

Reviews

Book Review

My Brother's Keeper: faith-based units in prisons

By Jonathan Burnside, Nancy Loucks, Joanna R. Adler and Gerry Rose, Willan Publishing 2005. ISBN 1-84392-061-1.

Five years ago Dr Jonathan Burnside, a practising Christian with a keen interest in the application of Christian principles to criminological issues, was invited to lead a research team to inquire into the operation of faith-based units established in prisons. This covered units that had been established during the previous three years in four English prisons: HMPs The Verne, Swaleside, Highpoint South and Highpoint North. The research followed an internal review of the working of the Kairos-APACTrust and arose from a requirement that the newly formed Kainos Community Trust, which replaced the Kairos-APAC Trust, be evaluated by independent research into the operation and effective functioning of the four units.

My Brother's Keeper is an account of the research, and an account of life inside the four Christian-based units in the English prisons. Ten years ago there were no faith-based units in prisons outside South America; now they are spreading around the world, in the United States, Europe and Commonwealth countries. The authors explore the roots of the faith-based units in South America, the reasons why the Prison Service in England and Wales set up the first Christian-based units in 1997 and the rapid expansion since. At the same time Christian-based units were being set up in the United States, and an account is given why they were complemented by interfaith and multi-faith initiatives.

The volume comprises eleven chapters, with sectional subheadings guiding the reader through the history, development and structure of the programmes described. It begins with a Prologue entitled 'Beatitudes behind bars: Christianity and Imprisonment'. In it the author states his purpose is to identify the concerns, which are derived from Christian beliefs which have a resonance with the purpose of faith-based units. These concerns are those of human decency, justice, relationships, and spiritual transformation. Despite the reduced role for institutional Christianity in contemporary British society, he concludes that governmental policy currently favours the development of working partnerships with faith-based groups.

Chapter One begins by tracing the history of faith-based groups from the creation of the Association for the Protection and Assistance of the Convicted (APAC) and the model prison Humaitá in Brazil in the 1990s, the structure and evolutionary processes which have been at work over the thirty years of its existence. Included in the evaluation are the role of Christianity in Humaitá and a description of the goals and programmes involved in this faith-based community.

Chapters 2 to 7 give an account of the various initiatives which have been inspired by the Brazilian experience. Each chapter contains a descriptive account of the development of the units, highlighting strengths and weaknesses of each approach and ends with a summary of conclusions to be drawn from the accounts.

Chapter 2 describes the work of Kairos, a Christian ministry started in the United States in 1976 consisting of Kairos Weekends and follow up programmes. It now operates in five other countries

including the United Kingdom where it began in 1997. It identifies points in common and distinctions between the Kairos programme and Christian-based units.

Chapter 3 describes the work of Kairos-APAC, initially the Christian-based unit set up at HMP The Verne in 1997, followed by the three units in the England mentioned above. The concluding section highlights the issues alluded to in the chapter title 'The rise and fall of Kairos-APAC', central to which were the organisational issues of programme management and appropriate context.

Chapters 4-6 set out the evaluation of the Kainos Community, established in 1999 to continue the work of Kairos-APAC, and at the time of writing operating in HMPs The Verne, Swaleside and Parc. They examine the organisation of the community 'from the inside', 'views from the top', and consider the issues of religious freedom, which have arisen. The basic structure of the community is the same in each prison with weekly meetings required for everyone, run by a prisoner President elected by the other prisoners. The meetings were used for organisation of the community, for example, dealing with conflicts, allocating responsibilities, discussions with staff about privileges. Smaller group meetings took place at least weekly or on request facilitated by civilian staff in addition to one run by prisoners themselves. 'Godparenting' evenings occurred weekly with volunteers informally befriending prisoners. A common element was the Kairos Weekend (consisting of talks, meditations and events contained in the Kairos Weekend Manual) organised by Kairos UK, running from Thursday night until Sunday, during which time there was no participation in the usual prison regime. On

the basis of interviews with staff and prisoners, the authors conclude that an issue of transparency needed to be addressed to enable informed choice about these programmes. 'Any programme that offers something different in prisons is at risk of rumour and misunderstanding ...' They highlight the importance of careful recruitment and training of staff, and the need for clarity of purpose among staff to enable others to understand the nature of the communities and their operation. Issues of religious inclusivity/exclusivity are considered in relation to human rights considerations and in the light of the Prison Service's policy on the recognition of different faith groups.

