course of time to a deeper consideration of the location and the specific quality of voluntary visits to prisoners in jail. The conclusion of these reflections can be seen in the pluralistically structured countries of our epoch with their open societies in the recognition that socialisation i.e. integration into society is not possible without their participation.

How can those people who have not concretely experienced the socially moulding forces of our society in the form of love and attention through their family, of challenge and support by teachers, and in the form of rewards and recognition appropriate to achievement in working life, then in prison have the opportunity to prepare themselves for their social reintegration, if that society itself does not take up the role of partner! In open prisons that is for the most part already the case. In a closed prison on the other hand which are still the places where the great majority of inmates are accommodated the prisoners cannot by themselves overcome the blocking off from the outside world. Here it is the business of society to make a move towards the prisoners. Individual citizens, part of society, have to consider whether they fulfil their social obligations sufficiently in that they finance prisons with their tax payments, or whether beyond that depending on the extent of their energy can make a personal contribution to the establishment and maintenance of workable social relationships with prisoners.

Most politically mature citizens of a society based on their ability to make money, think of course in the first place of the problems which most immediately concern them. Some as a result already tend to classify prisoners as social failures and to withhold from them recognition as fellow human beings. Specifically those prisoners who can generate no contacts with confidant(e)s outside the institutions are negatively affected by such an attitude and position; after their release they exist in isolation.

The existential needs especially of prisoners for inter-personal communication and their meaning for the practice of social behaviour have been increasingly recognised by open-minded citizens. They do not rest content with the temporary exclusion through prison sentences of their convicted fellow-citizens, but instead make the first step towards the prisoners.

Already the idea that something different which complements the statutory penal system needs to be brought in for the achievement of the latter's goals, renders the autonomy and quality of voluntary work unmistakably.

From the viewpoint of the prisoners, the voluntary assistance for them is based on other pre-conditions than that of penitentiary staff. The former have the advantage of the voluntariness of the relationships, their distance from the prison system, and often attention which is more strongly felt. From the perspective of the closed penal institutions, voluntary work services

are welcomed because they fill gaps. Nonetheless the volunteers' aid to those liable to punishment has less a compensatory and more a complementary function: what matters is solving or reducing any personal difficulties of the prisoner, promoting their training and professional skills, preparing for their release, supporting their reintegration into a life at liberty, and if necessary to stand by them after the release with word and deed. The following can serve this goal: individual and group conversations, the establishing of contacts based on trust, the support of participation in social communication, help with training or further education, cooperation in the planning of recreation including sports, aid in finding work and accommodation as well as personally standing-by for the period after release.

Since the voluntary workers stand outside of the institutional structures, exercise neither authorisation of orders nor can or have to take supervisory or sanctioning functions, the distrust which the prisoner normally would have of them melts away. It is not unusual for the volunteers to be shown confidence in advance. The special opportunities for the volunteers which arise from that are in turn, however, confronted by specific limitations. These can principally be seen in the following factors: the time which they have with the inmates is as a rule too short for them to inform themselves thoroughly about the learning processes which are under the control of the prison staff of all kinds, and too short to reinforce those processes if necessary. Other difficulties result from the fact that not a few sovereign burghers as a result of their social origins, and their own successful socialisation, lack experiences and knowledge from the social sphere of life of the most prisoners. For more demanding contacts, namely from the domain of professional training and further education, those citizens who are prepared to go as a volunteer into a prison not uncommonly lack a proper qualification. This and other difficulties cannot always be balanced out simply by the special possibilities already described of voluntary contact personnel and their good will. In such situations a danger exists that initiatives will be developed for whose implementation the prerequisites are missing.

Under such circumstances criticism is sometimes expressed of the rules and regulations to which the management of the institutions allegedly attach too much importance when making their decisions. In this respect important points are easily overlooked.

In many standardisations within the field of penal institutions, appears the conflict of goals i.e. to want to educate through unfreedom to freedom. The solution may often consist of the following: that contradictions such as those between the security concerns of the institution and the trust which is the basis of a helping relationship are joined together, and the tensions which result from that cannot be removed through decisions in one direction or another, but rather merely demonstrated and to some extent established. On closer consideration it mostly turns out, however, the regulation which has been complained about continues to balance out the opposites, whereby the boundaries are drawn exactly there where a breakout of this tension is threatened. Where well-meaning critics think they see an easier and perhaps more simple path forward, it is later ascertained that this path cannot be taken without the neglect of significant duties. Martin Buber's profound words are valid for criticism too: "He who takes a path but who has not already shown in his own behaviour the type of goal, will miss it, however fixedly he keeps his attention on it; the goal which he achieves, will not look any different from the path with which he reached it."

