



## OFFERING HOPE & A NEW BEGINNING

### Persevere

We often see runners in reflective clothing sprinting through the dark. Jogging in the snow may seem perplexing but they are focused on a goal and recognise the need to keep going regardless of the weather.

Prison Fellowship focuses daily on the needs of the marginalised. Men and women inside and released from prison desperately need support. Their families too want help and victims desire to be heard. But it isn't easy and many have given up. Perseverance requires sacrifice and the staff and volunteers of PFNI match that challenge every day.

Read about how God helps to keep us going. Lives are being touched and through your support will continue to do so in 2019. Keep praying, keep giving, keep going. Persevere.

### Week of Prayer

The theme for our Week of Prayer was 'Love Always Perseveres' and at the evening in the Crumlin Road Gaol Graham Stockdale, one of the Chaplains of Maghaberry Prison, challenged us to **Persevere in Prayer**.

'We need energy to keep going. I'm sure we have all had the experience of running out of energy at a crucial time. A couple of Christmases ago I got a frantic call from my wife who was trying to be well organised and have the turkey



Ronnie, Gordon, Graham, Robin, Gillian

cooked the evening before. Mid way through the gas ran out! I was working a late shift and she had no access to a car. So on my way home, late at night, I was frantically trying to find somewhere to get a cylinder – thankfully I did, and Christmas was saved!

Running out of energy can be a problem, no less so when it comes to our spiritual lives and in particular, prayer. Sometimes it can be desperately hard to keep going – to keep persevering in prayer. That is why we need, when we pray, to make sure that we are tapped into our spiritual energy source. But how do we do that?

One of the ways is to remind ourselves of how great is the One whom we come to in prayer. So let's always take time to do that. Think that we approach the God who has made us and made the world and more than that, keeps an active





interest in it – He doesn't just leave us to our own devices. We are reminded of that in Psalm 8 where the Psalmist declares, "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth." He goes on to talk about God's creative power, and how each one of us is an integral part of that by stressing, "what is man that you are mindful of him?"

But He is more than just the creator God, He is also the redeemer God, as the writer to the Hebrews makes very clear, God the Son – Jesus, "is the mediator of a new covenant" and he has died "as a ransom" to set us free from our sins. And if that was not enough, God the Spirit intercedes for us "with groans that words cannot express." (Romans 8:26).

That is our energy, so when we struggle with prayer, we need to continually remind ourselves of how great is the God whom we approach.'

**Graham Stockdale**

## Persevering in Love

This was my second year to attend the Prison Fellowship Week of Prayer event at the Crumlin Road Gaol. As the previous year's event had been both inspirational and thought provoking I was looking forward to the evening, especially as I was uplifted by the theme 'Love...always perseveres' which for me has joyful memories. However, for personal reasons I never look forward to being near, never mind in 'The Crum.'

Coming into the venue, I was enthralled by the pop-up art gallery, exhibiting works created by people while in custody. The images portrayed and the techniques and array of colours used were a feast to my eyes. These were further enhanced by one of the Artists who shared his journey, explaining how important art has become to him and his walk with Christ. His enthusiasm was infectious!

The interview with Emma (PBNi) highlighted the challenges of working within a system where community safety is the priority, and sharing faith isn't encouraged. In spite of these she continually found ways to demonstrate God's love. Her ability to marry her statutory responsibilities with her heart for her clients told me a lot about her determination to persevere in finding a win/win solution.

What struck me in the interview with Graham was how he had turned any negativity he had about some in-mates and strove to see each person through Jesus' eyes. By revealing this personal vulnerability, he illuminated some of the challenges of 'persevering in love.'

The personal accounts of the Prison Fellowship staff and volunteers were an insightful testimony to their grit and determination to walk alongside people and to help turn lives around. Believing in people, especially when they are at their lowest ebb, and finding ways to help them to have hope is 'persevering in love'.

A huge thank you to Andy and the band for their thoughtful and uplifting worship. God willing, I plan to be at next year's event, and as time goes by I'll come to appreciate that even in the Crum love perseveres in this place.

**Carol**



## 'Prison Fellowship is certainly making a difference...'

Until I attended the reception during Prayer Week at the Bar Library in September, I knew nothing about Prison Fellowship. Indeed, I'd never even heard of the organisation, so the reception did just what it promised; it raised awareness of its work here in Northern Ireland.

Some years ago, as part of the Citizens Charter panel, I was involved in visiting many organisations and charities who had applied for the government inspired Charter Mark. We travelled with examiners from the headquarters in London,

smoothing the way and pointing out the sensitivities within the public sector in Northern Ireland. Most disturbing for me were visits to Maghaberry and Magilligan prisons. At first I thought 'not much by way of punishment here'. Cells with television sets, personal items, photographs, workshops for learning trades, libraries to study, a canteen with good food. One man told me he had reoffended because life on the outside was too much for him, the traffic noise 'did his head in', he was lost in the big bad world, much happier within the prison regime. Another tried to convince me that



he shouldn't be 'banged up', he was, he said, an innocent man but I knew not to get involved in that argument! When on my tour I came face to face with a notorious paedophile, I admit I turned and fled. In that moment it all became real; these were men who were imprisoned for doing something very wrong and often cruel.

But should we forgive them? Could I forgive them?