Chapter 7 discusses the work of the Horizon Communities (also known as Kairos Horizon Communities) set up in the United States in 1999. The Communities may be Christian-based or inter-faith or multi-faith. This development grew out of the initiative of Kairos-APAC at HMP The Verne. The five existing communities are described and evaluated, including the roles of volunteers, serving prisoners, and ex-offenders. It concludes by noting the importance of the contribution of volunteers, of obtaining informed consent, the constructive working relation between the units and the chaplaincy.

The InnerChange Freedom Initiative described in chapter 8, began in Texas in 1997, expanding to other states and a programme in England at HMP Dartmoor more recently. IFI has four interrelated goals: evangelism to prisoners; evangelism to the world; securing lower rates of recidivism; and, providing effective aftercare. It describes itself as 'a revolutionary Christ-centred, Bible-based prison programme', which aims at spiritual and moral transformation. The author suggests it is unique amongst the other faith-based units discussed because of its specifically

Christian-based focus on evangelism, compared, for example, to the goals of Christian nurture or community building for other faith based programmes. This raises the question of how far the programme can adapt to the English prison environment where proselytising is forbidden. However it illustrates the positive role faith-based programmes can have in resettlement, the positive influence they can have in relationships between prisoners, volunteers and staff, and the contribution volunteers make to the popularity of faith-based programmes and their effectiveness.

The empirical analysis of the psychological outcomes of the programmes and their influence upon reconviction rates is discussed in chapters 9 and 10. The research drew upon the expertise of criminology, law, psychology, statistics, and scientific research into religion. The chapters set out the methodology of the research and its findings, many of which relate to the rates of recidivism for the research and control groups. Attention is drawn to the limitations of the previous studies of faith-based groups and the dubious claims that the programmes have resulted in a significant reduction in recidivism.

This might seem to imply a very negative evaluation of the contribution of faith-based groups. The final Chapter 11 'Keeping faith in prison: the promise of faith-based units' does however present a more optimistic picture. The Kairos evaluation preceding the research recommended that Communities which received support from local management should be allowed to continue. But the author also relates the institutional ambivalence in response to the evaluation. 'The subject of Kairos was enough to trigger knee-jerk reactions from supporters and sceptics alike, regardless of the findings uncovered ... To some extent Kairos may simply have been a focus for the ambiguous feeling of many in a

post-modern society of how to respond to Christianity in public life.'

A new 'Kairos' has come into existence since, with 'a completely revamped programme' and the development of faith-based groups continues around the world. The chapter gives a cautionary note: 'Religion is an intensely personal experience and the manner and extent to which it forms the basis of programmes in prisons must always be handled with extreme care', and identifies lessons that can be learnt for the future in developing faith-based groups.

The research methodology and presentation of its findings are quantitative in approach. The description of the programmes is mainly in terms of institutional and organisational issues which will be of interest mainly to those with management, institutional or organisational concerns, but provides little curriculum detail of help to would-be practitioners.

Despite the ambiguity and ambivalence about the outcomes of the faith-based programmes as expressed in quantitative terms, the writer finally directs his observations to the qualitative issues which the programmes encapsulate:

At their best, faith-based units can help to foster a sense of maturity and responsibility and encourage prisoners to take more responsibility for themselves, their families and their communities, as well as greater responsibility with staff ... They consider what prisoners' strengths are, as well as their weaknesses. They are a chance to reorder personal values and to reconstruct a new identity.

Since religion is concerned with personal values and the beliefs on which they are based, the

contribution of faith-based groups may lie in qualitative individual and social changes which do not directly translate into the quantitative outcomes of which rates of recidivism is but one. The authors suggest that further research is indicated, and the direction this might take could well follow the leads of the studies into religion to which they refer.