Dilettantism in the work of volunteers in prison can as elsewhere in individuals do more damage than good. In spite of the trends towards professionalism in social work too, there is no reason to restrict the increasing activities of volunteers and contact groups which have increased. In resocialising prisoners within our penal institutions, some concerned fellow

citizens who have set themselves particular duties have for a long time participated with success. The success of the aid performed quietly suggested a general regulation of the authorisation for the continually growing number of suitable voluntary helpers in the prisons of our federal state (*Land*). That took place on the 9th of July, 1976 through a general decree by the Minister of Justice concerning voluntary workers in the penal institutions of this *Land* North Rhine-Westphalia. In that administrative regulation the goals of voluntary visiting work, the required prerequisites for the personnel, the authorisation procedure, the legal position of the volunteers, and the form of cooperation with the prison staff were set down. These codifications were improved on through a general decree of the Justice Minister dated 2nd December 1977; the basis of which was an assessment of experiences of the use of the earlier decree which were collected together, as well as some critical comments from the circles of helper and helper groups, and a public hearing of experts by a committee of the *Land* parliament.

Apart from social and human commitment, volunteer visitors have to bring with them the willingness to work closely with the prison staff, and to respect the rules which are valid for the penal institutions. Applicants are preferred who already possess experience in the field of social work, and who are both prepared to and in a position to maintain the helping relationships with the prisoners past the date of release. A leaflet ('Instructions for volunteer visitors to prisons') gives more detailed information about their possibilities of this kind of work, and provides an overview about the duties whose fulfilment is expected of the visitor in the interests of achieving the goals of the institution. The leaflet furthermore tries to prompt the visitor in their behaviour towards the prisoners and the penal institution to think about some details, which could help to avoid failures and difficulties in the visiting work.

The staff of the penal institutions of the Land North Rhine-Westphalia neither view the voluntary visitors as work assistants, nor their work as a mere relief in the daily routine of the prison. Instead they perceive in the activities of the volunteers a specific field of action for independent colleagues. They take into account that regardless of the goals shared by the penal system and the voluntary help and visiting, truly different focuses of interest and priorities can be set. That corresponds also with the relations as partners between the statutory authorities and the independent welfare agencies. The content of the voluntary work of citizens in prisons is not regulated through laws. The law governing prisons contains, nevertheless, some regulations which tie up the possible and desired shared responsibility in our legal and social system with the field of welfare visiting of prisoners. Section 74 sentence 3 of the law relating to prisons obliges the prison authorities to endeavour to arrange a personal support for the time subsequent to release. In accordance with Section 154, paragraph 2 of the law governing prisons, the penal institutions are legally obligated to work closely together with all the authorities involved in the welfare services for the release period as well as the associations of independent welfare agencies; furthermore they should cooperate with people and associations whose influence can assist the reintegration of prisoners.

The activities of voluntary visitors depend on fields of work i.e. from the different penal institutions. In the institutions themselves they depend strongly in turn on the spatial as well as the personnel conditions, and finally also from the financial possibilities. As for these financial possibilities, the contact groups were in their early years more or less dependent on their own resources, contributions etc. In 1976 the Parliament of the *Land* North Rhine-Westphalia for the first time earmarked a sum of DM 20, 000,- from the budget for the

reimbursement of the voluntary visitors' expenses. This sum has meanwhile been increased and adjusted to the requirements.

Activities which are planned for the long-term by the contact groups often set social learning as an aim for the prisoners. They attempt among other things: the recognition of the game rules of the group, temporary deferment of their own current needs and individual interests, acceptance of and confrontation with criticism, the reduction of the use of violence, and enabling of socially acceptable solutions of conflict of interests.

The freedom of structuring which volunteers have, needs to be oriented to the requirements of the prisoners. Voluntary visiting of prisoners pre-supposes not only a wish to help but rather also the ability to do so. The result of that has been that prior to authorisation as a volunteer worker, a suitability for this task has to be ascertained. That cannot depend on declared intentions; more important is to find out whether somebody's participation could objectively serve the goals of the prison. So people interested in voluntary work have no legal entitlement to authorisation as a volunteer visitor but rather only to a discretionary decision free of error concerning authorisation.

Where the will to a continually useful cooperation exists, conflicts between paid and voluntary staff will be avoided; in the final analysis such conflicts would be carried on with inevitably negative effects for prisoners and those who are released. Usually the legal structures fade into the background; they are not ends in themselves but rather represent in a difficult field of labour the necessary framework for the fulfilment of statutory duties, namely the development and multiplying of help in integration.

The reform of the prison system in which helpful personal attention plays a decisive role cannot do without the participation of some involved citizens and likewise the contribution of independent welfare agencies.