It didn't occur to me to forgive; they were there to be punished and that, I reckoned, was the bottom line. But I'd that niggling doubt about punishment; after all they were being treated well and seemed happy, but then one prisoner told me the truth. He was deprived of his freedom, his family life, going out with his mates, looking after his mother. That, he said, was his punishment.

So hearing about Prison Fellowship filled in another gap in my knowledge. Listening to Andy Corley and Robin Scott was most interesting and I realised that prisoners need spiritual, social and emotional support and guidance if they are to survive and make a new and positive life outside. I'm sure it isn't always easy, although there will be those who will shun such help but perhaps their families will benefit and so a circle of Christian caring will be established. I'm not surprised that the Fellowship doesn't care about political or religious backgrounds; people are more important. Often it's the influence of others or events of the time that shape their thoughts so it's necessary to offer them a way back into society with their heads held high.

I think it was Robin Scott who replied to my question - where is the punishment? He made me think when he said 'Punishment is at the time of sentencing.' Imagine hearing that you are going to be deprived of freedom for however long and knowing of the silent sentence passed on to families who are deemed guilty by association.

Preparing men and women to come out of prisons and into the world again can't be easy but Prison Fellowship is certainly making a difference when they are released. Almost more important is the follow-up and keeping an interest in those families with support and prayer. Trust Oscar Wilde to come up with the perfect quote: 'Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future'. Perhaps you could add: There for the Grace of God.

**Anne Hailes**



## Persevere in Praise

The café in Lowe Memorial Presbyterian church in Belfast is light, airy and welcoming. For an afternoon during the Week of Prayer the church generously allowed PF to take over the café. One of the Hope Works choir members had made an 'honesty box' into which visitors dropped money for their lunch. Singers, staff and supporters munched and chatted freely together until the first song was announced – and what a treat it was! Having practised for weeks, the men sang with gusto and in a meaningful way as if the words about God really came from their hearts. Audience and choir combined for familiar favourites and worship filled the air.

***"It was a delightful occasion – no awkwardness, the guys mixed with us and chatted quite freely, and I thought that was great. Well done to all of them."*** - Diane, a visitor.

Guitar accompaniment came from Ali who had also penned some of the songs herself. When she told the story behind Child, a beautiful solo piece written after a period of doubting in her own life, I almost held my breath at her honesty.

Testimonies punctuated the songs. D came to the PF Bible class many years ago following release from prison. Trouble had marked much of his life and alcohol helped drive away the despair but he became a regular at the weekly class. When the PF centre opened for a shared home-cooked meal and board games on Thursday nights (Hope Works) his enthusiasm knew no bounds. Better still, the choir was formed! Now D found a voice – literally. His self-esteem rose and today he gives all the glory to Jesus. Two of the men presented their choir leader with flowers and chocolates to thank her for her belief in their ability to learn to sing. After the applause one of the men spoke up. "Right, can we go home now?!"

**Christine Thompson**



# The Annual Prison Fellowship Christmas Dinner

The annual Prison Fellowship Christmas Dinner never fails to draw a crowd and this year was no exception. Eighty-nine people packed the downstairs room over the two days, while Robin and the PFNI staff sweated in the kitchen. Festive decorations adorned the tables with crackers, fairy lights and the obligatory Christian beverage - Shloer! Attendees of the Family Work, Ladies Aftercare and Men's Aftercare greeted each other, some for the first time in months. Everyone was warmly welcomed and after an opening prayer, the first course was served.

"The vegetable broth,' writes one of the men who attended the Thursday dinner, 'was delicious and plenty of hands shot up for more. Then came the main event. Turkey, ham, stuffing, roast and mashed potatoes, veg and cranberry sauce. Plates were soon scraped clean. A choice of four desserts was offered followed by cups of tea and delicious home-baked shortbread.

As the washing-up began David from Christ Church Kilkeel stood to speak to the men. He read from God's word and encouraged us for the New Year ahead. Afterwards games and banter closed off the day while the staff finally had a chance to receive a round of applause for all their hard work. It was a time of blessing that many needed but all appreciated."

## Who Would Jesus have Christmas Dinner With?

If Jesus was walking on earth this Christmas what type of people would want him at their table on the 25th? World leaders, royalty and celebrities would be likely. Everyone would be craning their necks at our Saviour's every word hoping for a nugget of insight. It would likely be held in some impressive palace with hundreds of blacked out cars and Secret Service on high alert. There would be only one thing missing: Jesus himself.

It might surprise you to learn He was actually at a meal I shared last week in the PF centre. There were around 35 men, each wearing their best clothes. They exchanged presents, pulled crackers, and ate turkey with a little too much Christmas pudding. After the meal some of the men had a quiz and others just relaxed with a coffee and full bellies.

These are people just like you and me. They have the same smiles and tears that fill all our lives. These men have stared deep into who they are in the darkest of moments. Very few told them that they just made mistakes and could turn over a new leaf. In fact, when they were at their lowest point many people made the choice to shun them and compound their abject dejection.

The heart of Jesus burns with love for the outcast. It burns with love for those in pain. It burns with love for the poor.

Jesus was at that Christmas dinner with those ex-prisoners and is there every time we reach out the hand of help or recognise humanity. This Christmas, reach out to the marginalised, the lonely and the desperate and Jesus will be at your table too.

*"I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me."* (Matthew 25)

**Daniel B (Volunteer)**