Meanwhile *My Brother's Keeper* has provided a comprehensive survey of the institutional and organisational issues arising in the development of the faith-based groups. The authors observe how some of the mistakes made by the faith-based units in the United States were repeated in the course of the development of programmes in the United Kingdom. *My Brother's Keeper* will have performed a useful service if it prevents the same mistakes being repeated by those responsible for policy-making in the Prison Service, as well as staff and volunteers who wish to further develop faith-based groups.

Peter Hammersley is a prison chaplain at HMP Hewell Grange.

TV Review

Songbirds

(Dir. Brian Hill). Century Films. Broadcast Channel 4 on 15 December 2005.

In 2002, poet Simon Armitage and film director Brian Hill collaborated with the rapper Dextrous to produce *Feltham Sings!*, an amazing film which showed the residents of Europe's largest youth prison performing songs about their lives. By simply presenting the songs with limited commentary, the film allowed the words and experiences of the prisoners to come to the fore. Although the film had a rough and ready, even disjointed, feel to it, that perfectly reflected the mosaic of fractured lives that make up that world. The film went on to win a BAFTA award

and is widely recognised as one of the best prison films of recent years. It was with much anticipation that Armitage and Hill, this time with musician Simon Boswell, returned with *Songbirds*, following a similar format, but this time being filmed in HMP Downview, a women's prison in Surrey. The film is slicker and more polished than its predecessor and the songs still provide an insight into the lives of these women but ultimately, by trying to impose a more disciplined structure, the film cops out and cheats both the audience and its participants.

The film has five songs, which are cut with interviews where the singers describe the life experiences that have shaped the lyrics. This runs from parental and spousal abuse, substance misuse, mental health problems, greed and naivety. The songs are unquestionably excellent. Sam opens with a pretty, Didoesque sound that wraps a horrific tale of abuse and violence:

*so ask me again what I'm
doing here,
my brother's bleeding,
my husband's on fire,
in the background a
shadow stands,
I make my art with my
father's hands.*

This is cut together with interviews where Sam describes the meaning behind the lyrics; she was physically abused by her father, abandoned by her mother and then ended in a series of abusive relationships, until ultimately she broke down, stabbing her brother and setting fire to a house with her husband inside.

This device works excellently in illustrating both the song-writing process and providing a glimpse into the lives of these women. The other songs are similarly impressive; Mary's rough and ready song about her prison violence ('I'm so sorry that I threw my piss at you'); the

hilarious, grand, international musical about drug importation ('Mule It'); Claire's chav rap, and Maggie's beautiful ballad to her lost children. These songs illuminate both the individual lives and experiences, and wider issues in women's prisons, showing the power of Armitage's work to bring this to life in an accessible form.

So why is the film so disappointing given the high quality of Armitage's songs? The answer is that by trying to impose a disciplined structure, the director Brian Hill distorts the messages being conveyed in the words of the women. The film particularly does this by targeting a specific middle-class audience, tacking on a happy ending and playing to gender stereotypes. In doing so, the film betrays the people it purports to represent. Whether that is for commercial, artistic or political reasons is not clear, but the film leaves a distinct taste of compromise, or worse.

This starts with the slowly unfolding interview with Theresa, a middle class family woman who is driven to exhaustion by noisy neighbours. This tragically ends in a confrontation where the neighbour is stabbed and killed. This interview is designed to illicit empathy for Theresa and to put her in the position of an 'every person'. The implication is that this could be you or I in that situation. It is significant that such an exceptional and rare event and such an unconventional prisoner is given such a prominent position in the film. This says a lot about the audience that this film is being pitched at, it is not being aimed at the kind of women depicted in the songs, nor is it being aimed at the people who are most usually in prisons, but is instead being pitched at the middle-classes. It could be argued that this is a perfectly legitimate strategy, such film-makers as Roger Graef attempt to pitch their films at a similar audience. However, to so clearly and consciously take one class of people